



Theology, Contextualization and The Evangelical Counsels: An African Socio-Cultural Model

Fr. Prof. Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu, OSA

Abstract

During the past few decades, theology has been very concerned about contexts and experiences of peoples within which the Church finds herself. The emphasis on contextualization is because it makes theology not only a discipline inundated with the capacity for the liberation of a people, but also of seeking to make Christ more appealing by making the cause of Christ synonymous with the political, social, cultural, etc., that is, the struggles of a particular people. It also makes theology becomes committed to making God's word understandable for the people or culture that it comes in contact with. Several theological works have been written on the need for the contextualization of theology, but with little or no literature on the contextualization of the evangelical counsels. The piece, therefore, distinguishes itself by its focus on the Evangelical Counsels: chastity, poverty and obedience. While the thematic method of inquiry would be adopted for the presentation of ideas, the Igwebuike theological framework which establishes a link between culture and the Christian faith will be employed to guide the interpretation of the basic ideas in this paper. The paper discovered that the contextualization of the Evangelical Counsels will make the Evangelical Counsels feel at home in Africa and Africans appropriate them as their way of life.

Keywords: Contextualization, Evangelical Counsels, Chastity, Poverty, Obedience

Introduction

A cursory glance at the development of theology in Africa, reveals that in the past few decades, theology has been very concerned about contexts and experiences of peoples within which the Church finds herself. This has been manifested within the theological parameters of evangelization, conducting worship, teaching the Scripture, that is, thinking about and presenting biblical truths in ways that are understandable to a certain culture/people and responding to the questions that they bring to the biblical text¹

The dimension of contextualization in theology does not only make theology relevant, but broadens the understanding of culture to include social, political, and economic questions without omitting the taste of criticality² This development also suggests that theology needs to interact and dialogue not only with traditional culture value, but also with social change, new ethnic identities, and the conflicts

¹ Karl, D. (2022). *what is contextual theology?* <https://www.dahlfred.com/index.php/blogs/gleanings-from-the-field/982-what-is-contextual-theology>; Kanu, I. A. (2020). “Igwebuike Theology of Udi: God’s unchanging revelation and man’s changing culture”. *Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life*. Vol. 17. No. 2, pp. 12-24.

² Wu, Jackson (April 2015). *One Gospel for All Nations: A Practical Approach to Biblical Contextualization*. Pasadena, CA: William Carey Library Publishers.; Bevans, Stephen B. (2002). *Models of Contextual Theology*. Maryknoll, NY: Orbis Books; Kanu, I. A. (2020). “Igwebuike theology of Omenani and the missionary bifurcation of horizons”. *OGIRISI: A New Journal of African Studies*. Vol. 16. No. 1. pp. 127-144;

that are present as the contemporary phenomenon of globalization encounters the various peoples of the world³

As a means of making theology relevant to the people of Africa, African theologians have emphasized the need for contextualization in the African theological enterprise⁴ The emphasis on contextualization is for principal reasons: first, because it makes theology not only a discipline inundated with the capacity for the liberation of a people, but also of seeking to make Christ more appealing by making the cause of Christ synonymous with the political, social, cultural, etc., that is, the struggles of a particular people. It is within such a circumstance that the story of Christ can become the story of the people and their story, the story of Jesus.

³ Chung, Paul S.; Kim Kyoung-Jae; Kärkkäinen, Veli-Matt, eds. (2007). Asian Contextual Theology for the Third Millennium: Theology of Minjung in Fourth-Eye Formation. Eugene, OR: Wipf and Stock Publishing.

⁴ Crollius, R. (1986). Inculturation: Newness and ongoing progress. Nairobi: Pauline; Chidili, B. (1997). Inculturation as a symbol of evangelization. Jos: Mono; Carrier, H. (1989). *Gospel message and human cultures from Leo XIII and John Paul II*. Trans. John Drury. Duquesne: Duquesne University Press; Kanu, I. A. (2020). "Igwebuikwe theology of Ikwa Ogwe and the Inculturation of the Gospel message". *OGIRISI: A Journal of African Studies*. Vol. 16. No. 1. pp. 15-28; Kanu, I. A. (2024). "The Inculturation of Consecrated Life in Africa: Towards a Logic for Promoting Indigenous Gifts of Fidelity". *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life*, Vol. 21. No. 1. pp. 245-265.

Secondly, when contextualization is embraced without compromising Scripture and Sacred Tradition, theology becomes committed to making God's word understandable for the people or culture that it comes in contact with.⁵

Several theological works have emerged on the need for contextualization, but the beauty of this paper is that it chooses a context for contextual theological reflection. The present context is not a regular context, which are the Evangelical Counsels: chastity, poverty and obedience. The choice of this context is not for the alteration of the teachings of the Church on the Evangelical Counsels, but an expression of the importance of presenting the Evangelical Counsels from an African perspective, and in such a manner that the Evangelical Counsels feel at home in Africa and Africans appropriate them as their way of life. The Igwebuiké theological framework which establishes a link between culture and the Christian faith will be employed so as to guide the flow of this paper.

An Indigenous Theoretical Framework

The Igwebuiké theological framework is employed in this paper for the understanding and interpretation of the contextualization of the Evangelical Counsels. Igwebuiké is an explanatory theory or principle that interprets the puzzle of our complex relationships, and

⁵ Kanu, I. A. (2012). "Inculturation and Christianity in Africa". *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. Vol. 2. No. 17, September, pp. 236-244; Karl, D. (2022). *what is contextual theology?* <https://www.dahlfred.com/index.php/blogs/gleanings-from-the-field/982-what-is-contextual-theology>

underpins the epistemological manifestations of the human person's universe. The present theological framework is *apropos*, given that it presents a complementary concept of the relationship between the consecrated life and culture.

Igwebuike is a combination of three Igbo words. It can be understood as a word or a sentence: as a word, it is written as *Igwebuike*, and as a sentence, it is written as, *Igwe bu ike*, with the component words enjoying some independence in terms of space.⁶ *Igwe* is a noun that means number or multitude, usually a large number of population. The number or population in perspective are entities with ontological identities and significance, however, part of an existential order in which every entity is in relation to the other.⁷ *Bu* is verb, which means *is* *Ike* is a noun, which means *strength* or *power*.⁸ *Igwe*, *bu*, and *Ike* put together, means 'number is strength' or 'number is power'⁹

⁶ Kanu, I. A. (2016a). "Igwebuike as an expressive modality of being in African ontology". *Journal of Environmental and Construction Management*. 6. 3. 12-21.

⁷ Kanu, I. A. (2016b). "Igwebuike as an Igbo-African hermeneutics of globalisation". *IGWEBUIKE: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*, Vol. 2 No.1., 61-66.

⁸ Kanu, I. A. (2016c). "Igwebuike as the consummate foundation of African Bioethical principles". *An African Journal of Arts and Humanities* Vol.2 No1, 23-40.

⁹ Kanu I. A. (2017a). "Igwebuikeconomics: Towards an inclusive economy for economic development". *Igwebuike: An African Journal of Arts and Humanities*. Vol. 3. No. 6. 113-140.

As a framework, it strives beyond all forms of particularities, peculiarities, paradoxes, and contradictions and espouses the path of complementation, therefore, showing how realities can relate to one another in a mutually harmonized non-absolutistic mode.¹⁰ Thus, it explores methods and principles for the mediation, coalescing, and comprehension of the different units of reality: ideal and real, universal and particular, progressive and conservative, necessary and contingent, transcendent and immanent, essential and inessential, and other units of reality within the same framework (Kanu, 2016d) It treats all units, fragments, or components of reality, no matter how minute as units and combinations, or missing links that are necessary for the conceptualization of reality as a whole.

This idea of mutuality, complementarity, solidarity, interrelationships, and relationality is the ontological logic that Igwebuike provides for a discourse on the contextualization of the Evangelical Counsels. It is a value that is capable of making the consecrated life feel at home in Africa and the African people feel at home with the consecrated life. The Igwebuike framework is relevant for this study for two reasons: first, it is a study done from an African perspective, therefore, serving as an African indigenous category, and secondly, it looks at the possibility of the complementarity of the consecrated life and the culture of the African people.

¹⁰ Kanu I. A. (2017b). "Sources of Igwebuike philosophy". *International Journal of Religion and Human Relations*. 9. 1. 1-23.

Theological Logic for Contextualization

Theological logic in this case refers to the theological basis or pillar(s) upon which the thought on the contextualization of the Evangelical Counsels stands. It is the structure on which this idea is developed, to allow for the alignment of theory and praxis necessary for the conveyance of theological thought. Given the fundamental place that the Second Vatican Council occupies in the life of the Church, it is *apropos* to begin such a discourse from the documents of the Second Vatican Council.

When the Second Vatican Council was formally inaugurated on 11th October 1963 by Pope John XXIII with different continents in attendance, Rahner (1986) describes it as “the beginning of a tentative approach by the church to the discovery and official recognition of itself as world-church.” (pp. 77-89) At this Council, the Church treated as a major issue the need for building a bridge between Christian perspectives and indigenous knowledge systems. It is within this context that the Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy (SC), the first conciliar document that was approved by the Second Vatican Council and promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 4, 1963, favored the revision and adaptation of the liturgy into particular circumstances and cultures. This was necessary given that the Christian faith implanted in mission territories could no longer be confined to Euro-centric cultural manifestations¹¹ (Sacrosanctum Concilium 2010). The Church saw the need for people to hear God

¹¹ *Sacrosanctum Concilium* (2010). In Austin Flannery, (ed.), Documents of Vatican Council II, Vol. 1, No.36, Mumbai: St Paul Press, 2010.

speaking to them in their tongues and languages (Acts 2:16). Rahner (1981) describes the Vatican II event as “the coming-to-be of a world church, with its particular churches each existing... in its cultural group.” (p. 80)

Gaudium et Spes, promulgated on December 7, 1965, by Pope Paul VI gave the highest attention to the topic of faith and culture, and thus provided room for the dialogue between the faith and the cultural values of different cultures. The document rightly notes that “the human person can achieve true and full humanity only using culture.”¹² It did not only recognize the importance of culture within the church but also outside the Church. It holds that human identity and transformation are deeply rooted in culture.

The Decree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, promulgated by Pope Paul VI on December 7, 1965, uses the analogy of incarnation to justify the church among cultures. It states that: Christ’s incarnation is the paradigm for the young churches, insisting that if the church is to be in a position to offer to all the mystery of salvation and the life brought by God, then it must implant itself among every group of people in the same way that Christ by his incarnation committed himself to the particular social and cultural circumstances of the people among whom he lived (No. 10). At the closing session of the First Plenary Assembly of the Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar

¹² *Gaudium et Spes* (2010). In Austin Flannery, (ed.), Documents of Vatican Council II, Vol. 1, No.53. Mumbai: St Paul Press.

(SECAM) on evangelization and the cultural adaptation of faith in 1969, Pope Paul VI recognized the diversity of cultures and thus urged African Bishops to recognize that:

An adaptation of the Christian life in the fields of pastoral, ritual, didactic, and spiritual activities is not only possible, it is even favored by the church. The liturgical renewal is a living example of this and in this sense you may and you must have an African Christianity (p. 129).

Pope Paul VI in 1975 issued an Apostolic Exhortation on Evangelisation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*. In this document, he shows how the gospel message could be integrated within any given culture by bringing the Good News of Christ into all the strata of humanity so that humanity itself becomes a new creation. The Roman Pontiff teaches that:

Evangelization loses much of its force and effectiveness if it does not take into consideration the actual people to whom it is addressed if it does not use their language, their signs, and symbols if it does not answer the questions they ask, and if it does not have an impact on their concrete life (p. 63).

Saint Pope John Paul II was known for his extensive travels to the local churches around the world. These travels afforded him a firsthand encounter with diverse cultures. He is the champion of a dialogue between Christianity and the various religious cultures of the world. He established “the Pontifical Council for Culture to help the Church be involved in the saving exchange in which

inculturation of the Gospel goes hand in hand with the evangelization of cultures.” (No. 26)

Saint Pope John Paul II on 6 January 1993, announced a Special Assembly for Africa. In the *Instrumentum Laboris*, the Holy Father states that the *telos* of the synod will be:

To assist the Church in Africa to deepen, her commitment to the mission of evangelization, taking into account her history and development as well as the whole cultural, social, political, and economic context in which she lives. (No. 1)

The synod was held in Rome from April 10th to May 8th, 1994 and it represented the most important ecclesial gathering for Africa since Vatican II. It was the first time that the pastors of Africa gathered *cum et sub-Petro* to reflect on new ways and means of carrying out the evangelizing mission of the church on the continent.¹³

The foregoing reveals that there has been a consistent emphasis on the need to build a bridge between faith and the cultures of local peoples. It is these perspectives that provide the theological foundation for the discourse on the contextualization of the Evangelical Counsels.

¹³ Chianain, E. (2018). *Inculturation: A Conditio Sine Qua Non for Effective Evangelisation in Cameroun in the Light of the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, Ecclesia in Africa*, Unpublished Ph.D. Dissertation, Univ. of Toronto.

Understanding the Evangelical Counsels

The discussion on the Evangelical Counsels will be based on the teachings of *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965), precisely, numbers 12 (on chastity), 13 (poverty) and 14 (obedience). Both *Lumen Gentium* (1964) and *Perfectae Caritatis* have taught that at the very root of religious life are the Evangelical Counsels. It is through the profession of vows that one becomes a Consecrated person to God. The Christological value of religious life is in the consecration of the religious to Christ, and this consecration takes place through the Evangelical Counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience.

a. Chastity

Celibacy is a gift of grace from God that “uniquely frees the heart of man (cf. *1 Cor* 7:32-35) so that he becomes more fervent in love for God and for all men” (No. 12). Chastity is for the religious, a most effective means of dedicating themselves wholeheartedly to the divine service and the works of the apostolate. In the mind of the Council Fathers, chastity has a functional role in the missionary mandate and service of the religious.¹⁴ The Second Vatican Council document further makes a connection between chastity and the quality of community life being lived out in a religious institute: “Further, let all, and especially superiors, remember that chastity is preserved more securely when members live a common life in true brotherly love” (No. 12).

b. Poverty

According to *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965), the religious chooses poverty voluntarily as a way of imitating Christ who though was

¹⁴ *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965). In A. Flannery (Ed). *Documents of the Second Vatican Council* (pp. 611-623). Dublin: Dominican Publications.

rich, chose to be poor so that we could become rich through His poverty. The underlined point here is voluntariness and willingness, not coercion or force. It is a poverty in fact and in spirit, such that the religious is seen to be poor, having their treasures in heaven and not seeking worldly things. In the practice of poverty, they put their trust in the providence of God. In other words, there should be no unhealthy preoccupation about tomorrow.

Perfectae Caritatis (1965) calls on institutes to bear “a quasi-collective” witness to poverty, taking the local conditions into account (No. 13). This they have to do by giving up part of their resources for the other needs of the church and the poor. Even though institutes have the right to possess temporary good for their sustenance and work, they should avoid any semblance of luxury, excessive wealth and accumulation of property.

c. Obedience

The vow of obedience, according to *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965) is a commitment through which a religious offers his or her will as a sacrifice of himself or herself to God. He or she does this in imitation of Jesus Christ who came to do his Father’s will (cf. *Jn* 4:34; 5:30; *Heb* 10:7; *Ps* 39:9), and actually did His Father’s will. The religious, moved by the Holy Spirit subject themselves in faith to their superiors who hold God’s place. Through this act of free submission of the will, the religious are able to serve the brothers, sisters and the church as well.

In the mind of the Second Vatican Council, obedience is an act of faith in God who relates to the religious through the superior. This theologico-anthropological dimension of this Evangelical Counsel elevates obedience from mere acquiescence, to an adoption of a Christological imitation. Through the impulse of the Holy Spirit, the

religious places his or her faith in his or her superior who represents God as he or she seeks to do what Christ did.

Because the superiors represent God, the religious are expected to be humbly submissive to them. However, this submission should be done in the spirit of faith and of love for God's will and in accordance with their rules and constitutions. Pope John Paul II, in *Vita Consecrata*, stresses the importance of the authority of the superior: "While authority must be above all fraternal and spiritual, and while those entrusted with it must know how to involve their brothers and sisters in the decision-making process, it should still be remembered that the final word belongs to authority and, consequently, that authority has the right to see that decisions taken are respected" (p. 75).

Contextualizing the Evangelical Counsels

The contextualization of the vow of chastity is in relation to the present socio-political situation in Africa and the culture of the African people. In the present African society highly influenced by western culture through globalization, cultural shifts, technological advancements, etc., there is a gross decrease in moral values, especially as it concerns the expression of the human sexuality. Consecrated person in this evolving social milieu must be signs of the age to come by pointing, by their way of life, to the right direction.

This contextualization project of chastity could also be done in relation to the African spirituality of sexuality, which is often misrepresented because it is viewed from the Western perspective. Before the advent of Christianity, the African people had traditional customs of chastity. Through parables, proverbs, songs, etc., they

have been able to teach their children high moral values, which are passed down from one generation to another. Therefore, beginning from an understanding of the value of chastity from within the African culture is likely to drive a better understanding and appreciation of the vow of chastity.¹⁵ (Kanu, 2024). Chastity and the value of virginity is not foreign to the culture of the African people.

The contextualization of the vow of obedience is anchored on the African philosophy of obedience to constituted authorities and elders. The African understanding of the authority of the king, the father or mother, or the first son, etc., and obedience to them is not only understood in a physical sense, there is a spiritual backing to this authority which is handed down to every generation. This understanding of authority and the absolute obedience that follows is a structure around which the vow of obedience can be interpreted. It also reminds us that obedience is not a practice that is alien to the African people (Kanu, 2024). There are a retinue of stories and proverbs that teach the value of obedience. This notwithstanding, for the appreciation of obedience among the African people, it needs to be interpreted within the context of the religious life as a family.

As regards poverty, the African socio-political milieu is one that is already highest in poverty rates globally, with 23 of the world's 28 poorest countries, with poverty rates above 30% using the poverty line of 1.9 dollar per day. It is in such a society that consecrated persons witness to, and have been called to smell like the sheep not by living in perjury, but by living among them and with them as

¹⁵ Kanu, I. A. (2024). "The Inculturation of Consecrated Life in Africa: Towards a Logic for Promoting Indigenous Gifts of Fidelity". *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life*, Vol. 21. No. 1. pp. 245-265.

much as possible. Being with the people they have been called to serve and feeling their pains and difficulties with them rather than living as bourgeoisie among them. The present socio-economic situation in Africa calls for moderation and sharing with others. And this is a context for living out the vow of poverty in Africa.

The contextualization of the vow of poverty is also possible from the angle of the African's cultural emphasis on the value of the human person and not on the value of what a person has or possesses. This has promoted a sense of selflessness among the African people even before the advent of Christianity. The spirit of sharing among the African people is also significant in a discourse about the inculturation of the vow of poverty. Life for the African is a life of sharedness. And there are several African stories that help the young to understand the consequences of pursuing wealth at the expense of one's dignity, and also the importance of sharing what one has with the other given that the other is a part of me.¹⁶ These can be instruments for the communication of the idea of the vow of poverty to the African people.

The Challenges of Contextualization

A community of factors have clung to the wheels of the contextualization of the gospel message. Some of these factors that have constituted obstacles include:

¹⁶ Kanu, I. A. (2024). "The Inculturation of Consecrated Life in Africa: Towards a Logic for Promoting Indigenous Gifts of Fidelity". *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life*, Vol. 21. No. 1. pp. 245-265.

a. *Scepticism*

Contextualization for many is a downgrading of the Christian message or the message of the gospel. This perspective usually comes from the understanding of the African culture or context as second class, or as incompatible with the Christian message, and thus to bring the two together is to temper with the sanctity of the Christian message.

b. *Syncretism*

Syncretism is the union of two opposite forces, beliefs, systems or tenets so that the united form is a new thing.¹⁷ This agrees with Schreiter (1994),¹⁸ who defines syncretism as the “mixing of elements of two religious systems to the point where at least one, if not both, of the systems loses basic structure and identity”. Pinto (cited in Kanu 2012)¹⁹ has a dismal concept of syncretism. In his opinion, it is the “fusion of incompatible elements” or the “mingling of authentic notions and realities of the revealed faith with realities of other spiritual worlds”. There is the fear that contextualization will undermine the uniqueness of the gospel as found in the Scriptures or the incarnate Son of God.

c. *Distrust for things African*

The distrust for things that are African is another serious obstacle to the progress of contextualization. This comes from two sides, first

¹⁷ Yamamori, T. (1975). *Christopaganism or indigenous Christianity?* Pasadena: WC.

¹⁸ Schreiter, R. (1994). *Constructing local theologies*. Maryknoll: Orbis.

¹⁹ Kanu, I. A. (2012). “Inculturation and Christianity in Africa”. *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. Vol. 2. No. 17, September, pp. 236-244.

from the African who sometimes has no confidence in himself or herself and in the African culture. There is also the situation of people external to Africa who do not believe that the African culture or story is authentic or good enough for contextualization

d. Training/Guidance on Contextualization

Many African theologians have not been trained on the meaning of contextualization, and this has led to a misrepresentation of the entire project. There is, therefore, the need for information on the extents of contextualization and the limits of contextualization. This will provide guidance to African theologians as they engage in the contextualization project.²⁰

Conclusion

In the encounters of cultures within the Christian faith, there is always the possibility of overlooking things that are very important for a specific cultural context, or not making meaning out of the specific cultural values of other people because of our own cultural background. God, in Scripture, has set the standard by using cultural concepts, terms, and symbols to make sense of who He is and his purposes for the world. This notwithstanding, He revealed Himself to ALL nations indicating the need to reach out to other cultures within the context of their cultures. In relation to the Scripture, this might involve reading the scriptural text through a certain cultural perspective, and also using the biblical lens to explain what is happening in a culture.

The focus of this paper has been on the contextualization of the consecrated life in Africa, with particular reference to the evangelical counsels. The purpose of this consideration of contextualization is to make the Evangelical Counsels

²⁰ Kanu, I. A. (2012). "Inculturation and Christianity in Africa". *International Journal of Humanities and Social Science*. Vol. 2. No. 17, September, pp. 236-244.

feel at home in Africa and to help the African people appropriate these evangelical counsels as their way of life. To achieve this, a theoretical framework and a theological logic were developed as a ground for contextualization, followed by an understanding of the evangelical counsels. This was proceeded by a provision of the socio-cultural contexts for the contextualization of the evangelical counsels. Despite the possibility of the challenges of syncretism, scepticism, distrust for things African and lack of training and guidance, the project of contextualization, especially in Africa still remains a worthy project in need of greater attention than ever.