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THE RENEWAL OF THE PARISH IN TERMS OF ECCLESIAL COMMUNION AND MISSION: ROAD TO PROPER CATECHESIS, AUTHENTIC PASTORAL CARE AND EVANGELIZATION IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The consciousness of the Church as a communion of the people of God on mission as we have it today belongs to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. From this ecclesiology, we learn that the Church exists to evangelize; a sensibility that was not rife until after the Council. However, to realize herself truly as an evangelizing entity, the Church has to be well-positioned by renewing herself in terms of the new ecclesiology. The idea of communion implies that the entire people of God has to precede the hierarchy in the order of ecclesiological importance and that benefits should no longer be disproportionately slanted in favor of the latter. That is why the renewal has to commence in the parish since it is therein that the people of God are concretely found. If the parish is the place where the people of God are concretely found, it means that efforts should be made within the context of the renewal to remove all the structures that promote diocese-centered mentality in order to allow parishes to function well as the preferred place for catechesis and other pastoral

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actions. The parish ought to become a community of praxis so that Christians can learn in practice and develop their charisms for the purpose of evangelization. Too much concentration of evangelical projects in the diocese at the expense of the parish can lead to “economy of exclusion” and exploitation. The idea of laboratory ecclesiology has to be developed so that it will be easy to provide employment opportunity for the youth, financially run the Church and reach out to the marginal persons.

Key words: Parish, ecclesiology, renewal, communion, mission, evangelization, charisms, catechesis, hierarchy.

Introduction

The fact that the Second Vatican Council recognizes the dynamism of culture, which provided ground for the recent epochal changes in the socio-economic life of people(s), calls for serious renewal in pastoral and catechetical practices so that the Church will be well-positioned to carry out her mission of evangelization. We may recall that the quadruple event of Protestant Reformation, Industrial Revolution, Enlightenment Philosophy and French Revolution has forced the Church to begin a process of reevaluation that culminated in the Second Vatican Council; the Council in which the Church identified herself as a communion of the people of God and her mission as evangelization. It was within the background of modernity birthed by these events that updating became necessary as a way by which the Church braces up in order to keep pace and be able to face the challenges brought about by the socio-cultural mutations. That is why it is necessary for particular churches to now rethink their ecclesiology and accommodate policies that

will enhance renewal of ecclesiastical structures for the benefit of communion and missionary engagements. It is for this reason that the parish within the entire ecosystem of the ecclesiastical structures is so important to the Congregation for the Clergy. According to them, parishes should be arranged in such a manner that will enhance the dimension of communion so that working under the guidance of their pastors, there will be in their territories “a harmonious synthesis of charisms and vocations”; vocations and charisms that will be placed at the service of the proclamation of the Gospel in order that they may correspond to the demands of evangelization in our time.²

For the parish to assume a missionary posture, there is the need to rethink the relationships between the diocese and the parishes, the parish priests and their parishioners as well as the interplay of charisms and ministries that take place within the parish communities and the diocese at large. The catechetical/pastoral practices of Christian initiation, continuing education in faith, pastoral care for the youth, catechesis/pastoral care with/or for adults as well as those living with disabilities have to be rethought and repositioned to aid missionary commitments. Sequel to this, the thrust of this essay is not only to interrogate the realities of the current parish institutions but also to see how the renewal of their structures and practices can engender effective evangelization in today’s Nigeria. Nigeria is a country that is highly populated by Christians. As of 2020, the Christian

²Congregation for the Clergy, “Instruction The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church”, *Holy See Office Summary of Bulletin*, <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2020/07/20/200720a.html>

population in Nigeria was 45.5 percent; second only to Muslim religion that was placed first with 50.5 percent of the Country's population.³ Unfortunately, the strength of Christianity has continued to wane as a result of so many faith crises associated with syncretism, "neo-paganism", prosperity gospels and lot more, which now call for more effort on deepening the faith especially on the part of the Catholics. That is why this study is done as against the backdrop of a failed system of catechesis in which diocesan policies that regulate faith formation favoured centralistic attitudes that slanted benefits towards the dioceses at the expense of the parishes where faith formation and evangelization actually take place. This essay employs the qualitative research method in its studies.

The Church's Vision of Communion and Mission

The consciousness of the Church as a communion of the people of God on mission as we have it today belongs to the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council. In the document *Lumen Gentium*, the Council "presents the Church as a mystery and communion of baptized believers who are called to holiness and who each have (sic) specific roles and responsibilities."⁴ That is why it places the people of God before the hierarchy as a way of underscoring the leading position of the former to the latter in the order of ecclesiological importance. Obviously, this is an awareness as well as a breakthrough; a very gigantic stride in the

³ Nigeria Travels and Tours, *Introduction to Nigeria*, <https://nigeriatravelstours.com/an-introduction-to-nigeria/>

⁴The Vatican News, *An Overview of the Second Vatican Council*, <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/vatican-city/news/2022-10/vatican-ii-council-60th-anniversary-video-history-background.html>

effort to eradicate clericalism and the other polarities, that in the course of history, slanted privileges towards the hierarchy or the elites at the expense of the people. The Council Fathers actually observe that Christ the high priest was taken from among men and as such made the people a kingdom of priest to his Father, recognizing that though the royal priesthood of all the baptized and the ministerial priesthood of the hierarchy differ essentially in degree, yet that they are ordered to one another.⁵ Hence, for Pope Francis, the Church as a mystery rooted in the Trinity is “more than an organic and hierarchical institution; she is first and foremost a people advancing on its pilgrim way towards God.”⁶ In that sense, it cannot be seen as set of identical cells with identical functions, but rather, an organic communion with a diversity of components and a variety of ministries performed variously by baptized Christians.⁷

The call for a communion conscious Church goes beyond the hierarchy/laity categorizations. Believers whether they are clergy or lay members of the Church are invited to commune with one another in atmosphere of dialogue, active participation and co-responsibility. That is why Emilio Alberich believes that there must be a community conscious methodology in catechesis that

⁵Second Vatican Document, Dogmatic Constitution of the Church *Lumen Gentium* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1964) n. 10, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19641121_lumen-gentium_en.html

⁶ Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), n. 111, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

⁷D. Maggi, *Educazione e pastorale. Una scelta di Chiesa*, (Leumann: Elledici, 2003), 79.

must lead to a proposal that will be capable of maturing adult Christians in such a manner that no one should look at him/herself as a passive recipient of pastoral care but rather an active and responsible subject that can engender interpersonal/mutual actions and enrichment in a christian community. And so, it is important to create the impression that without personal commitment and responsibility especially towards others, one's own faith does not mature.⁸ Being missionary can no longer be understood only in terms of *missio ad gentes*; the sense of mutual commitments among members of a Christian community is in itself missionary. Beyond doubt, this signals a departure from the pre-Counciliar idea of a solely institutional/juridical church whereby the phenomenon of individualism and the so-called idea of "believing without belonging" was rife. It is for this reason that the General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and Caribbean (henceforth Aparecida) makes a proposal of a formative itinerary of missionary disciples that can engender an authentic encounter with Jesus Christ; an encounter that "must be established upon a solid foundation of Trinity-love."⁹ According to the Bishops, "The experience of a triune God who is inseparable unity and community enables us to overcome selfishness and fully find ourselves in service to the other."¹⁰

⁸ Emilio Alberich, "Catechesi e chiesa-comunità" AICa – Convegno Puglia 2011 – «Instrumentum Laboris»
A cura del Emilio Alberich, 5.

⁹ Fifth General Conference of the Bishops of Latin America and Caribbean and Caribbean Bishops, *Aparecida Document*, Brazil, 29 June 2007, n. 240,
<https://www.ltrr.arizona.edu/~katie/kt/misc/Aparcida/Aparecida-document-for-printing.pdf> [Henceforth Aparecida].

¹⁰ Aparecida, n. 240.

In the current vision of the Church as communion on mission, there has to be concerted efforts on the part of those who are entrusted with the task of faith formation to develop a catechesis that will produce missionary Christians who, while participating actively in their ecclesial communities, will be able to exercise their baptismal responsibilities as missionaries. the Conference of the Catholic Bishops of France actually suggests that catechesis should assume a missionary dynamism which will place it at the heart of ecclesial communion since the Church exists to evangelize.¹¹ It is important to note that the missionary vocation of the Church is not only expressed in strictly missionary activities, but in all of her life and endeavours. The bishops opine that each Christian community especially the parish, “carries the Gospel” by striving to bring together the faithful within it; inviting one another to expose their lives to the transformative power of the word; urging its members to enter in conversation with those around them by giving account of their faith and being active in the celebration of the liturgy. According to them, it is through the life of the community that the Church gets revived and places herself at the service of mankind.¹²

The Parish as the Concrete Expression of the Church as a Communion

¹¹ La Conference des évêques de France, *Texte national pour l'orientation de la catéchèse en France*, <https://catechese.catholique.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2018/04/texte-national-pour-l-orientation-de-la-catechese-en-france.pdf>

¹² La Conference des évêques de France, *Texte national pour l'orientation de la catéchèse en France*, <https://catechese.catholique.fr/wp-content/uploads/sites/15/2018/04/texte-national-pour-l-orientation-de-la-catechese-en-france.pdf>

While it is understood that the Church as a communion of the people of God cannot achieve its evangelizing mission if it does not constantly renew its structures, the parish is seen as the basic ground within which the renewal is supposed to commence and spread out to the diocese and perhaps the universal Church. According to the 1983 Code of the Canon Law, Canon 515 §1, “A parish is a certain community of the Christian faithful stably constituted in a particular church whose pastoral care is entrusted to a pastor (*parochus*) as its proper pastor (pastor) under the authority of the diocesan bishop.” It goes without saying that the parish is subordinate to the diocese in the order of hierarchical arrangement. However, for the benefit of catechesis, pastoral care and evangelization, the parish should enjoy a high level of preference over the diocese. The reason is that it is usually in the parish and not in the diocese that it is possible to reach out to people in their far-reaching and variegated situations. Inasmuch as it is the strength of communion that propels mission, the need to give predilection to the interest of the parish over that of the diocese cannot be over-emphasized. It is the diocesan bishop that is the pastor of the parishes. But since, in accordance with the logic of the Council Fathers, it is impossible for him “always and everywhere to preside over the whole flock in his church, he must out of necessity establish groupings of the faithful; and among these, parishes, set up locally under a pastor who takes the place of the bishop...”¹³ What it means is that the authority of the bishop in a parish (which is authority for the sake of service) can

¹³Second Vatican Document, The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1963), n. 41, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/vat-ii_const_19631204_sacrosanctum-concilium_en.html

never be undermined so long as he is capably represented by the parish priest who is there to serve the people on his behalf. Hence, in the spirit of pastoral conversion, dialogue, listening and journeying together which are at the heart of missionary communion, the bishop cannot but maintain “an unassuming and merciful presence” in the midst of God’s people.¹⁴ If he is to serve and not to be served (cf. Matt. 20:28), the bishop (in a situation where there is paucity of fund) will need to sacrifice some diocesan projects in order to ensure that the ‘little’ parish evangelical projects will like the parabolic mustard seed (cf. Mk. 4:30-34) grow and produce branches under which God’s people wherever they are can shelter. It is therefore noteworthy to say that the parish rather than the diocese is a more appropriate ground for planting of evangelical seeds. This is because “The parish is... the most important *locus* in which faith is formed and expressed... In the parish, all human differences melt away and are absorbed into the universality of the Church. The parish is also the usual place in which the faith is born and in which it grows.”¹⁵ Diocesan evangelical projects whether they are of temporal or spiritual values can serve as pioneer/model projects for the parishes, yet they often lack the expansiveness that is needed to construct an all-inclusive ecclesiological structure.

¹⁴Pope Francis, Apostolic Exhortation on the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today’s World *Evangelii Gaudium* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013), n. 31[Henceforth EG]. https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20131124_evangelii-gaudium.html

¹⁵ Congregation for the Clergy, *General Directory for Catechesis* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1997) n. 257 https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_co_n_ccatheduc_doc_17041998_directory-for-catechesis_en.html [Henceforth GDC].

Thus, overemphasis on diocesan projects at the expense of the parish projects always gives rise to centralism. Little wonder Pope Francis is more at home with the idea of the “Church that goes forth” to evangelize everybody including those who live at margins of the society than the one “which is concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures.”¹⁶ It is, therefore, reasonable to think that the parish should constitute the base for every pastoral, catechetical or evangelical project in the diocese since it is the natural habitat for communion and mission.

The Renewal of the Parish: *Sine qua non* for Proper Faith Formation, Pastoral Care and Evangelization

In order to ensure that the Church becomes veritably mission-oriented as desired by the Council, Francis envisions a Church that is thoroughly and genuinely renewed in its being, culture and orientations. That is why he dreams of “a ‘missionary option’, that is, a missionary impulse capable of transforming everything, so that the Church’s customs, ways of doing things, times and schedules, language and structures can be suitably channeled for the evangelization of today’s world rather than for her self-preservation.”¹⁷ We may also recall that Pope Paul VI had in his Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* re-defined the Church in terms of the same missionary option by confirming that “the task of evangelizing all people constitutes the essential mission of the Church” and that it is not possible to think of the Church

¹⁶EG, n. 49.

¹⁷EG, n. 27.

without thinking of evangelization.¹⁸ It means that the mentality in which the *raison d'être* of the Church was thought in the past to be self-preservation/conservation needs to be modified so that the Church can be imbued with the missionary inclination that makes evangelization possible.

Therefore, one cannot but think of the parish as the primary place where this renewal should take place. According to John Paul II, “By its nature the parish is the ordinary place where the faithful worship and live their Christian life... The parish is the place which manifest the communion of various groups and movements, which find in it spiritual sustenance and material support.”¹⁹ That is why Francis reasons that the parish cannot be an obsolete institution since it possesses great flexibility that can make it assume “different contours depending on the openness and missionary creativity of the pastor and the community.”²⁰ Obviously, the parish is not the only institution that evangelizes. However, Francis believes that if it “proves capable of self-renewal and constant adaptivity, it continues to be ‘the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters.’”²¹

¹⁸ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation on the Evangelization in the Modern World *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1975), n. 14, 100 https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_p-vi_exh_19751208_evangelii-nuntiandi.html

¹⁹ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa *Ecclesia in Africa* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1995) n.100 https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_14091995_ecclesia-in-africa.html

²⁰EG, n. 28.

²¹EG, n. 28.

It is not possible for the parish to renew itself if it keeps clinging to the pre-Councilar catechetical/pastoral ideas and practices that did not encourage communion and mission. According to J.T.C. Udechukwu, the Second Vatican Council “marked ‘a new ecclesiological frontier, initiating a shift from overly institutional and juridical vision of the Church to a sacramental vision of ecclesial communion and service to the world.’”²² Hence, “The pre-Conciliar model of the Church which is also the pyramid or hierarchical model presented the Church as a perfect society with ‘a strong ecclesiocentric emphasis and with a prevalence of juridical and institutional aspect.’”²³ It was a model that “envisaged the Church as made up of two different and unequal parts, namely, the clergy and the laity, the teaching Church and the following Church, the pastors and the flock.”²⁴ Accordingly, “the novelty of the Second Vatican Council in ecclesiology is the shift from this hierarchical model of the Church to ecclesiology of communion (*koinonia*) and service to the world (*diakonia*) where the parish, for instance, is envisaged as ‘a community of communities’, a sanctuary where the thirsty come to drink in the midst of their journey, and a centre of constant missionary outreach.”²⁵

It goes without saying that the Church whether at the parish level or any other level cannot achieve this needed renewal if there is

²²J.T.C. Udechukwu, *Meditation on the Historical “Conversation” between Fr. Shanahan and an Igbo Chief* (Onitsha:Trinitas Communications, 2022), 32-33

²³Udechukwu, 33.

²⁴Udechukwu, 33.

²⁵Udechukwu, 33.

no shift from the catechesis of conservatism to that of evangelization. The fact is that it is catechesis that makes the Church while the Church in turn does catechesis. The task of kerygmatic catechesis, (which leads to evangelization) instead of being a mere transmission of doctrinal contents to the recipient, has to do with the transmission of the entire life of the Church in its four dimensions, namely; proclamation-*Kerygma*, communion- *koinonia*, christian service-*diakonia* and liturgy/prayer-*liturgia/orazione*. In this sense, it is the proclaimed word of God that convokes the community while the community proclaims the word, lives it out in communion and in service as well as celebrates it in the liturgy. In all these, we find the aspect of communion very important since communal living among the faithful is at the centre of it all. According to Aparecida, “The vocation to missionary discipleship is a con-vocation to communion in the Church. There is no discipleship without communion... Faith releases us from the isolation of “Me”, because it leads us to communion.”²⁶

It means that the parish cannot actually perform its function of catechizing until it transforms into real communion and becomes a community of catechesis (an educative community). According Alberich, the following are the qualities of community catechesis. First, it is a journey travelled together by the members of the community who announce the mystery of Christ to each other in a way that makes it easy to discover within themselves potential evangelizers. Second, it is an approach to the Christian message whereby *a priori* program or contents are not given primacy or imposed on the recipients of catechesis. Instead, the

²⁶ Aparecida, n. 156.

subjective conditions of the recipients are considered as a hermeneutic instance for the interpretation of the Christian message. This is why the target is always to integrate the faith with the daily life and experiences of the members of the community. Third, it is a community-based methodology which treads the path of participation and empowerment such that no one should see him/herself as a passive recipient of the proclaimed word, but rather, as an active and responsible subject who needs to enrich other people's faith before one's faith can be enriched. Last but not the least, it presents a new figure of the catechist. It is the community rather than a single individual that is said to be the catechist. Thus, catechesis is understood as an ecclesial action that involves the Christian community in its entirety.²⁷ As a result, whoever takes on a management or animation role in the community has to possess a "relational personality", that is capable of creating deep relationships and enhancing the participation and faith growth of the group.²⁸

Instead of understanding catechesis as teaching or mere transmission of the content of faith, it is today understood as initiation into the life of a Christian community. Hence, the Italian Bishops (*Conferenza Episcopale Italiana- CEI*) highlight the importance of the parish as the ordinary place where the Church provides the itineraries that lead to Christian initiation.²⁹

²⁷ Maureen Gallagher, *The Art of Catechesis. What You Need to Be, Know and Do* (New Jersey, Paulist Press, 1998), 215.

²⁸ Emilio Alberich, "Catechesi e chiesa-comunità" *Instrumentum Laboris* di AICa (Convegno Puglia, 2011), a cura di Emilio Alberich, 5, <https://www.catechetica.it/convegni-associativi/convegno-2011>.

²⁹ Conferenza episcopale italiana, *Il volto missionario delle parrocchie nel mondo che cambia* (Roma: CEI, 2004), 14,

For Luciano Meddi, Christian initiation is an introduction into the Christian life and not just a function of the sacraments. Thus, it is required that the itinerary of Christian initiation should be organized to meet this purpose. The parish should be enabled to select contents and educational experiences for the same purpose. This implies that the parish should be authorized to make structural changes in relation to times, methods, classification of recipients and not only to organize themselves to teach catechisms.³⁰ In all, there is the consciousness that catechesis should go beyond the acquisition of doctrinal knowledge and empower the Christian to the life of the sacraments, communion, mutual pastoral care, works of charity and to render christian services to humanity; that is, to be a missionary, an evangelizer.

The Parish as the Breeding ground for Ministries and Charisms

Another reason the renewal of the parish is so exigent is because of its position as the birthplace and the breeding ground for ministries and charisms. In Aparecida we read that “The diversity of charisms, ministries and services opens the horizon to the everyday exercise of communion through which the gifts of the Spirit are made available to others so that charity may abound (cf. 1 Cor. 12:4-12).”³¹ It further says that “Each baptized person in effect bears gifts that he or she must develop in unity and

<https://centromissionario.diocesipadova.it/wp-content/uploads/2010/01/Il-volto-missionario-della-parrocchia-in-un-mondo-che-cambia.pdf>[Henceforth CEI]

³⁰ Luciano Meddi, *Formare cristiani adulti. Desiderio e compenteza del parroco* (Assisi: Cittadella Editrice; 2013), 58.

³¹ Aparecida, 162.

complimentarity with those of others so as to form the one Body of Christ, given up for the life of the world.”³² As far as the development of the charisms is concerned the role of the parish is inestimable. First, it is at the occasion of baptism which happens within the parish itinerary of Christian initiation that the spiritual birth of a Christian as a member of the Church takes place.³³ Second, it is only within the atmosphere of communion made possible by the “pastoral conversion” of the hierarchy and a well-informed understanding of the task of the laity that charisms and ministries can grow and flourish. Hence, since the parish remains the most privileged space for the exercise of communion and mission, we must not forget that the “Holy Spirit ‘distributes special graces among the faithful of every rank’ for the building up of the Church.”³⁴

Catechesis whether it is of Christian initiation or ongoing formation must depart from the linear approach of teacher-student educational relationship in which the recipient of the catechetical message is totally passive while communication remains completely in the hands of the catechist who must do everything in his power to have the recipient receive and assimilate it.³⁵ It is a model of communication that is characterized by lack of mutual communication between the

³² Aparecida, 162.

³³ Christopher Nnubia, *Infant Baptism in the Catholic Church* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2010), 41.

³⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), n. 951. https://www.vatican.va/archive/ENG0015/_INDEX.HTM.,

³⁵ Salvatore Soreca, *La formazione di base per i catechisti. Criteri di competenze e cenni di metodologia* (Roma: Libreria Ateneo Salesiano, 2014), 40.

catechist and the catechized and so is incapable of actively involving the catechized.³⁶ According Salvatore Soreca, unidirectional or linear catechetical approach represents one of those catechetical proposals which are moved from a predominantly sacramental perspective, aimed at preparation for the sacraments of the Eucharist and Confirmation but, most of the time, are unable to answer the thousand questions posed by the events of adolescence and early adulthood. Soreca is of the view that the mass exodus of young people from the parish context after receiving first Holy Communion and Confirmation that is witnessed today is as a result of a feeling of indifference arising from the conviction that what was learned during catechism classes are irrelevant to actual life.³⁷

Thus, in lieu of such an approach that evokes passivity on the part of the catechized, the Church today prefers the catechumenal approach which makes the recipient of the catechesis of Christian initiation a co-responsible actor in the enterprise of his/her own education to/in faith. The catechumentate is a practical course where those being initiated into the Church learn in practice in a community of praxis. It goes beyond doctrinal catechesis which only has to do with intellectual knowledge. It is an experiential approach whereby all the 'domains of catechetical objectives'- cognitive, affective, operational, relational and mystical- come together to provoke and mature charisms so that the Christian no longer remains a passive receiver of catechesis/pastoral care but a co-responsible partner in ecclesial communion and service as

³⁶Soreca, 40.

³⁷Soreca, 39.

well as an ambassador that is willing and ready for missionary outreach.

In view of this, effort should be made to renew parish catechetical architecture so that time, resources, money, personnel and places will be channeled towards exhaustive initiation itineraries and missionary catechesis. And so, we need to realize that catechesis is the most important aspect of the Church's pastoral action. According to John Paul II, "The more the Church, whether on the local or the universal level, gives catechesis priority over other works and undertakings the results of which would be more spectacular, the more she finds in catechesis a strengthening of her internal life as a community of believers and of her external activity as a missionary Church."³⁸ Continuing he says, "As the 20th century draws to a close, the Church is bidden by God and by events... to renew her trust in catechetical activity as a prime aspect of her mission. She is bidden to offer catechesis her best resources in people and energy, without sparing effort, toil or material means, in order to organize it better and to train qualified personnel. This is no mere human calculation; it is an attitude of faith."³⁹

As a matter of fact, the retrogression witnessed in different quarters of ecclesial life especially with regard to the churches in Nigeria is to a great extent as a result of lack of this much needed

³⁸CT, n. 15.

³⁹ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation on Catechesis in Our Time Catechesi Tradendae* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1979), n.15, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_16101979_catechesi-tradendae.html [Henceforth CT].

attitude of faith on the part of the leaders. The reason is that lack of faith does not allow us to see any undertaking whose result is not spectacular to be worthy of attention. But the result of catechetical projects is not usually readily palpable. Do not forget that “Faith is the realization of what is hoped for and the evidence of things not seen (cf. Heb. 11:1).” And so, the tendency to abandon catechetical projects in favour of colourful projects such as building of physical structures, hosting of flamboyant ecclesiastical meetings, embarking on very expensive/elitist projects and many more is always there. Before the Church in Nigeria can overcome its faith crises, it has to recognize with the Fathers of the Second Vatican that modernity has recorded an anthropological breakthrough that should make us see the people as the real church rather than physical buildings. Catechesis is not just teaching. It involves every other aspect of human formation. Indeed, catechesis is the building of the faith of individual Christians. However, the Christian faith cannot be successfully built outside of a vibrant community of practices;⁴⁰ a community where proclamation is lived out in communion and in charitable engagements, celebrated in liturgy and addressed to God in prayer. Little wonder Paul VI sees witnessing as the best way of doing catechesis in our time. Hence, he says that modern men listen more willingly to witnesses than to teachers.⁴¹

In order to produce real missionary disciples, parishes need to transform into laboratories where Christians especially neophytes

⁴⁰ CT, n. 24.

⁴¹ EN, n. 41.

learn in practice.⁴² It means that individual Christians cannot really learn how to participate in kerygma, communion, Christian service as well as liturgy and prayer unless those things are being practiced by the Christian community. Effort should therefore be committed in providing the resources that will be used in organizing such a capital-intensive project. It shows that catechesis of Christian initiation, for instance, has to move from the practice of catechism classes, where teachers receive little or no material incentives, to a more robust educational/formative enterprise wherein catechists are properly trained and lucratively remunerated.⁴³

The reason the parishes should transform into communities of praxis is that it is through active participation that charisms and ministries are developed. That is why the Church at all levels should move from the medieval/tridentine mentality that she exists to conserve to the post-Conciliar mentality that she exists to evangelize.⁴⁴ To evangelize, one needs to invest. We need to invest on gifts and vocations in order to develop and bring them into fruition. We must therefore eschew all sorts of parsimonious disposition that belongs to conservatism; dispositions which J. L. Moral likens to the attitude of the third character in the Parable of the Talents who refuses to invest his talents in order to make gains for his master. To evangelize is to invest. Moral likens

⁴² J. L. Moral, *Pastorale giovanile. Sfida cruciale per la prassi cristiana* (Torino: Ellidici, 2018), 190-191.

⁴³ Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Guide for Catechists*, (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1993), n. 32, https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cevang/documents/rc_coon_cevang_doc_19971203_cath_en.html

⁴⁴ EN, n. 14.

evangelization to the attitudes of the first and second characters in the same parable; those who invest their talents in order to make gain for their master.⁴⁵ The Church does not grow in conservatism. It grows by evangelizing. That is why “The pastoral conversion of our communities requires moving from a pastoral ministry of mere conservation to a decidedly missionary pastoral ministry.”⁴⁶

The Parish as the Community of Communities

If we recall that it was sequel to the impossibility of the bishop when left alone to administer the entire diocese that the office of the parish priest was created, it may not be difficult for us to understand why the creation of small Christian communities (henceforth SCC)⁴⁷ should be required in the renewed sense of ecclesial communion and mission. While the SCCs do not have juridical status, they are nonetheless a veritable instrument for pastoral care, catechesis and evangelization. SCCs arise from the need to achieve an effective interpersonal encounter as well as mutual exchange of spiritual and temporal goods in a Christian community. In fact, SCCs are a reenactment of the early Christian communities where communal living among believers ensured that no single individual was neglected in the scheme of pastoral care. Testifying on the success of the communities in the Church John Paul II says “A rapidly growing phenomenon in the young

⁴⁵Moral, 189-190.

⁴⁶Aparecida, n. 370.

⁴⁷ SCCs are small groupings of Christians who share common residential neighbourhood within which they communally exercise their christian responsibilities of proclamation, communion, charity, liturgy and prayer as well as other missionary actions.

churches... is that of "ecclesial basic communities" (also known by other names) which are proving to be good centres for Christian formation and missionary outreach."⁴⁸ According to him "These are groups of Christians who, at the level of the family or in a similarly restricted setting, come together for prayer, Scripture reading, catechesis, and discussion on human and ecclesial problems with a view to a common commitment."⁴⁹ They "are a sign of vitality within the Church, an instrument of formation and evangelization, and a solid starting point for a new society based on a 'civilization of love.'"⁵⁰

Furthermore, of critical importance to evangelization is the fact that SSCs organize and decentralize the parish community without dividing it.⁵¹ This is another way of saying that they bring the parish to the doorstep of its members. This system is therefore a veritable means for looking for that one sheep among hundred who might have strayed in the wilderness and whose rediscovery brings exceeding joy to the owner (cf. LK. 15: 1-7). In that case, it can serve as an antidote to individualism and pastoral indifference among Catholics. According to Aparecida, SCCs "deploy their evangelizing and missionary commitment among the humblest and the most distant and they visibly express the

⁴⁸ John Paul II, Encyclical on the Permanent Validity of the Church's Missionary Mandate *Redemptoris Missio* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1990), n. 51, https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_jp-ii_enc_07121990_redemptoris-missio.html [Henceforth RM].

⁴⁹ RM, n. 51.

⁵⁰ RM, n. 51.

⁵¹ RM, n. 51.

preferential option for the poor.”⁵² In this way, they bear witness to the gospel of Christ in their neighborhood.

In the case of Christian initiation, SCCs can provide parental support to baptized children who are denied of family catechesis because of spiritual apathy on the part of their parents. If the communities are well-organized, parents may not need to go outside of their SCCs to look for those who will sponsor their children during the celebrations of baptism. Godparents who share the same neighborhood with their godchildren and who participate actively in Sunday Eucharistic celebrations, in the meetings of the community, in charity apostolate, in prayer as well as other missionary events in the community should be best suited for this purpose. SCCs therefore become an opportunity to re-examine the significance of such sponsorship with the objective of making the proximity and commitment of those who play such roles a yardstick in selecting them. Catechesis has also to do with accompaniment;⁵³ a role which the sponsors are expected to play.

The Parish as Platform for Laboratory Ecclesiology and Gateway to Missionary Outreach

To say that a church is laboratory is another way of saying that the church gets involved in economic activities. Etymologically, the term “laboratory” is of the Latin root *laborare*, which means

⁵²Aparecida, n.179.

⁵³Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter “Motu Proprio” on Instituting the Ministry of the Catechist *Antiquum ministerium* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2021) n. 6, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/motu_proprio/documents/papa-francesco-motu-proprio-20210510_antiquum-ministerium.html

to work. Thus, when we say "Church laboratory" we intend to distinguish a church that embarks on economic activities through drudgery from the one that only organizes spiritual activities. But there are two understanding of the term "church": the people as a community of believers and/or the building in which they gather. But since spiritual exercises are at the core of every religious gathering, a laboratory church would designate a worshipping community that not only gathers to pray but also to work. Church laboratory is different from a museum church; the latter underscores the mode of being and mentality of a community of believers who are not open to innovations, warmth, and who are not enterprising.⁵⁴

Actually, laboratory ecclesiology belongs to the understanding of evangelization as having to do not only with spiritual salvation but also liberation and the general wellbeing of mankind. That is why Paul VI is of the view that the Church does not "restrict her mission only to the religious field and dissociate herself from man's temporal problems."⁵⁵ Hence, as we talk about the renewal of the parish especially here in Nigeria, we need to integrate this very vital aspect of economy as way of providing for the temporal welfare of the faithful and reaching out to those who live at the margins of the society. According to the logic of laboratory ecclesiology, parishes can own such business ventures such as farms, bakery, tailoring workshop, furniture workshop, mechanic workshop, art studio, music studio, printing press, ICT unit, primary schools, and secondary schools for their economic benefit. The primary reason for building a laboratory church in

⁵⁴Moral, 190.

⁵⁵EN, n. 34.

Nigeria should be to provide alternative means of fundraising for the running of the church so that the incessant exploitation and degradation of the liturgy in the hue of fundraising in most dioceses in Nigeria can gradually curtailed.⁵⁶ The second reason will have to do with provision of vocational skills and employment opportunity to many unemployed youth in the country. In this sense, laboratory church can satisfy the evangelical need of Francis' revolutionary ecclesiology of "the church that goes forth" to the fringes of the society to provide succor to the marginalized. The third reason has to do with faith formation since the youth who come for work or training in those establishments will have the opportunity of attending Holy Masses and other spiritual exercises in the church. They could also be other special occasions inserted in their timetable for catechesis.

Laboratory ecclesiology can be implemented at two major levels of hierarchical arrangement: the diocese and the parish. This is because "For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new...."⁵⁷ The preference of the parish over the diocese in terms of situating a laboratory church is noteworthy. If mission or evangelization has to do with the people, we must realize that it is in the parish rather than the diocese that they are found in all their categories.

⁵⁶Pope Francis, Apostolic Letter on the Liturgical Formation of the People of God *Desiderio Desideravi* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2022) n. 16, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/apost_letters/documents/20220629-lettera-ap-desiderio-desideravi.html

⁵⁷EN, n. 18.

Accordingly, “the parish is still the major point of reference for the Christian people, even for the non-practicing.”⁵⁸ According to Meddi, the parish is the last location of the messianic people.⁵⁹ We can talk of the Church at the universal and local level as ecclesial communities; yet they cannot be made a community of praxis. But the parish can be transformed into community of praxis.⁶⁰

What it means in effect is that the few projects of the laboratory ecclesiology that are located at the diocesan level should serve as pioneer or model projects that should be replicated in the parishes. There should not be too much concentration of such projects at the diocesan level to avoid what Francis refers to as “economy of exclusion” which he likens with murder and according to which “Human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded.”⁶¹ Lamenting this ugly situation he says,

We have created a “throw away” culture which is now spreading. It is no longer simply about exploitation and oppression, but something new. Exclusion ultimately has to do with what it means to be a part of the society in which we live; those excluded are no longer society’s underside or its fringes or its disenfranchised – they are no longer

⁵⁸GDC, n. 256.

⁵⁹Meddi, 73.

⁶⁰A. S. Omeayo, “Repositioning the Catechetical Ministry and Saving the Office of the Catechist in Nigeria from Disrespect”, *The International Journal of Evangelization and Catechetics* Vol. 2 No 2 (Washington D.C.:The Catholic University of America Press, 2021), 232.

⁶¹EG, n. 59.

even a part of it. The excluded are not the “exploited” but the outcast, the “leftovers”.⁶²

Actually, it constitutes a case of exclusion when the church embarks on elitist projects which often do not benefit the poor, yet the money with which they are established are those of the poor. That is why it cannot but amount to social injustice if churches that still ask for monetary contributions from people embark on projects that exclude the same poor people who contribute to their building.

Instead of embarking on expensive project at the centre (a case of centralism) the best thing that could be done is for dioceses in Nigeria to encourage their parishes to own and host people oriented projects in their territories. To avoid centralism, dioceses in Nigeria should allow their parishes to own most of the money-making projects; projects that will in turn be tributary to the diocese in terms of taxation. The taxes that will be collected from the vast installations of such projects across the diocese will be sufficient for running of the centre. Nonetheless, excessive levying of the parishes by the diocese can as well lead to centralism; action that seriously diminishes the chances for catechesis. The parish should be a means of reaching out to those who live on the peripheries of the society and not an avenue of exploiting or excluding them.

Conclusion

The need to embark on the renewal of the Church as a way of pursuing communion and mission ecclesiology is a brainchild of

⁶²EG, n. 53.

the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council. But it will be very difficult to satisfy such need if the factors that led to the socio-cultural changes that birthed modernity are not taken into serious consideration. That is why the Council Fathers had no inhibitions in acknowledging the reality and overt influence of such changes in the socio-cultural and economic life of the people. Hence, it becomes foolhardy for any individual or organization to keep on existing without acknowledging the impact of these changes during its decision making processes. One of the ways these changes have affected the Church as an institution is the acknowledgement by the Council Fathers that the people rather than the hierarchy have to be given a prime position in the order of ecclesiological importance. If it is so, the parish, once it comes to evangelization (and not governance), should also receive such predilection since that is where the people of God are concretely found in all their colours and categories. The idea is to renew the parish so that it will have the flexibility that will enable it to assume different contours so that it continues to be “the Church living in the midst of the homes of her sons and daughters”⁶³

Sequel to this, the parish cannot fail to be recognized and respected as the birthplace of faith and since it is in it that the catechesis of Christian initiation takes place. It goes without saying that the Church cannot be renewed if the ingredients of the renewal are not incorporated in the formation of its people. Catechesis of Christian initiation should therefore be organized in such a manner as to instill the idea of communion and mission in the life of every member of the Church. The parish should also

⁶³ EG, n. 28.

be recognized as the breeding ground for ministries and charisms. In such a way, effort should be made by those who administer it to see that these ministries and charisms are not stifled at the altar of clericalism or hierarchism. The lay person should be given the opportunity and provided with the wherewithal for active participation for them to develop and perfect their gifts/talents by keenly participating in the life of the Church. In the same vein, since the idea of laboratory ecclesiology calls for the Church's involvement in the economic life of the people, the age long ecclesial principle of preferential option for the poor cannot also be neglected. Concentrating economic projects meant to provide succour to the people at the diocesan level may amount to centralism. The best thing is to situate them in the parishes where people of different classes can benefit from them. However, few of such projects can be cited in the diocese as pioneer or model projects. The Church should not embark on very expensive projects in an effort to provide material assistance to the people. This, certainly, will lead to elitism and increase the unfortunate situation of the "economy of exclusion" that is already rife in our society. Finally, since the parish is the place where the people are concretely found, it can be a gateway for missionary outreach. There in the parish, the less privileged that live on the margins of the society can be reached and evangelized.