

## BOOK REVIEW

1. Austin Echema, *Corporate Personality in Traditional Igbo Society and the Sacrament of Reconciliation*. Berlin: Peter Lang, 1995, 299 pages.

The book is divided into three parts and six chapters. The last portion devoted to conclusions and implications summarised the entire efforts of the author.

In the general introduction the author sets out to delineate his areas of attention. His main concern is with the sacrament of reconciliation. In the light of the renewal set forth by Vatican II, the author tries to see how this spirit of *aggiornamento* could be seen to reflect on the sacrament of reconciliation which as he observed, has almost fallen into abuse or disuse as its real meaning, content and application is shrouded in crisis.

Such is the general state of the sacrament of reconciliation but our author is going to examine this crisis as it is felt in the Igbo context. According to him the fact that many in Igboland still patronise the confessional is no sign that the sacrament of reconciliation is not undergoing 'identity crisis' in the area. He observes, and rightly so, that many frequent the sacrament without knowing what it really means while others go without relish. For him the basic problem with the sacrament can be located in the alienation of the people from their traditional and cultural values and symbols. While noting that symbols find their meaning and function within each culture and while not denying that people can be brought to appreciate symbols outside their cultural milieu, the author exposes the futility of presenting a symbol to a people which ultimately does not speak to them. In this light, it is better to refer to symbols that would make meaning to the people even if this symbol is outside what the church is already used to. He cites the Second Vatican Council's recognition that elements of sanctification can be found outside the church. It is on the strength of this that the author wishes to present the Igbo traditional concept of corporate personality and its implications for the Christian understanding of reconciliation.

The Igbo anthropology lays great emphasis on the community. The Igbo while recognising the autonomy of the individual also believe that humans live in the community, by the community and for the community. As the community shares in the good deeds and fortunes of the individuals, so also is it believed that the evil of an individual can cause disequilibrium in the network of connections that bind the community together - a network which includes the living, the ancestors, the deities and even the environment.

Reconciliation in the Igbo traditional setting involves both the individual and the active participation of the community. For the sacrament of reconciliation to make more meaning in the Igbo church, the author argues that we cannot afford to overlook this community-oriented anthropology. The slant of the entire work therefore is inculturation or incarnation. We now examine the chapters briefly.

In his review of the Igbo world view, in the first chapter, the author highlighted Igbo religious outlook, the concept of community and corporate personality, cult

of ancestors, Igbo hospitality and generosity. He concludes the chapter with a brief but general reflection on Igbo culture, tradition and language. The author makes a vital point by observing that the key to this world view is religion. The sense of the sacred pervades every aspect of Igbo life-experience; and that is why traditional Igbo setting has no atheists.

Having laid the foundation for his work in the first chapter, the author went ahead to explore, in Chapter two, the Igbo understanding of sin and reconciliation. He establishes that the Igbo have a sense of right and wrong; and this moral sense is universal to humanity. The accusation that the Igbo belong to fear-oriented societies - without any real sense of sin - is thus unfounded. The author argues strongly that while fear may contribute to a people's awareness of sin - which of course is not limited to the Igbo - there is no ground whatsoever to assert that some people are ultimately bereft of the sense of sin.

The author also pointed out that the Igbo had the sense of light and serious offences before the coming of Christianity. As an example, he drew up a list of light and serious offences. However some of the offences in his list of light offences can be considered serious in some parts of Igbo land. The author also went into an exploration of Igbo sacrificial practices and rituals of reconciliation. In his evaluation of the Igbo ritual of reconciliation the author writes:

All Igbo efforts towards cleansing and warding-off rituals are directed not towards the cause of sin or any effort to cleanse oneself. This is one of the defects in Igbo traditional system of reconciliation (P. 82).

And still talking about the deficiencies of the traditional system of reconciliation he writes: "It emphasises more the aspect of restoration of order, the establishment of social and cosmic balance that has been upset. In other words, the personal restoration, the sincere desire for conversion at the personal level is left out" (P. 287). There seems to be some exaggeration in the above statements. I would certainly think that the Igbo system of reconciliation is concerned both with the possible effects of sin as well as the person of the sinner. The simple fact that the community frowns at certain acts (regarded as sins) and has instituted a system for cleansing and reconciliation is in itself an invitation to personal conversion. The manner and rate in which this personal conversion is effected or rather appropriated will always remain ultimately with the individual and not a function of the community as such. Above all, the ultimate aim of the Igbo ritual of reconciliation is to discourage sin. Thus it will be unfair to characterise it as directed only to warding-off the anger of the gods and establishing equilibrium in the order of things.

Having explored the Igbo notion of sin and reconciliation, the author undertakes a survey of the biblical conception of sin and reconciliation. After examining the various Hebrew terms that are used in characterising sin, the author tried to point out similarities and differences between Igbo and Hebrew understanding of sin.

Reconciliation in the OT involves a variety of ritual prescriptions while in the NT this is basically seen as turning to Christ who has conquered sin and has reconciled the world to himself and his father. While the NT recognises the reality of sin in the Christian Communities and has references about reconciling people, it has no developed ritual of reconciliation. This leads the author to explore, in Chapter Four, the historical development of the practice of reconciliation. The NT has no systematic rite of reconciliation, so also the first century. From the 3<sup>rd</sup> to the 7<sup>th</sup> century, we began to get some systematic formulae of reconciliation. Because of the rigorism associated with this ancient rites, they fell out of use and were replaced by Tariff Penance which originated with the Irish monks. There was yet another formula which while retaining the Irish private confession also allowed for public penance.

While Vatican II called for the revision of the sacrament of reconciliation without giving specific guidelines it has been recognised that underlying this call is a certain concern to recapture the social dimension of sin and the role of the whole church in reconciling penitents. The new *Ordo Paenitentiae* is an outcome of that vision. While attempts were made to bring in the communal dimension of reconciliation, there is an indication that preference is still given to private practice.

The author made an important connection between the sacrament of reconciliation and salvation history. Thus reconciliation is connected with other symbolic actions of the church (especially baptism and Eucharist), and ultimately with Christ. He also favours dropping the traditional categorisation of sin into *Venial* and *Mortal* as these terms are heavily loaded with legalistic overtones. While not levelling the gravity of all sins, he observes that all sin is ultimately a rejection of God.

In conclusion the author argues that the historical survey which he has done has shown that there were diverse ways in which reconciliation was practised. Consequently, there is nothing wrong in having a plurality of forms of reconciliation as they may be suitable to the various ecclesial contexts.

The crisis in the sacrament of reconciliation follows the historical survey. Some of the possible causes include, the renewed recognition of the social dimension of sin, loss of the deeper meaning of reconciliation as a result of a reductionist association of confession with receiving communion at mass, the challenges posed by the ongoing understanding of the Christian faith etc. The crisis in reconciliation can also be understood in the wider context of the renewed understanding of sacramentology - an understanding which sees sacramentology from the perspective of the humane sciences, particularly, psychology and anthropology.

Identifying the possible causes of the crisis in the sacrament of reconciliation, naturally leads the author to argue that the Igbo have also problems of alienation with regard to the sacrament. Inculturation is the only suitable option. The author makes a valid point by observing that this alienation is felt not only in the sacrament of reconciliation but also in the other spheres of life of the Igbo

Church.

In the concluding chapter the author attempts an articulation of a renewed Igbo Christian ritual of reconciliation. This flows from his conviction that the survival of this sacrament in Igboland and the future of Christianity generally in Igboland and Africa as a whole depends on the project of inculturation. He observed that inculturation is not new in Christianity as Christianity right from the time it left the Hebraic world has been interacting and borrowing from other world cultures. The first task in the project of inculturation is to heal the wounded psyche of the Igbo and Africans which has been damaged as a result of long experience of slavery, colonialism and other forms of oppression. This will restore the confidence of Africans in themselves and their traditional world view. To show that he was not merely speculating, he drew up a proposed Igbo Christian rite of reconciliation.

The work under review is indeed scholarly going by the number of authorities called into service by the author to buttress his points. It is to the credit of the author that while sticking to his theme he was able to address other contemporary theological issues and relate them to his chosen theme when necessary. The author cited frequently the Council of Chalons (pp. 166, 169, 175). Two opposing views were attributed to this council. One is left to wonder how this council could have contradicted itself. But the author did not explain this discrepancy. Secondly the author dated the council at 813 (pp. 166, +75) and on page 169 he asserted that the council took place barely sixty years after 589. It is not clear how he arrived at this calculation. Apart from these and few cases of misspelling (perhaps typographical errors), the work is superb and it is one which anybody interested in the project of inculturation generally and the renewal of the sacrament of reconciliation in particular should endeavour to read.

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2. Amuluche Gregory Nnamani, *The Paradox of a Suffering God*. On the classical, Modern-Western and Third World Struggles to Harmonise the Incompatible Attributes of the Trinitarian God. Frankfurt am Main, Berlin, Peter Lang, 1995, 428 pages.

There are varied conceptions of reality among different peoples and cultures. This is particularly so about God and his relationship with the world. The Jews conceive God in the context of history and relationship. Immanence and transcendence are conceived in their mutual inclusiveness. God is one who can suffer or change his ways. And so he is represented in anthropomorphic and relational terms. On the other hand, Greek philosophers emphasise the discontinuity between God and the world. For them, God cannot experience