“Q Nürü Ube Nwanne Agbala Qsọ”, A THEOLOGY OF FRATERNAL SOLIDARITY: AN IGBO PERSPECTIVE TO LIBERATION THEOLOGY

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Introduction

The development of Christian theology and the growth of its social relevance in our time will always depend on its ability to boast of being intelligible to the lay person. Such a development consists less in sensational discoveries of hitherto unknown truths, nor in the reformulation of dogmatic precepts, which often seem to repudiate a true commitment to aggiornamento. It also does not consist in the abstract academicism of the Symposia that tends to confine theology and reduce it to an object of the intellectual sports of a few elite theologians. No, it consists rather in new ways of perceiving old problems which lead to articulating credible diagnoses that advance the goals of Christian theology. If one were to appreciate some of the achievements of inculturation and liberation theologies in recent years, one will note their priceless contributions in liberating theology from the barren so-called academicism and of assisting it to reach out beyond the walls of the university classrooms or seminaries to confront the human being in the society. Even as these two theologies still face the threat of being discarded or relegated either as echoes of a leftist ideology, or as a glorification of syncretism, the perspectives which both theologies have illuminated in theological discourses, especially in Africa, are important and remain to be fully explored. It is in fact the inspiration, which came from the discourses in liberation and inculturation that compels me to engage myself in this reflection on what I have chosen to call “a theology of (fraternal) solidarity”.

1 Dr. Okafor got his PhD from the theological faculty of the University of Vienna Austria and specializes in fundamental theology.
The phrase ‘fraternal solidarity’ in fact awakens in me the memory of a somewhat uneventful encounter with a young African boy of about seven years old who, carrying his younger sister on his back on a long distance trek turned down my offer of help, to give him a lift, with such a gentle rebuff that was thought-provoking. I (a stranger who suddenly stopped with his car by the roadside) was trying to persuade him that I meant no harm to him, and that his sibling sister is undoubtedly too heavy a burden for him to carry under the circumstances. And in response to my argument the little boy retorted: “O naghị anyị m alọ, ọbu nwanne m”, which means, “she is not a burden to me, she is my sister!” Reasoning about this reply, I was forced to admit that the primary reason why the human burden on the boy’s back was not heavy is precisely because she is his sister. Invariably, the boy could not have been able or willing to carry any other type of load that weighs exactly as his sister on such a long distant trek. This response from such a young innocent lad illuminates a profound truth, that in the awareness of a commitment to fraternal charity, human beings discover incalculable inner strength or potentials capable of making heavy burdens seem light. This boy’s demonstration of altruism exemplifies perfectly what the virtue of solidarity is all about. When love is present, carrying one another in fact becomes a beautiful experience—a welcome duty. And one of the essential purposes of Christian theology is to ensure that the countenance of fraternal love is reproduced in the faces of most, if not all, women and men of this world. In other words, that most women and men will learn to appreciate the virtue of seeing one another as real brothers and sisters and consequently be prepared to carry one another on this journey of earthly life whenever the need arises. This is not only an ideal of the Christian faith; it is also a divine imperative.

This ideal is the joint-aspiration of Catholic Social Teaching (CST) and the theologies of liberation and inculturation. CST, understood as the on-going reflection on the human person as a social being and about how society can best be structured to
provide for people's well-being both as individuals and in community, admits to having a common ground with liberation theology on the theme of solidarity. Speaking at the 20th anniversary of Pope John Paul II's *Centesimus Annus*, Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that solidarity is a "responsibility on the part of everyone with regard to everyone, and it cannot therefore be merely delegated to the State." In that address the Pontiff reiterated an aspect of his message in the encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* that the family model of the logic of love, of gratitude, and of gift goes together with a universal dimension: commutative justice, "give to have", and distributive justice, "give to owe", are not sufficient in social living, because it is necessary to arrive at gratuitousness and solidarity in order to have true justice. This demand of gratuitousness and fraternal charity is painted in the story of the little boy carrying his sister and also encapsulated in the Igbo pithy saying, "*O nuzu ube nwanne agbala oso*" which literally means, 'one who hears the cry of a brother/sister should not ignore it (i.e. walk away, or show apathy)'. This Igbo saying articulates laconically the heart of African theology of solidarity and an Igbo perspective to liberation theology. It is an exhortation to hearken to the brother's or sister's cry for help in the spirit of solidarity. However, it leads us invariably to ask a fundamental question: Who is my brother or sister to whom I am so indebted in love and solidarity? Jesus’ answer to this question breaks the boundaries of consanguinity (cf. Mt 12:48-50) and of nationality (cf. Lk 10:29-37). It opens for us a new way of perceiving one another—a way that also requires in our time a shift in theological hermeneutic.

My African understanding of solidarity compels me to acknowledge the exigency of this shift in hermeneutic—a shift that appreciates the merits of both liberation theology and Catholic

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3 Ibid.
Social Teaching while at the same time looking deeper into the dark waters of oppression and exploitation which form the subject-matter of liberation hermeneutic. In the light of this hermeneutic, the primary cause of discriminations that are based on race, gender, social status, ethnic or religious affiliation etc., is identified in this essay as a mental construct that must first of all be dismantled if there will be hope of effectively addressing the problem of unjust structures in human society. *Ọ nụrụ ụbe nwanne agbala ọsọ*[^4] is in this context an Igbo clarion-call to every member of society to join in building the highest form of civilization worthy of human history—the civilization of love. In this pithy saying, which, for the Igbo, is no less a theological treatise, an idiomatic perspective to liberation and solidarity is disclosed and compactly and profoundly articulated. My aim here is to demonstrate how this idiom adequately synthesizes the basic tenets of Catholic Social Teaching and the theologies of Liberation and Inculturation in the one singular theme of fraternal solidarity.

As the Roman Catholic Church commemorates the 50th anniversary of Vatican II ecumenical council, and as theologians engage in the intellectual stock-taking of the church’s pastoral endeavours, it is important to remember what was at the heart of the council’s most popular document, the *Gaudium et Spes*: “*The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way....*”[^5] It is precisely on this note of sharing the afflictions of the poor that one must consider it important to shed light on the theological depth and significance of this Igbo saying whose relevance for African theology cannot be ignored or overemphasized.

[^4]: This terse saying was made popular in Igboland by musician Bright Chimezie and his Zigima Sound with the song “Ube Nwanne”. See You Tube, [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qO4ZR1xjvzl](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qO4ZR1xjvzl).

[^5]: See *Gaudium et Spes*, 1
Meaning and Theological Implication of “Ọ Nụrụ Ube Nwanne Agbala Ọsọ”

As already mentioned above, this is an Igbo pithy saying, which is primarily a moral appeal, an exhortation, and above all, a theology. Western thinkers and readers may find it difficult to comprehend how a ‘mere’ African saying translates into a theology. This is one of the noteworthy examples of how the epistemic structure of the African intellectual world differs from that of the West. This African otherness and uniqueness is a preponderant logic of the inculturation theology. We shall come back to this later. Meanwhile, let me state that any theology that wants to be socially relevant must be ready to confront men and women of every age with the question: Cain, where is your brother Abel? This is because theology is all about interaction—vertical and horizontal—between God and humans, and between humans among themselves. In a pluralistic multi-racial, multi-cultural and multi-religious world polluted by conflicts of various kinds, identifying the brother or sister in the above question may be fraught with difficulties. The true picture of human interactions in the society today suggests that covert and overt hostile attitudes of many persons are often influenced or in fact dictated by prejudicial perceptions of other human beings who are seen as not belonging to one’s own group. Such aberrant perceptions are in fact responsible for such deplorable phenomena as nepotism, sexism, exploitation, marginalisation, intolerance, condescension or downright murderous hatred. The mission of the church is to offer some sort of contrast to such anti-social behaviours. In the church, the utopia of harmonious living is always what every theologian and Christian will call the “Kingdom of God.” The major emphasis of liberation theology has been the biblical notion of this kingdom of God: a new vision of societal existence marked by justice, peace, dialogue, and loving collaboration. According to Juan Luis Segundo, “the prophetic content of Jesus’ proclamation moves and revolves around the words, kingdom, salvation, the poor, and good
news.”  

And Jesus declared himself a brother to all those who are attentive to this proclamation (cf. Mt 12:46-50; Mk 3:31-35; Lk 8:19-21). To be church or to belong to the family of Jesus Christ is to have the compassion and gentle sensitivity of Jesus for the multitude. Blessed John Paul II admitted at the twentieth anniversary of *Populorum Progressio*—on the Development of Peoples—that “in a world divided and beset by every type of conflict, the conviction is growing of a radical interdependence and consequently of the need for a solidarity which will take up interdependence and transfer it to the moral plane.”  

In fact, the hope of a better world arising from the consciousness of our mutual interdependence has been a recurrent theme in theological discussions recently. Hence, the liberation that is sought through acts of solidarity is liberation from interior blindness that obscures our appreciation of this mutual interdependence; a liberation that brings men and women to a new level of understanding one another and relating accordingly, thus liberating the oppressed as well as the oppressor. Such a new level of enlightenment requires also a new theological hermeneutic that edifies the mutual perception of human beings, educating peoples about the need for a healthy social mentality that realizes the hope of the kingdom of God. In fact such a mutual perception of an ontological fraternal bond between human beings is apriori to any commitment to liberation. The saying, “Ọ nụru ube nwanné aghala ọso”, pre-empts such a new trend in theology and aptly summarizes it in a very intelligible and compact lecture.

The saying could be said to be propagating a theistic anthropology that has been recently elaborated by Benedict XVI’s encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*. It in fact evokes the memory of the

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first paragraph of *Gaudium et Spes*. It also actually recapitulates the first Act of the covenant God: “Yahweh then said, ‘I have indeed *seen the misery* of my people in Egypt. I have *heard them crying for help* on account of their taskmasters. Yes, I am well aware of their sufferings. And I have *come down to rescue them* from the clutches of the Egyptians and bring them up to that country…”⁸ In this Exodus text, which is fondly quoted by liberation theologians, Yahweh sees the misery of His people, He *hears* their *cry for help*, and He *comes down to rescue* them. Yahweh’s intervention in the book of Exodus demonstrates a historically divine precedence in salvation history that gives the dictum, *O nuru ube nwanne agbala oso*, when interpreted in that light, the status of a divine precept and no longer that of a mere idiomatic exhortation. Invariably, the Igbo remind themselves here that all are obliged to act with empathy and fraternal charity in any encounter with social evil or suffering (the cry—*ube*), because God wills it so.

As we know, in the Old Testament biblical theology, Yahweh’s action is by virtue of His filial relationship with Israel (cf. Hosea 11: 1-4). It was a saving intervention that is analogous to the obligations of a senior uncle, אגד - *go’el*,⁹ (Isa. 43:14; 47:4; Jer. 50:34). In this sense God is seen analogically as a supra-cosmic member of the family of Israel and invariably cannot abandon His family to the mercy of cruel persecutors. His intervention does not only have a paradigmatic moral significance, but also a relational significance by virtue of its familial character. Over and above the need to render justice to Israel, God’s pathos is that of a father or a

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⁸ The New Jerusalem Bible, Ex 3: 7-8
⁹ See Ex 19:4; *Go’el* is the Hebrew participle of the verb *gaal*, “to redeem”. It is rendered in the Authorized Version of the Bible as “kinsman” (Num. 5:8; Ruth 3:12; 4:1, 6, 8); “redeemer,” (Job 19:25); “avenger,” (Num. 35:12; Deut. 19:6, etc.) The Jewish law gave the right of redeeming and repurchasing, as well as of avenging blood, to the next of kin, who was accordingly called by this name. The word is often used of God, the Saviour of his people and avenger of the oppressed. The early Jewish rabbis applied the term to the Messiah, and this probably induced St Jerome to translate it as ‘Redeemer’ (see *The New Jerusalem Bible*, Job 19:25, footnote ⁸).
kinsman. This decisive exodus-event reveals to us an empathic God, a liberator and a kind of senior ‘Brother’ who proverbially carries his people on eagle’s wings (cf. Ex 19:4) and delivers them to safety and prosperity. Through the exodus-event God invites us not just to acknowledge his mighty deeds as a liberator-God but above all to take after His example and intervene likewise in those historical situations where the cries of need earnestly call for our attention and make urgent appeal to our humanity. This is what Igbo theology of solidarity entails. The theological import of the nwanne idiom of solidarity requires, however, further hermeneutic clarification.

**Hermeneutic of “Nwanne”**

As the study of meaning, hermeneutic is important to literary discourse in disclosing that wherein the intelligibility of something maintains itself. The contextual meaning of the word “nwanne” in Ọ nụrụ ube nwanne agbala ọsọ would be crucial in understanding the pithy saying and the moral it intends to showcase. According to Heideggerian hermeneutics, the reciprocity of text and context in which the hermeneutic circle is recognised, would consider the understanding of this idiom to be ontological and not merely epistemological. Hence, it is not just meant to communicate knowledge, but rather to state an existential truth of being (facticity) and, of course, motivate human action—‘being-for’, or ‘Dasein’. Nwanne is in fact a Dasein; and the facticity of his or her being, expressed in the context of the above pithy saying, portrays him/her as an addressee and a moral agent who is confronted with his or her “suffering other”. In that context, nwanne refers to everybody whose image of his or her “self” is authenticated in his/her empathy for a suffering other—his/her needy self. To refuse to hearken to the anguished cry (ube) of this other is to repudiate

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what it means to be *nwanne*. This is why our people sometimes say (when they are disappointed with the West): "*Bekee a bughi nwanne anyi*!", "the Whiteman is not our brother"! Accordingly, the basis of empathy, Ṣọµátheta (empathia, 'in passion', suffering with) as a necessary social duty, is the ontological facticity of *progeneration*, that is, the fact of being *umunne*—children of the same mother or father.

The meaning we seek is the phenomenological basis wherein the word "*nwanne*" maintains its intelligibility in Igbo verbal communication. 'Meaning' in fact resides basically in the "in-here" of a concept or thing. This definition is without prejudice to Ricoeur's *The Rule of Metaphor*, in which he underscores the importance of 'resemblance' in the theory of interpretation and thus advances the positions of earlier thinkers. However, adopting the classical understanding of hermeneutics, meaning could be said to be that, which is *inherent* to the concept whose content is being disclosed in the hermeneutic process. And inherent to our concept of 'nwanne' in Igbo linguistic morphology is primarily a sense of a *shared origin*, and secondarily, a sense of shared *purpose*, *familyhood* (*ujamaa*), *togetherness*, *team work*, *friendship*, and *community*.

In her erudite study of this Igbo kinship terminology, albeit with a view to underscoring its matrifocal thrust, Joseph-Thérèse Agbasiere acknowledges that *nwanne* is a primary kinship idiom.11 The word 'nwanne', which translates as 'brother' or 'sister', is actually a compound of two words, 'nwa' (child) and 'nne' (mother). From a purely lexical point of view, 'nwanne m', literally means 'the child of my mother', and by implication 'nwanna m' 'the child of my father'. The latter is usually used to designate members of the extended family, the kindred, clan, village, town, etc., although one can also refer to an extended family relative as *nwanne*. Agbasiere informs us that the notion of *nwanne* is symbolic, in the sense that it is often manipulated in socio-

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economic and religious interactions. It also emphasizes Igbo propensity towards the orderly or appropriate. The concept is all-inclusive, it is not gender-specific and it is seen to operate as a means of asserting group membership.\(^\text{12}\)

The ‘inherent’ meaning which the word ‘nwanne’ or ‘nwanna’ communicates is the fact of a shared descent from one common progenitor. From this indication of a common biological descent and heritage, brotherhood in Igbo language and culture is linked inseparably with parenthood, so much so, that whoever rejects the one must necessarily reject the other. Accordingly, one cannot talk of nwanne status (brotherhood or sisterhood) in Igbo language without at the same time expressing the filiation that is the common denominator in the relationship. By implication, one cannot sever fraternal relationship without necessarily injuring maternal or paternal relationship and invariably jeopardizing the bond of the family and one’s own existential root. Theologically considered, when Christians recite the Lord’s Prayer, they profess exactly this bond: a profession of faith which lays the foundation for an ecclesiology of communion that can only be sustainable through a transparent attitude of fraternity in solidarity. Christians invariably confess that God is the transcendent origin of fraternity. This unique position gives God the absolute right to judge and punish sins against fraternity as he judges and punishes Cain for murdering his brother Abel (cf. Gen. 4: 9-12).

The triangular essence of nwanne (as in a nwanne catena: the loving subject; ↔ the object of love; ↔ and the origin of love), also makes it an adequate theological resource for comprehending analogically the Trinitarian logic, insofar as the Trinity communicates the existence of community in the Godhead. And I think that I am not alone in maintaining that we can try to

\(^{12}\) Ibid. p. 83f.
understand the mystery of the Triune God from the point of view of our own domestic relationships. In fact some other African theologians believe that the notion of the ‘Church as family’ is a mystery of unity and communion which has its origin fundamentally in the Blessed Trinity. And it is not by chance that the strong sense of family as the epicentre of all African social systems, which is entrenched in African culture, came to constitute the bedrock for the 1994 African synodal ecclesiology. The Vatican II ecclesiology of communion enunciated by the dogmatic constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, also speaks of the “mystery” of the Church and of her divine dimension, which proceeds from the Trinitarian missions of the Son and the Spirit in history. According to *Lumen Gentium*, the Church is seen as ‘a people made one with the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit’ (LG 4). Cardinal Marc Ouellet admits that “this Trinitarian vision of the mystery of the Church is not new. It belongs to the great tradition, but was obscured in modern times by a predominantly juridical approach to ecclesiology, that of the *societas perfecta*.” Theologians may have taken diverse orientations in articulating this mystery of the Trinitarian unity. What is unique or new here is that I relate it to the duty of solidarity. In this sense, the implicit triad that is embedded in the word ‘*nwanne*’ embodies community, of which primary expression of unity is the family. It could be seen to express, at least on the theoretical linguistic level, a form of “circumincession” illustrated in the diagram above, insofar as the one word, ‘*nwanne m*’, represents a triple interlocking relationship. It also symbolizes the Kingdom of God in its micro-phenomenal fullness, since to share in the life of the kingdom means to enjoy the community of saints—of men and women who are truly brothers and sisters to one another. Consequently, personal faith in God makes no sense

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14 Marc Ouellet, *The Ecclesiology of Communion, 50 Years after the Opening of Vatican Council II* (Maynooth, Ireland, June 7, 2012 (Zenit.org)).
without the acknowledgement of this God as ‘our God’. This is a fact of theistic anthropology which theologians like Pope Benedict XVI recognize.\(^{15}\) I cannot address God in The Lord’s Prayer without remembering that He is in fact “Our Father” and not my Father alone. Without the recognition of this all-embracing ‘we’, human society, whether acting as individuals or as a community, risks being emptied of its essence. This helps to illuminate why this idiom, *O nụru ube nwanne agbala ọso*, is an important subject-matter for a theology of fraternal solidarity. Now I turn to the relationship between solidarity and the theologies of liberation, inculturation and the Catholic social teaching.

**Significance of Solidarity in the Basic Tenets of Liberation Theology**

Liberation theology, as its name implies, is a theology which assigns primacy to the liberation of the poor. It privileges the poor “as that part of the content of theology around which all of theology can be organized—all questions of who God and Christ are, what grace and sin are, what the church and society are, what love and hope are, and so on.”\(^{16}\) The starting-point of liberation theology is an analysis of the concrete socio-political situation and the uncovering of the discrimination, alienation, exploitation, and oppression within it.\(^{17}\) The main thesis of liberation theology is one that is anchored on a reinforced emphasis on the *kairotic* character of the kingdom of God which was proclaimed by the prophets of


The Old Testament and by Jesus himself (cf. Mk 7:37; 12:2-6; Lk 4:16-21; 7:18-23; 11:20). This programmatic proclamation of Jesus demands conversion, faith and discipleship (cf. Mk 1:16-20), understood in terms of a commitment to struggle against the opposition of the anti-kingdom. According to Jon Sobrino, God’s “reign” is the positive action through which God transforms reality and God’s “Kingdom” is what comes to pass in this world when God truly reigns: a history, a society, a people transformed according to the will of God.

Because of its attention to the cries of distress, liberation theology is credited for having given the poor a strong voice in a world in which the phenomenal victory of the powerful has installed the deplorable principle that might is right. It is a constant refrain of all liberation theologies that the perspective of the poor and marginalised offers another story, an alternative story to that told by the wielders of power whose story becomes often the ‘normal’ account. A perfect example of such a ‘normal’ account is the infamous account that was chronicled in British colonial historiography as “the pacification of the Lower Niger”: At the dawn of the colonization of southern Nigeria, the Onitsha Igbo wanted to protect their economic, cultural, and religious interests and to negotiate on terms of equality with the missionaries and their British trading partners (the West African Company), whose trading terms and trade monopoly were against the best interests of the Onitsha community. The Onitsha chiefs objected then to what they perceived as harmful missionary preaching; the introduction of an alien lifestyle; and the creation of social dichotomy. They then proposed “that an agreement should be entered into for intermarriage between the children of the settlers and those of the

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18 Jesus’ answer in Lk 7:18-23 to the disciples of John the Baptist who came to query whether he is the “One who is to come” is particularly remarkable. It evokes the idea of a “Kingdom of God” that is already present and at the same time should be made present by the liberating actions of healing for the mind and body.

19 Jon Sobrino, Jesus the Liberator, p. 71
natives of Onitsha that all may become one people...." Their proposals were turned down and relationship deteriorated, such that between 1868 and 1880 living together became very tense. Finally, on October 28, 1879, after British citizens had been carefully evacuated, Onitsha was brutally bombarded by a British gunboat. A similar bombardment took place in 1880. Such gunboat diplomacy as witnessed in Onitsha was popularly known in the British colonial historiography as 'pacification'.

Theologians will agree that such 'human story' as we see in the Onitsha narrative is closely bound with the history of salvation, insofar as salvation history is also about the story of human hubris and God's just and loving interventions. For liberation theologians, Christology is the centre of that history—a story that encompasses the incarnation, the life of Jesus, which found its ultimate fulfilment in his cross, resurrection and ascension into heaven. And precisely because the salvation offered by Christ (i.e. his saving works), remain inseparable with his person, all Christological statements have at the same time soteriological character and vice versa. In order to situate Jesus in the history of the exploited people of Onitsha, the Christology of liberation required a new hermeneutic. Such a Christology goes hand in hand with a critical exegesis that devotes itself to a new interpretation of fundamental Christological dogma and an elucidation of the liberative dimensions of the Christian faith. Traditional images of Jesus Christ are hence criticized by liberation theologians as serving the colonial project. Consequently, the Christology of liberation feels empowered by a new understanding of the historical Jesus and engages itself for the interest of the oppressed and the marginalised. To be neutral means to give a tacit support to the privileged group that perpetuates structures of inequality and injustice. In other words, liberation is seen as a gospel imperative—a fraternal and salvific duty. Liberation theology hence asserts, in its discourse, the priority of the anthropological

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element over the ecclesiological. In Africa, where Jean-Marc Ela champions this perspective, liberation theologians insist that the basic project of Christianity in African society must be redefined. Ela asks: “At a moment when the privileged of the system are stifling their consciences to protect their situation, who will dare to confront the forces of oppression that condemn men, women, and children to suffer atrocious living conditions and all but starve…?”\(^1\) In other words, who will hearken to the cries of need that is ever present in African society? The simple answer to this question is: Everybody. Everybody should be Nwanne.

It is everybody’s duty to see in the suffering poor the distorted image of the crucified God and to continuously seek peace through justice, charity and solidarity. This includes the poor themselves. I say this with the awareness and sincere acknowledgement of the fact that such atrocities like the Jewish and Rwandan genocides were neither dependent on the failures of the Church’s institutions nor on the errors of ecclesiological models in dogmatic teaching. We are the Church (the people of God) and we (rich and poor alike) all bear responsibility for the shortcomings of our world. As a cosmic family that desires to live in harmony, each and every member is obliged in the task of building the kingdom of God by casting off all kinds of prejudice that obscure healthy human relationships and deprive humanity of the chance for peace and integral development. The Christology of liberation, insofar as it is an historical Christology, is a Christology from below. It begins with the concrete story of Jesus and considers it as a whole. Albeit, it includes the resurrection as a decisive moment, it refers ultimately to the activities of Jesus as service to the kingdom. And the most historical aspect of the historical Jesus is his actions through which he influenced his immediate environment and sought to change that environment towards the direction of the search for the kingdom of God. The most historical thing about the historical Jesus is, therefore, his invitation (or demand) for us to

continue his works. "O nuru ube nwanne agbala oso" typifies the call of Jesus to discipleship and the duty thereof. Hence, the theology of fraternal solidarity which is encapsulated in this pithy saying finds its ultimate expression also in an indigenous Christology of Jesus as Brother which I wish to examine in the next section.

"Jesu, Nwanne Otu Onye"—Jesus The Brother: an African (Igbo) Christology

In Matthew’s Gospel 25: 31-46, Jesus anticipated the last judgement and underscores God’s definitive, irrevocable, liberating, and gratuitous glory which is present and actual in the world. He demonstrates how this presence is hidden in his impalpable proximity to the hungry, the thirsty, the alien, the naked, the sick, and the impoverished, who he calls his “brothers” [and sisters]. Thus we know that in the combat for human liberation, nothing less than the divine is at stake. What concerns humanity by that very fact concerns God: “Lord, when did we see you hungry and feed you...?” (Matt. 25:37). Knowing who Christ is and where to encounter him is very essential to Christian faith. In fact Christ himself calls this knowledge “eternal life” (John 17:3). As I noted in my recent dissertation, “African Christians and theologians, like all Christ’s disciples, cannot evade the most fundamental Christological question: ‘But you, who do you say that I am?’ (Mk. 8:29). Any response to this Christological question must also begin with the acknowledgment of concrete human experience. Hence, the Son of God, the second person of the Trinity, is also the One, who a pious Igbo in his or her supplications refers to as ‘Jesu, Nwanne otu onye’. The choice of this Christological title, which is widely used in Igboland, is very

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22 cf. Sobrino J., Jesus in Latin America, p. 112
significant, even when it does not yet stand under theological limelight.”

The meaning of “otu onye” in this title is worthy of note. The term, which literally translates as “one person”, “an individual”, does actually connote something different. “Otunye” is an idiom that articulates a situation of helplessness and acute need; a feeling of abandonment; or of being alienated. “Jesu, Nwanne otu onye” accordingly addresses Jesus as the Brother of the needy, the lonely, the dejected, the marginalized, the social outcast etc. Jesus is thence, “Nwanne otu onye” (the Brother of one who has no brother) because in Him the lonely and marginalized find consolation and compassion; in Him all humans find help in moments of need. It is by virtue of being seen first as a Brother, that Jesus is also seen as the Liberator of the African people. The brother status of Jesus precedes and, in fact, lays the foundation for his liberator status. Hence Jesus, who is Christ, personifies in himself the historical reality of the paradigm of brotherhood. He is the perfect fulfilment of the ideal of brotherly love in both its historical and eschatological dimensions. As the King and divine Judge of history, he rightly punishes those who escaped or thought they could circumvent justice on earth, and rewards those whose brotherly commitment in the service of justice and solidarity still awaits to be duly rewarded (cf. Mt 25: 31-46).

The incarnation finds its meaning in this historical becoming-a-brother-to-us of Jesus Christ. The New Testament accounts of his birth situate it in the historical and sociological context of a human family. The letter to the Hebrews hence notes: “For it was not the angels that he took to himself; he took to himself descent from Abraham. It was essential that he should in this way become completely like his brothers so that he could be a compassionate and trustworthy high priest of God’s religion” (Heb 2:16-17). Jesus’ teachings, however, contain an express command to transcend the

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narrow bonds of consanguinity in order to form a spiritual family of disciples uncluttered by blood ties (Mk 3:31-35; Lk 9:59-62). As a divine Brother in this spiritual family, he remains the refuge and consolation of all who suffer oppression and injustice, as well as the solace of all who grieve on account of having nobody as helper in need. And for this reason the Igbo call him “Nwanne otu onye”—the brother of the lonely, or brother of the “brotherless”. This Christological portrait of Jesus as brother is not an Igbo phenomenon alone. It is an image that is at the heart of African Christian spirituality, as has been confirmed by Diane B. Stinton.\(^\text{24}\) It is an image that communicates the humanity of Jesus in a meaningful way, incorporating notions of intimacy and solidarity, contemporary presence and availability, protection from harm, and peace amid the hostilities of a divided humanity.\(^\text{25}\) This Christological image of Jesus as a brother is invariably the centre and the driving force for a theology of fraternal solidarity. It is an image that is not only culturally relevant and dear to Africans; it has also ample biblical support. It is from the perspective of seeing Jesus as an intimate brother that some Africans understand or seek to understand the theology of liberation. In an attempt to synthesize such understanding of liberation theology with the basic thrust of the inculturation theology, “\(O\ nuru\ ube\ nwanne\ aghala\ osọ\)” could be described as a sort of prolegomenon to an African theology of solidarity. Its alignment to inculturation theology is very obvious.

**Inculturation and the Theology of Solidarity**

I fully agree with Emmanuel Martey, that theological hermeneutics in Africa must necessarily have a unitary perception of both


\(^{25}\) Ibid., p. 151
inculturation and liberation. Indeed, even if many inculturation theologians would be reluctant to call themselves liberation theologians, inculturation in African theological discourse cannot be seen to be lacking liberation motif, for it emerged as a reaction to the alienation of Africa in ecclesiastical matters. P. Arrupe defined inculturation as “the incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the culture, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about ‘a new creation’.” This is a definition which many African theologians agree with and which Pope John Paul II confirms in *Redemptoris Missio*. But for some African theologians, inculturation in fact represents the specifically religious or theological reassertion of African memory. The quest for African identity lies at the heart of the project of inculturation; i.e. the attempt by Africans to create a new form of Christian self-understanding that is informed by an ‘anti-colonial’ recuperation of their own varied cultural traditions. Its ‘anti-colonial’ thrust and its location and largely implicit participation in the discursive practices of postcolonial theory, tie it to the history of colonialism. Therefore, it is a theology of protest whose efforts is to rethink African identity and whose goal is to resist or displace the epistemic claims of a western inflected Christianity. Accordingly, inculturation has been seen to testify to a crisis which “originated in the interrogation and devaluation of traditional modes of thought by and through the colonial project.”

28 Cf. Pope John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, (Rome, December 7, 1990), # 52
29 See Edward P. Antonio, Ibid. p. 8
30 Ibid. P. 12
could aptly be described as the theological echo of the African cry. One should not forget that slavery and colonialism were predicated on a theory of anthropological otherness which successfully blocked any vision of fraternity between racial black and white peoples. The result of the power play that characterised this period of history was culturally devastating for Africa. According to Edward P. Antonio, “it is precisely in the realm of culture that the effectiveness of the colonial agenda is best evaluated for it was there that new epistemic structures were created, new ways of being human were prescribed, new modes of perceiving and describing the world were preached and enforced and it was also there that the new myths of Christianity imposed a new moral consciousness and new forms of identity.”\textsuperscript{31}

Antonio rightly observes that “again and again, new and foreign modes of rationality emphasized the difference and incompatibility of African and western cultures with the latter serving as the supreme norm for civilization, development and progress—the goals of the colonial project. This brought about disruption, discontinuity and alienation to the African self-understanding.\textsuperscript{32} The epistemic structure of the African cognitive world was alien to the West and as a result was derided as primitive. As I said earlier, it is true that western thinkers will not easily understand how a mere idiom, like “\textit{O nuru ube nwanne agbala oso}”, equates to a theology. But to Africans, to whom this mode of thought belongs, idioms are repositories of folks’ wisdom and epistemologically valid and autochthonous modes of transmitting education and moral values in the society in a way that is compact, intelligible and morally edifying. However, African inculturation theology as we know it today is yet to tap the full resources of this mode of teaching and thinking. And I think that appreciating the theological significance of such pithy sayings like “\textit{O nuru ube nwanne agbala oso}” in Igbo cultural pedagogy is an essential step to enriching inculturation theology today while at the

\textsuperscript{31} Ibid.
\textsuperscript{32} Edward P. Antonio, Ibid. p. 40
same time incorporating the liberation imperative that is urgent in African society. In a manner so subtle to grasp, yet too obvious to be overlooked, this idiom fulfils the vision of African liberation theologians, like Emmanuel Martey, who believe in the necessity of a synthesis between liberation and inculturation in African theology.

Solidarity with African women, especially those who suffer domestic violence and sexual exploitation, also demands a radical change in perception which this saying advocates—a change underlined by fraternal charity in which the woman is seen first of all as a sister with equal heritage and dignity as the man. The problems faced by Africa and the world in general call for remedies that must be based upon new forms of socialization that is mutually inclusive. The cause of gender disparity is traceable to the inability to perceive and appreciate the woman primarily as a dear sister and a worthy daughter of one cosmic family made up of men and women whose equal and complementary sexuality constitutes the image of God as revealed by the Scripture: “in the image of God he created him, male and female he created them” (Gen 1:27). Humanity, therefore, will remain impoverished so long as women are forced to remain voiceless and supine partners in the divine mandate to govern the earth. The project of Christianising culture or inculturating Christianity in Africa cannot and should not ignore the unsustainability of extolling a culture that continues to subordinate women and discriminate against “osu” (outcasts). African theologians who engage in inculturation must bear in mind that culture is more than the arts. It is about shared patterns of identity. It is about how social values are transmitted and individuals are made to be part of a society. Culture is how the past interacts with the future. Culture is all about “onye aghala nwanne ya” (let no one abandon his/her sister or brother), and is essentially communitarian. Without this understanding of culture, inculturation as an expression of protest against “theological imperialism” becomes meaningless. The African continent reminds us that the future belongs to those who will have found a way to give present
generations reasons to live and hope. While it must be acknowledged that modern society is making progress on emancipation, “Ọ nụrụ ụbe nwanne agbala ọso” further challenges inculturation theology to become also a theology of solidarity. In this sense, it epitomizes a new anthropological perspective with respect to the gender question—a perspective that calls for a fraternal response to the cry of incarcerated womanhood.

Now having argued for the above Igbo saying as an essential tool of theological discourse in both liberation and inculturation theologies, I would like to further examine how it also satisfies the vision of Catholic Social Teaching since Vatican II.

The Post Vatican II Era of Catholic Social Teaching

The Second Vatican Council in its Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes, acknowledges that the earth has not yet become the scene of true brotherhood; and then asks how this unhappy situation can be overcome. In answer to this important question, the Council tells us that the Word of God, which became man “assures those who trust in the charity of God that the way of love is open to all men and that the effort to establish a universal brotherhood will not be in vain.” Keeping the flame of this hope alive is admittedly one of the major goals of Catholic theology and a concern that has predominantly preoccupied successive Popes since the past half century. The very questions that motivate the heretofore articulated theology of fraternal solidarity arise also from this hope.

Pope John Paul II defines solidarity as a Christian virtue, which seeks to go beyond itself, to take on the specifically Christian dimensions of total gratuity, forgiveness and reconciliation. Through an awareness of the common fatherhood of God, of the brotherhood of all in Christ—“children in the Son”—

33 See Gaudium et Spes, # 37
34 Ibid, # 38
and of the presence and life-giving action of the Holy Spirit, this virtue brings to our vision of the world a new criterion for interpreting it. This criterion is one that enables all men and women to see in each other brothers and sisters who are mutually interdependent, and who are challenged by a young African boy to learn to carry one another without feeling the burden. A cursory look at three pontificates of the past five decades highlights how recent Catholic Social Teaching resonates in the Igbo saying that form the principal thrust of the theology of solidarity understood here both in terms of liberation and inculturation.

**Pope Paul VI**

In March 1967, with the encyclical *Populorum Progressio*, Paul VI stated categorically that the world is sick, and its illness consists less in the unproductive monopolization of resources by a small number of men than in the lack of brotherhood among individuals and peoples. This important observation distinguished this encyclical as a significant trailblazer to a theology of solidarity. Invariably, the problem the Pope saw does not consist in the fact of having rich people in the society living side by side with very poor people, but rather in the “rich man’s” lack of awareness that the “poor man” is his brother. Hence, the encyclical asserts: “there can be no progress towards the complete development of man without the simultaneous development of all humanity in the spirit of solidarity. Man must meet man, nation meet nation, as brothers and sisters, as children of God. It is in this mutual understanding and friendship, in this sacred communion, that the task of working together to build the common future of the human race takes its departure.” Pope John Paul II took over from where this Pope stopped.

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35 John Paul II, *Solicitudo Rei Socialis*, n. 40  
36 Pope Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, n. 66  
37 Ibid., n. 43
Pope John Paul II

Twenty years after Populorum Progressio, Pope John Paul II, in Solicitudo Rei Socialis, notes with disappointment that the hope for development, once alive, suddenly appears far from being realized. Faced with a waning optimism about overcoming the ever widening gap between rich and poor, between the different worlds, the Pontiff acknowledges that the unity of the human race is seriously compromised—an issue before whose moral implications the Church cannot afford to remain indifferent. In Solicitudo Rei Socialis the Pope points out that “the obstacles to integral development are not only economic but rest on more profound attitudes which human beings can make into absolute values.” Obviously such aberrant attitudes are rooted in the unwillingness to appreciate the other as a brother or sister.

In addition to other positions taken by John Paul II, one must note that the 1994 Synod of bishops for Africa which took place under his watch was a land-mark event in the history of African theology. Not only did the Synod speak of inculturation, but it also made use of it, taking the Church as God’s Family as its guiding idea for the evangelization of Africa. The Synod Fathers acknowledged the family as a model that expresses the Church’s nature in a way that is particularly appropriate to Africa. The family emphasizes care for others, solidarity, warmth in human relationships, acceptance, dialogue and trust. The new evangelization will thus aim at building up the Church as Family,

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38 Ibid. Solicitudo Rei Socialis n. 12
39 Ibid., n. 14. Pope John Paul II observes that the nomenclature which speaks of different worlds within our one world is an unhealthy symptom of a divided humanity. Such expressions as “Fourth World”, he notes, is used not just occasionally for the so-called less advanced countries, but also and especially for the bands of great or extreme poverty in countries of medium and high income. But all in all, this invention of a new hierarchy of worlds is a shameful index of an undesirable stratification that serves neither mutual respect nor human development.
40 Ibid. n. 38
avoiding ethnocentrism and excessive particularism. It will try to encourage reconciliation and true communion between different ethnic groups; favour solidarity and the sharing of personnel and resources among the particular Churches, irrespective of ethnic considerations.\textsuperscript{41} Such was the vision of the synod Fathers.

The synod went further to express the hope that theologians in Africa will work out the theology of the Church as Family with all the riches contained in this concept, showing its complementarity with other images of the Church.\textsuperscript{42} Ironically, while much is being said about the Church as family, the extent to which this image has impacted the depth of the spiritual consciousness of Christians leaves much to be desired. According to Agatha Radoli, “it is shocking to Christians that church buildings were turned into sites of carnage during the 1994 Rwandan genocide. They keep on asking themselves questions like: How could Catholics desecrate Christ’s Presence in the Blessed Sacrament by slaughtering their \textit{brothers and sisters} in the churches? What drove them to such a degree of savagery that \textit{they could not even hear the cries of innocent children} as they died in agony?”\textsuperscript{43}

A more fundamental question, however, should be: Do those Catholics realise that the innocent victims they slaughtered were their “brothers and sisters”? This is the kind of question that ought to shape the outline of a theology that seeks to go beyond liberation hermeneutics. In fact in the light of “\textit{O n\textsc{u}ru u\textsc{b}e n\textsc{w}an\textsc{n}e a\textsc{g}b\textsc{a}l\textsc{a} \textsc{q}\textsc{so}}”, what transpired in Rwanda and in many other war zones is an abomination which undermined the ecclesiology of the African synod. The sad truth is that the victims of the genocide were first of all disparaged as “cockroaches” in nation-wide hate propaganda in order to make it easier to slaughter them in hundreds of thousands without qualms of conscience. This boils down to the question:

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\begin{itemize}
\item \textsuperscript{41} Pope John Paul II, Post-Synodal Exhortation, \textit{Ecclesia in Africa}, n. 63
\item \textsuperscript{42} Ibid.
\item \textsuperscript{43} Agatha Radoli, Preface to Mario I. Aguilar \textit{The Rwandan Genocide And The Call To Deepen Christianity In Africa} (Eldoret, Kenya: AMECEA Pub., 1998) p. vi
\end{itemize}
“Cain, where is your brother Abel?” It would have made a lot of difference, if the victims were perceived by their detractors as brothers and sisters. Such a perception would have imposed a moral restraint on the murderous anger that led to such tragic fratricides. Surely one must admit that in Rwanda as in similar historical situations, it is neither liberation nor inculturation per se that was urgent, but rather a theology that could bring to people’s consciousness the fact of their fraternal relationship and the spirituality expected thereof. It is a theology of solidarity. The need for such a theology remains acute even as the new pontificate encounters a new and different situation.

Pope Benedict XVI

The pontificate of Benedict XVI witnessed in the global financial crisis the sad reality that human society is still far from the ideals of fraternal solidarity. In his first encyclical, Deus Caritas Est, the Pope took up the theme of Love as the Christian image of God and the resulting image of humankind and its destiny. Using the parable of Lazarus and Dives, he reminded us of the eschatological consequences of ignoring the poor man’s suffering (cf. Lk 16: 19-31). And with the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk 10: 25-37) he underscores the exigency of a new hermeneutic for human relationship—a hermeneutic that recognizes the values of positive perception of other persons as the basis of every action of justice or mercy. In the light of such congenial perception, the helpless victim of unjust violence is immediately identified in one’s judgement as a neighbour in need; a brother or sister whose pain-filled groans (ube nwanne) one cannot ignore without being inhuman. According to the Encyclical, until Jesus’ teaching of this parable, “the concept of ‘neighbour’ was understood as referring essentially to one’s countrymen and to foreigners who had settled in the land of Israel; in other words, to closely-knit community of a single country or

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44 Pope Benedict XVI, Deus Caritas Est, n. 1
people. This limit is now abolished. Anyone who needs me, and whom I can help, is my neighbour. The concept of ‘neighbour’ is now universalized, yet it remains concrete. Despite being extended to all mankind, it is not reduced to a generic, abstract and undemanding expression of love, but calls for my own practical commitment here and now.”45 This teaching finds a resounding echo in the Igbo saying: “Nwanne di na mba”. The saying expresses the far-reaching extra-mural dimension of the “nwanne” relationship that is at the heart of the ecclesiology of fraternal solidarity.

In Caritas in Veritate, his first social encyclical per se, Benedict XVI laments that “as society becomes ever more globalized, it makes us neighbours but does not make us brothers”.46 Identifying the cause of underdevelopment as the lack of brotherhood among individuals and peoples, the Encyclical acknowledged a need for “a new humanism which will enable modern man to find himself anew by embracing the high values of love and friendship”.47 True development of peoples, the Pope affirms, “depends, above all, on the recognition that the human race is a single family working together in true communion, not simply a group of subjects who happen to live side by side.”48 Benedict XVI thus recognizes that to tackle the task of global development, “what is needed is an effective shift in mentality which can lead to the adoption of new life-styles in which the quest for truth, beauty, goodness and communion with others for the sake of common growth are the factors which determine consumer choices, savings and investments in our world.”49 This shift in mentality requires a magnanimity that was demonstrated by the little boy who, carrying his sibling sister on his back, boldly declared that the burden was not heavy for him because she is his sister.

45 Ibid. n. 15
46 Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate, n. 19
47 Ibid.; See also Populorum Progressio, n. 20
48 Benedict XVI, Caritas in Veritate, n. 53
49 Ibid. n. 51
Finally, the Pope cautions that, “while the poor of the world continue knocking on the doors of the rich, the world of affluence runs the risk of no longer hearing those knocks, on account of a conscience that can no longer distinguish what is human." Acknowledging the failure of human institutions to guarantee the fulfilment of humanity’s right to development, *Caritas in Veritate* invests the hope of integral human development in “a free assumption of responsibility in solidarity on the part of everyone.” In other words, everyone is called to carry everyone else in need.

In concluding this section, I want to raise objection to how CST often appears not to recognize in solidarity the very root and centre of all social questions. The encyclical, *Deus Caritas Est*, for example, allowed *philia* (that taken-for-granted manifestation of love which is neither demanding nor self-centred) to recede to the background, while *Eros* and *Agape* are juxtaposed as the predominant expressions of love. If the origin of love is God, then it is God’s *philia*, made flesh in the incarnate Logos, which is the decisive bond of the Divine-Human relationship. God’s *philia* makes us God’s children and members of a family through the Son, who He ‘filiated’ (begot) in eternity. *Agape* could be understood as the inundation of love, which divine grace effects in human *philia* engendering it to reach beyond the temporal (consanguinity) to the ontological (humanity). In order that charity maintains its splendour, it is important that it be exercised not as if to a wretched, helpless poor whose appearance evokes my pity, but rather to a needy brother or sister whose situation tests and challenges my humanity and spirituality. Owing to the significance of *philia* as the bond of the family and of friendship, its marginal treatment in *Deus Caritas Est* should, therefore, be regarded as a great oversight. For at a time when fraternal solidarity should have been the central theme of Christian theology, the Magisterium treated it without the attention it deserved. But theologians must

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50 *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 75
51 cf. *Caritas in Veritate*, n. 11
recuperate the full force and dynamism of *philia* so that Solidarity will take its place as the centre and fulcrum around which the pertinent social questions of humanity revolve. The statement of the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace on the Global Economy, which calls for recognizing "the primacy of being over having and of ethics over economy", even apparently confirms this new shift in theological emphasis. We might well be entering into a period in the history of theology when the focus on solidarity will be the yardstick for measuring contemporary social relevance of theological discourses. Presuming that that time has come, I want to approach the end of this essay by drawing attention to a possible interpretation of a well-known biblical parable with the aim of highlighting how a shift in hermeneutic could enrich our reading of sacred Scripture and expose the insufficiency, or even absurdity of old theological perspectives that are hitherto determined by narrow socio-cultural and historical contexts.

The Parable of the Prodigal Brother

The parable of the prodigal son (Lk. 15: 11-32) is one of the few sublime analogies that Jesus used in teaching us the very mystery and essence of divine mercy, as a profound drama played out between the father's love and the prodigality and sin of the son. At least, this is how it has been hitherto understood in official Church teaching. However, this parable has more to say than about a

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father and his son. It is at the same time a parable of the prodigal brother, because it also brings into the narrative, the disgruntled elder brother who has not been prodigal himself. I have intentionally renamed this parable to emphasize the fraternal charity that was called into question in the narrative. The role of the first son in the parable is remarkable, because what will in the end emerge as scandalous in the parable is no longer the fact that the prodigal son lavished his wealth in reckless living, but rather that the self-righteous elder brother would be willing to see him (as one might suppose) serve as a slave in his own father’s house, or even be cast out entirely.

As we know, the parable is a story of squandered inheritance, reckless vanity, and foolish delinquency that ended up in a miserable life: The prodigal son “would gladly have fed on the pods that the swine ate, but no one would let him have them” (Lk. 15:16). The young man’s loss of material goods brought him to a deeper consciousness—the consciousness of the tragic loss of his own dignity. This parable, apart from referring ultimately to sin and forgiveness, is also emblematic of those miserable life situations where the suffering subject may be held culpable for having made wrong and foolish choices. As events unfold, the judgement of history becomes too harsh for the prodigal son to bear and he is ready to undergo the humiliation and shame of becoming a slave in his father’s house. The obvious lesson, which emerges here, is that this humiliation is justifiable and even welcome by the prodigal son himself. The father, however, finds it intolerable and his mercy intervenes in the situation to prevent such a humiliation. He further prevails on his elder son to give up his indignation for reason of fraternity, arguing: “...it was only right we should celebrate and rejoice, because your brother here was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found” (Lk 15:32).

Jesus concludes the story here, leaving it open-ended, probably to enable us draw a variety of personal meanings from the parable. And one meaning is indispensable: Apart from the lesson about the Father’s dives in misericordia (rich in mercy), the
conclusion of the parable opens a whole new perspective that informs the elder brother what his perception of his younger brother ought to be, namely, “your brother”, and not “this son of yours”.55

The lack of appreciation of this truth of a shared paternity in God is the root of resentments, hatred, oppression, exploitation, racism, ethnicism, and all sorts of bigotry and apathy in human history. Therefore, the task of restoring dignity to those sisters and brothers who have lost it through material poverty, whether it is their fault or not, is a noble and essential responsibility which humanity is called to fulfil. If poverty assaults the human dignity of any people, the dignity of all people is at the same time assaulted in every part of the world. Humanity cannot live in peace if a greater section of the world continues to live in inexcusable poverty. The paradox of the kingdom is such that by refusing to join the party organized by his father to welcome and honour his younger brother; by refusing to be gratuitous, the elder son suddenly becomes the one in peril of being lost (by ostracising himself from the feast of the kingdom). His reluctance to engage in a filial embrace posits an open question to individuals and groups in every generation and in various circumstances about their relationship with others. And whether this elder son eventually succumbed to his father’s plea to join the party or not is left unanswered by Jesus. The parable of the prodigal son will, however, be a story with an unhappy end, if the merciful father were to lose his elder son again simply because of his magnanimity to the younger son. Therefore, the ‘good news’ in this parable lies in the fact that the father was able to bring his two sons together again (the indignant and the lost) to share in the same patrimony as brothers. The elder son

55 See Lk 15: 30. The elder son tends to distance himself from the prodigal by referring to him as “this son of yours”. And he went even further to allege that his younger brother squandered his wealth with prostitutes, thus attempting to underscore why this son should be undeserving of honour. It is not seldom that one hears this kind of argument from the privileged in attempts to absolve themselves from guilt on the misery of the poor. Some of the arguments against universal healthcare in the USA are similar.
hence had to learn to be merciful as his father in order that he too shall obtain mercy (cf. Mt 5:7; Lk 6:36). It is in fact in this mercy that his righteousness will consist. Mercy in this case cannot only mean that implied in forgiveness, but also that implied in empathy and fraternal charity.

One unmistakable lesson could be gleaned from this parable. Those who are unwilling to acknowledge the humanity of others are always the first to empty themselves of humanity without realizing it. Our fate and fortune are intimately tied and no nation on earth can demonstrate her greatness on top of the ruins of the anthropological poverty of her starving neighbours. An essential component of any civilization worthy of its name is how much respect and attention it gives to the weakest members of that society, and how it preserves and promotes the dignity of all its members and the common good. In this parable, the father’s call to his disgruntled elder son to join him in restoring dignity to his younger brother is significant. As much as it is a call to fraternal charity and mercy, which is divine, it is also a reminder of the fundamental humanism that is emblematic of the kingdom of God. In the end, whether we interpret this story in the light of a spiritual conversion of a sinner, or in the light of an exhortation to filial love, the significance of the story is all the more enhanced by the metaphor with which Jesus concluded it: 

[He] was dead and has come back to life; he was lost and is found.” With this metaphor, the celebration of the restoration of dignity to the poverty-stricken ‘lost brother’ assumes a new dimension—the dimension of a new life and a new profit—a treasure lost but found. If the elder son fails to see his brother in this context as a personified treasure, then he has really missed the point and is himself in peril of becoming the loser.

Relating this parable to our Igbo contextual Christology here, one can say that the prodigal has lived through the experience of what it means to be “otu onye”—alone and homeless, with nostalgia for home, losing his dignity on account of the loss of material possessions. However, the grace of Christ, “Nwanne otu
onye”, brings him back home and reintegrates him into the lost brotherhood where through divine compassion he is clothed with a new dignity. That divine compassion places a demand on all disciples of Christ: to value and cherish fraternal solidarity. In this sense, this parable, which is also known as the parable of mercy, provides the answer to such ‘apparently’ inexcusable situations which rationally question the call for solidarity simply on the reason that the poor man or woman is indeed responsible for his or her miserable life. Jesus teaches us then that even in such situations the duty to solidarity remains meaningful. Here the theology of solidarity teaches us not to despise and castigate others for their failures, but to help them on the path to new life, spiritually and materially. However, in addition to the above personal interpretation, what I intend also to demonstrate is how African idioms could be used to explore the depth of the Christian message and enrich theological pedagogy both for Africans and non-Africans.

Conclusion

In concluding this essay, I want to highlight the views of a prominent African inculturation theologian. According to Charles Nyamiti, the most difficult and central problem in creating African theology consists in the effective adoption of African elements into sacred science. Among the reasons for deficiency in African theological essays Nyamiti identifies a lack of intrinsic employment of cultural themes and a narrowness of approach to the factors involved. Hence, African ideas far from entering internally into the theological elaboration of revelation so as to form an organic part of it are rather used as a mere propaedeutic providing exterior illustrations or subjective preparations.\footnote{Nyamiti C., Approaches to African Theology” in Sergio Torres & Virginia Fabella eds., \textit{The Emergent Gospel, Theology From the Underside of History} (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1978), p. 41.} The theological
appraisal of “Ọ nụrụ ụbe nwanne agbala ọsọ” is intended to avoid this pitfall or deficiency. Nyamiti also singled out the theme of family as an example in his essay—a theme that is emphasized in both African and western communities, albeit in distinct ways. The African family is more extensive, Nyamiti observes:

It extends to the whole clan and sometimes even to the whole tribe. It includes all living members of these groups, besides being mystically connected to the ancestors and, through social pacts, to outsiders such as friends and others. Moreover, the relations between the members of an African family differ in many respects from those of the West.... In other words the category “family” in Africa evokes not only blood communal membership of a few living members, but also the themes of clan, tribe, affinity, maternity, patria potestas, priesthood, ancestors (thereby including the themes of mythical time, archetypes, heroes, founders), initiation, and hence fecundity, life, power, sacrality, and so forth.  

To appreciate fully the African originality of the category “family”, Nyamiti counsels that the themes it evokes should in their turn be examined in the light of the African context. This means that, although the formal content of the category “family” is identical in Africa and in the West, the mode of its integration in its cultural contexts is different. And it is particularly in this concrete mode of integration, i.e., in the local colouring of the cultural themes, that the originality of the African themes has to be sought.  

Accordingly, it is this methodology which ought to guide theological enterprise in Africa today. For even if African theology will still continue to be articulated in terms of an “ethno-theology” (i.e. the theology of a people rather than of an individual theologian), that will neither make it less authentic nor less relevant. It is on this note that I gladly but earnestly flash a relevant

57 Ibid., p. 39
58 Ibid.
light on the Igbo prolegomenon to a theology of fraternal solidarity. If Christian theology hopes to make a social impact in the 21st century, if it is to remain faithful to the vision of the Second Vatican Council in its *Gaudium et Spes*, it may have to be receptive of the Igbo wisdom and exhortation to hearken to the cry of the abandoned humanity. It is a cry whose echo resounds in cultural, economic, religious, and socio-political dimensions of human life, and yet a cry that could be responded to in a very simplified manner through solidarity, both in thought and action.