Forgiveness among the Igbo People of Nigeria:
A Theological and Psychological Examination

by

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A Thesis submitted to the Faculty of Regis College
and the Pastoral Department of the Toronto School of Theology
In partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Theology
awarded by Regis College and the University of Toronto

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2013

ABSTRACT

African Traditional Religion is variedly enlightened and affected by the Christian Religion as a revealed Religion. The God being sought for by people of different races, times and places has revealed himself to his chosen people in his own design, and in the fullness of time has revealed himself to the entire human race in the person of his Son, our Lord Jesus Christ. In the light of this revelation, it is within the realms of theology and pastoral adventure to examine the key concepts of human relational matrices within the people's lived experiences, as they search for God, order, and meaning in the groping of the human darkness.

This thesis is on the application of the Christian concept of forgiveness in the African context of the Igbo people of Nigeria. The research looks at the overview of the concept of forgiveness in Scripture and the theology, and then compares this understanding with that of the practice of forgiveness by the Igbo people before the advent of Christianity. For the Igbo people, community is primary. The sense of community and humane living are highly cherished values of traditional African life. As religion and culture are interwoven, attempts at understanding forgiveness among the Igbo people is nothing less than a cross-cultural appreciation of the diversity of Christian thought and practice within the rich context of the African Traditional Religion.
Employing the Igbo cultural-social reality and psycho-social challenge with the Christian virtue of forgiveness, which can be theologically engaged and strengthened through multiple conversations on such challenging but helpful concepts of covenant, community, and the good order; one can begin to respond to the recent call by Emeritus Pope Benedict XVI in his Post-Synodal document, *Africae Munus* that African theologians should come up with transformative theologies which can be translated into pastoral practices for reconciliation, justice, and peace.
Acknowledgement

I wish to offer my heartfelt thanks to those who have journeyed with me on the road leading to the completion of this work, offering me their professional and academic guides that have enabled me to bring this work to the standard it has attained.

My special thanks to Prof. Joseph Schnaer, my thesis moderator, who has worked so tirelessly and patiently directing me all along to the end of it. I am particularly thankful to the members of this thesis committee, Prof. Desmond Buhagar, for reading thoroughly the entire work and making all the necessary corrections and suggestions. And Prof. Stan Chu Ilo of St. Michael College, for his advice, insightful suggestions and recommendations. I am very grateful to Dr Larry Beech, for his encouragement and empowerment, urging me not to give up when the going was tough, and as well as his academic enlightenment in the finishing of this thesis.

I want to extend my thanks to the Archdiocese of Toronto for offering me parishes of abode during the course of this study, and for giving me an environment of spiritual nourishment and life-giving active ministry. I want to thank the Pilipino BLD Toronto and St. Catharines districts for their prayerful supports and spiritual companionship, and as well as other helps.

A special thanks also to my formal religious Superior, Most Rev. Hyacinth Egbebo, who is now the bishop of Bomadi diocese, for granting me the permission to go for further studies in Toronto Canada.

There are so many other persons who have supported me in one way or another during the course of this study. The list, of which will be endless to start naming them individually. To you all, and from my heart, I say THANK YOU!! To God be the glory!!!
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Introduction

In the post–synodal Apostolic Exhortation on reconciliation and penance in the mission of the Church today, Blessed John Paul II asks the question: “Why we are so interested in the issue of forgiveness and mercy?” He offers the following reason:

The concern to know better and to understand modern man and the contemporary world, to solve their puzzle and reveal their mystery, to discern the ferments of good and evil with them, has long caused many people to direct at man and the world a questioning gaze. It is the gaze of the historian and socialist, philosopher and theologian, psychologist and humanist, poet and mystic; above all, it is the gaze, anxious yet full of hope, of the pastor.1

Human life is riddled with puzzles, and pain that seeks an answer. Ramshaw-Schmidt says that "religion sees God answering the needs occasioned by human limits: because we are creatures in need of a God."2 This is further echoed by Arnold Roy in his illuminating book Surviving the Future, when he says:

That man's fundamental problem is his egocentricity. All the great historic philosophies and religions have been concerned, first and foremost, with the overcoming of egocentricity. At first sight, Buddhism and Christianity and Islam and Judaism may appear to be very different from each other. But, when you look beneath the surface, you will find that all of them are addressing themselves primarily to the individual human psyche or soul; they are trying to persuade it to overcome its own self-centeredness and they are offering it the means for achieving this. They all find the same remedy. They all teach that egocentricity can be conquered by love.3

Humanity is not only in need of God, but a loving and forgiving God who cares and enters in solidarity with humanity struggling with sin/forgiveness, injustice/justice, brokenness/wholeness, disease/healing, and death/life. Paul J. Roy says: "What we seek through reconciliation is in reality the fullest and healthiest expression of our humanity.

For it is as human being that we grow up, realize our individuality, and join with others in bringing creation to its full completion."4 These represent the areas of human stretching

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to attain the goal of our deepest yearning and balancing in our existential vocation and fulfillment. We constantly are being drawn to the highest and best human version which is friendship, and fuller connection with the Transcendental Other and harmony among human beings. This is the goal of theology and spirituality, as well as philosophy and psychology - responding to the human brokenness and longing for wholeness. As the human spirit feels alienated, it ceaselessly drives for re-connection. This reflects the connection-disconnection and re-connection circle in human life running like a vicious cycle reflected upon by James Olthius. He captures this reality very well when he comments:

The cosmos is a spiraling universe of the ever-flowing, interconnecting energies of love, wild spaces of love in which we are called to do this connecting and reconnecting. We connect with ourselves by cultivating a sense of our own identity-in-relation to others, to creation and its creatures, and to God—or we disconnect by seeking our identity in a mere role. We connect with each other in intimacy or disconnect in mistrust. We connect with creation in care or disconnect in abuse. We connect with God in faith or disconnect in unbelief. In a world broken by suffering and evil, the passion of love is a suffering love.5

This is what is revealed in the Scriptures as sin and grace (Gal.5:1; Rom.5:210, the constant struggle of good and evil in human beings to be overcome in Christ. Reconciliation is at the center of the Christian message that is rooted in the mission of Christ in holding and sustaining human dignity and human destiny. Reconciliation is modeled after the compassionate love of a God who is committed to saving humankind from its fallen state. Reconciliation and forgiveness reflect God's intent at healing the relationship between God and humanity and thus inspiring the same mentality of healing of relationships among human beings themselves.

In 1983, the International Theological Commission, an advisory body serving the Pope, called for a heartfelt renewed understanding of the full dimension of the Church's ministry of reconciliation. The commission, attesting to the divine and human nature of forgiveness, affirms that "in preaching conversion and reconciliation, the Church remains faithful both to God and to humankind; as a steward entrusted with the divine mysteries (see 1 Cor 4:1).6 William H. Woestman observes, that forgiveness shows itself in the

invitation to conversion by which the believer turns from a previously sinful life and converts to God with all one's heart.

Woestman indicates that conversion basically takes place in the appropriation of Christian faith and, the Rite of Baptism. In baptism, the gift of the Spirit is sealed; the believer becomes a member of the Body of Christ, the Church. Therefore, baptism also remains the basis for reconciliation and forgiveness of later sins. Woestman expands on the nature of forgiveness within the socio-spiritual life of the members of the Church, by reflecting on its unique nature as a relationship-healing mechanism. For instance, Woestman contends that Penance must be seen in its organic relationship with the other sacraments. In the first place, it is present in all as the words of reconciliation in the comprehensive teaching of the Church. A central witness to this is the article in the Creed "I believe... in the forgiveness of sins." This is the form and basic principle of the Church's life, its hopes and aspirations, and as well as the content of its kerygma that God has reconciled us to himself through Christ, and has given us the ministry of reconciliation (2 Cor.5:20). Forgiveness is basically experienced as compassionate love, and as a form of connection and re-connection. The term 'forgive' derives from "give" or to "grant", as in "to give up," or "cease to harbor (resentment, wrath)." More specifically, "forgive" refers to the act of giving up a feeling, such as resentment, or a claim to requital or compensation. Paul M. Hughes defines forgiveness as "the action of forgiving, pardoning of fault, remission of a debt, and similar responses to injury, wrongdoing, or obligation."

In this sense of the term, Hughes has placed forgiveness in a dyadic relation involving a wrongdoer and a wronged party, and thought to be a way in which victims of wrong alter their and a wrongdoer's status by, for instance by acknowledging and yet moving past a transgression. Although wounds, injuries and betrayal of trust cannot be undone, forgiveness brings people to move pass the mire of the human evil and to move on in life. Here one can make sense of the argument of Lewis B. Smedes, the author of "Forgive and Forget," where he says:

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8 Woestman, p. 135.
"The most creative power given to the human spirit is the power to heal the wounds of a past it cannot change."\textsuperscript{10} This power cannot but be associated with Olthius' description of forgiveness as a "suffering love," or a compassionate love that engenders his idea of disconnection-connection and re-connection cycle. Forgiveness in this viewpoint, is accepting and embracing the humanness of our humanity, and giving room for the much needed healing and growing opportunities in this state of affair. Forgiveness is not an event between only two persons, it happens between individuals and groups, such as the forgiving of an individual's debt by a financial institution, or the commutation of a prison sentence by an act of official pardon. And forgiveness may occur between groups of people, as evidence by intra-national restorative justice efforts and government commissions established to effect truth and reconciliation between perpetrators and victims of historical wrongs as in the South African Truth and Reconciliation Commission.\textsuperscript{11}

Understanding forgiveness evokes living a life of sharing, receiving and sharing forgiveness. An early 20th century expert on the historical development of the situation of human existence, Hannah Arendt puts it succinctly this way: "Forgiving and relationship it establishes is always an eminently personal (though not necessarily individual or private) affair in which what was done is forgiven for the sake of who did it."\textsuperscript{12} This is a sharing of support. And if we take the Christian teaching on love with appropriate seriousness, it must be true that only supportive love can forgive.

In this regard, Hannah Arendt further states that "only love is fully receptive to who somebody is, to the point of being always willing to forgive him whatever he may have done."\textsuperscript{13} Arendt's expression strengthens the link of forgiveness not only as very Christian reality but to its anchor in love, and not necessarily tied onto the other but the love of the other and oneself. Forgiveness, in this understanding, stands in the place of love, wholly or partly; consciously and unconsciously. Forgiveness, is feeling “as if.”

\textsuperscript{10} Lewis B. Smedes, \textit{The Art of Forgiving; When You Need to Forgive and Don't Know How}, (New York: Ballantine Books, 1996), 177.
\textsuperscript{13} Arendt, 243.
Contemporary theologian and spiritual writer, Henri Nouwen states that "Forgiveness is only real for the compassionate person who has discovered the weakness of his friends and the sins of his enemy in his own heart and is willing to call every human being his brother."\(^{14}\) Forgiveness in this perspective reflects the on-going diagnosis of our inadequacies, and an attempt to provide an on-going remedy to the human bane and human gain in forgiveness. Nouwen’s analysis x-rays the dark side of human nature. But compassion becomes, in his analysis, a critical diagnosis and treatment of human fallibility and pain.

Hughes R. Mackintosh, a Scottish theologian, agrees with this, when he says that the process of forgiveness is first owning up to and then disowning sins. He states that “in the specific acknowledgement of concrete acts for which we are sorry, there is no room for equivocation, no place for vague generalities and disclaimers. That kind of admission simply evades the issue.”\(^{15}\) Here, Mackintosh insists that it is truth and sincerity when dealing with the delicate pain in the art of forgiveness that comforts the suffering love of forgiveness. This, he calls "the Anamnesis of truth and sincerity"\(^{16}\) of the forgiving love.

Without truth and sincerity, James Olthius contends, the art of forgiving love is vitiated. He puts thus: “In the dynamic of evil, the positive momentum of the love-dynamics of creation is undermined, torpedoed, and is co-opted by the negative dynamics of violence and hate. The lie lives off the truth, evil is parasitic on the good, hate is aborted. Breaking with God brings with it an immediate break in ourselves and our neighbors and the rest of creation.”\(^{17}\) Olthius point here is very apt as truth is the other side of the coin that is love. Truth and love are inseparable. Hence, we describe God as Love and Truth in essence. God cannot be Love without Truth. When dealing with forgiveness, we are looking at the truth and sincerity of the human nature; and the possibility of growth in love and care of each person that forgiveness can bring about.

Forgiveness deeply reveals the dynamics of goodness in the vertical and horizontal relationships of the divine-human dyad. The Spirit of the eternal mission of Jesus Christ the Son of God, the Spirit he bequeathed to his Church is the Spirit of

\(^{16}\) ibid.
compassion and forgiveness. Peering into the life of Jesus as the epitome of forgiveness one comes face to face with the vulnerability underscoring forgiveness. The God of majesty and glory who gives himself up in love to forgive humanity through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ his Son. This is reflected upon by Seamus Whitney, when he says: "In no other way does the Church exemplify the Spirit of Christ so much as in the practice of forgiveness; as the health and well being of any believing community is measured by this apostolic spirit of the members." The Church’s self understanding is clearly expressed in the early Church's teaching and "injunction to confess your sins to one another" (James 5:16). Some consider this practice worth recovering because of the level of self-awareness that is raised. "The primary purpose of confession,” Charles Hanna writes, “is to keep people aware of their true condition and of the tension between good and evil in themselves.” In such understanding of forgiveness, openness to one another is being aware of the privilege of our faith and the many ways God has blessed us and done great things for us.

By the same token, Dietrich Bonheoffer considered the practice of confessing valuable because, "a man who confesses his sin in the presence of a brother knows that he is no longer alone with himself; he experiences the presence of God in the reality of the other person.” Bonheoffer’s insight suggests that when we confess our sin in the presence of a brother/sister we experience the presence of God in the reality of the other person. This is an encounter of God who in Christ has sent his apostles to forgive sin and to heal (Jn.20:21-23).

This experience resonates with the consequences of sin not only as an eruption of evil in the sinner; but in society as a whole as offensive to God and to creation. This is an idea from Chris Aridas which he well articulates as follows: "Reconciliation cannot stop with an individual's relationship with God. Having heeded the inner voice which calls him/her to conversion, the individual must proceed toward a change of heart which affects not only his/her own self-identity as child of God, but also his/her own response to

18 Seamus Whitney, Bible Themes in Alphabetical Order: The Spirit of Life (Ibadan: Intec Printers Limited, 1976), 21
others as children of God." In other words, Aridas is pointing to the fact that if we accept the reality of reconciliation, the reality of our identity as children of a loving God, then we must necessarily share that reality with one another.

In her practice of forgiveness, the Church recognizes the fact that she is a forgiven sinner called to practice forgiveness. In forgiving, she not only admits that she herself has been forgiven but that she is essentially the sacrament of the healing and forgiving Lord. In his treatise on the practice of forgiveness in the Church, Richard P. McBrien states:

The Church is also the penitent Church, ever bathing the feet of Christ with its tears and hearing his words, 'Nor do I condemned you;' (John 8:11). And because of its unshakable confidence in the triumph of God's mercy and grace in Christ, when night falls the Church holds high the lamp of hope and reveals itself as the sacrament of universal salvation, the community which gives up on no one and no situation, no matter how seemingly hopeless.

McBrien also emphasizes that in the celebration of the sacrament of Penance, the Church reveals itself as the sacrament of God's mercy in the world, but also as a sinful community, still "on the way" to the perfection of the kingdom. Those who sin and who must avail themselves of the sacrament of penance are just as much "the Church" as are those who, in the name of the Church, act to reconcile the sinner with God and the holy Church of God.

The Church knows what it is both to forgive and be forgiven, mindful of always of the Lord's own prayer, "Forgive us our sins for we too forgive all who do us wrong (Luke 11:4). McBrien points out that "A Church which cannot admit its own sin is not the Church of Christ. A Church which cannot forgive the sins of others against itself is not the Church of Christ. How the liturgical process of conversion, repentance, and forgiveness is to be structured is always of less importance than the fact that it goes on continually with the Church." The abundant lesson of humility that can be learned from the Church's own life experience and that of faith, hope and love is for any individual person who admits his/her own sinfulness and has the audacity to give and seek

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23 McBrien, 776.
24 Ibid., 783.
forgiveness from others. This has been the message of God to humankind through the prophets of the Old Testament, culminating in Christ in the New Testament to people of all ages. For the Igbo People of the South-East of Nigeria in their traditional religion and belief systems, they experience the grace of this forgiving God in their own traditional ways. The Igbo people practiced a forgiveness that is based on community motivation and preservation of community harmony and coherence. The community is held together in its relational matrices ensuring that everyone is holding on to the moral life of integrity and harmony with neighbors. The identity of the community is tied to this notion of harmony and interconnectedness, which in turn, defines the identity of the individual, both living and dead. This includes the notion of the ancestors who take interest in daily affairs and act as intermediaries between the living and the divine beings.25

Francis F. Njoku maintains that the Igbo theology of forgiveness is centered around covenant. He stresses that since individuals, families and clans have made pacts to recognize one another as brothers and sisters, any evil committed by one affects the others in their shared environment or land.26 Francis' descriptions hold true about the religious tenets of the Igbo people who so much believe that all human covenants happen with respect to land, and that what affects one person affects the land, and what affects the land, affects all people, both the living and the dead. The human person's responsibility is equally owed to the land or earth as much as to God and to one’s fellow human beings.

Steven Sandage and Ian Williamson referring to this model of existence as a collectivistic worldview, maintain that collectivistic cultures construe selfhood as interdependent and socially embedded, emphasizing social connections and group norms.27 In relation to forgiveness, a collectivistic view of relationships as communal or covenantal suggests forgiveness may be less a personal choice and more a proscribed duty in certain culturally defined situations. Sandage and Williamson also maintain that self-forgiveness

is likely to be less evident in a collectivistic worldview because the self is socially
defined and socially sustained.\textsuperscript{28}

Community comes to be regarded as a framework for accomplishing the
potentials of every individual in an African traditional context, and emphasis is placed on
such communal values as solidarity, cooperation, mutual helpfulness, interdependence,
reciprocal obligation, forgiving peace and reconciliation. Individualism is an abomination
or out of place, and communal responsibility is encouraged.\textsuperscript{29}

On the other hand, Kenan B. Osborne describes forgiveness as an all-pervasive
power in the Christian community which moves one from sin to holiness. He states that
Christian life, in all its aspects, includes a binding and loosing from sin, a forgiving of
sin. Christian life in all its aspects includes reconciliation as its major component. This is
the reason, Keenan maintains, that why Christian communities have seen and have named
the heart of the Christian life by various terms: reconciliation, redemption, justification,
sanctification. No one of these terms fully encompasses the totality of this central
mystery of our faith. Each term highlights an important aspect of this mystery, but does
not exhaust its meaning. In the Christian world-view, there is no sanctification without
redemption, and vice versa. There is no justification without redemption and
sanctification and vice versa. Reconciliation, a term which has received new impetus
from the renewal of Vatican II, itself is unintelligible without the aspects of justification,
redemption and sanctification.\textsuperscript{30} This understanding of reconciliation and forgiveness
reflects a Christian approach to healing and growth in the lives of individuals and
communities that is both collectivistic and individualistic, being lived out according to
the inner ordering of the Church.

The comparative analysis of collectivistic and individualistic worldviews in
relation to forgiveness, undertaken in this study, will underscores some of these
similarities and differences as they relate to forgiveness among the Igbo people of
Nigeria. The Igbo people of Nigeria exercise forgiveness in community, and as

\textsuperscript{28} Ibid, 46.
\textsuperscript{29} Raphael N. Teh, \textit{An Effort Towards Understanding Pastoral Care of the Sick in the Context of African
\textsuperscript{30} Kenan B. Osborne, \textit{Reconciliation \\
& Justification: The Sacrament and the Its Theology} (Oregon: Wipf
and Stock Publishers, 1990), p.21
individual, but there appears to be a tension for community identity to overshadow individual responsibility. Christ's invitation to repentance and forgiveness is offered to individuals and as well to communities. As Jesus emphasizes that on the last day, the challenge will be what you didn't do, and what you did for any of these, you did it for me (Matt. 25:31-46). He also gives power to the community to forgive sin (John 20:22-23), the power that is exercised by bishops and priests.

Theologically, St. Thomas Aquinas writes that human person is by nature inclined to harmony and to unity among one another. Forgiveness re-establishes the lost bond, the disturbed communion. There is a natural predisposition for forgiveness in the heart of every human being.31 This natural predisposition that St. Thomas reflects on is what humanity is blessed with in reception of and at the disposal of reconciliation and forgiveness, as a recipient, and then as an agent of God's gift of grace.

This study will undertake an analysis of the practice of forgiveness among the Igbo people and their traditional method of adjudicating justice in their collectivistic community. Included in this study will be an investigation of the works of African theologians and authors on the concept of forgiveness with particular emphasis on the traditional Igbo culture within the African Traditional Religion. The thesis is arranged into three major chapters.

Chapter one deals with the examination of theological understanding of forgiveness in the history of Christian theology, exploring various stages and developments in the understanding and practice of forgiveness from the Old Testament to Christ, and the New Testament, with the Church that Christ has sent to go out and forgive sin all over the world, continuing the work of reconciliation with God and humanity and among human beings.

Chapter two explores the concept and practices of forgiveness among the Igbo people of Nigeria, and considers the theological underpinnings of forgiveness among the Igbo who are deeply religious. Forgiveness is attended as response to the mission of Chukwu (God) who sent Eri - the proto-ancestor to the chaotic world to co-operate with others, in order to make existential living bearable for the neighbor, who shares the

existential high-ways together. Forgiveness is rooted in justice, equity, fairness and reasonableness. There is also a highlight on the implications of collectivistic and individualistic understanding and practices of forgiveness among the Igbo in their community approach to life.

The final chapter of the thesis considers the areas of similarities and differences in the Igbo and the Christian understanding of forgiveness and how they can complement each other. Other areas of this chapter reflect on possible places for further research on the theory and practice of forgiveness, especially as related to differing cultural contexts and traditions, as well as the similarity and differences between the Igbo method rooted in the African Traditional Religion and the Christian meaning of forgiveness. The thesis concludes with a suggestion of how both faith can be at the service of each other, and complement each other in enhancing forgiveness and reconciliation as an endless human possibilities; and an answer to the question: How finished is the "closure" on circumstances that remain unreconciled and unforgiven?32

Chapter One
Scriptural Basis For Forgiveness

Forgiveness in the Old Testament

God has made himself known through his words in the Scriptures. It is in the Scriptures that we gather our knowledge and gain insight into God's intent and purposes regarding forgiveness. Scripture is the spring board where we discover and learn about God's mercy and compassion and to discern God's will. The origin of the human yearning and craving for forgiveness is centered on the realization that we are created in the image and likeness of God. We were invited to walk in the garden with our Maker, to converse with God, to commune with God, to live in peace and harmony not only with God, but with all of creation and with one another (cf. Gn 3:8). We were created to live without divisions, and what Denis J. Wood calls neither "distributive divisions, ideological divisions nor structural divisions, but in perfect harmony in creation in the fullness of the love of God."33 This is what human life was like before the chaos, the alienation, brutality, discrimination and guilt occurred as a result of disobedience.

When this relational bond is broken through human disobedience to God, humanity loses its sway and becomes alienated from God, the center and root of its coherence, reasonableness and meaning. Bernard Cooke states: "Separated by choice from the only true Source of life, men and women became disoriented and rootless: aliens in the world they were suppose to inherit and care for. This alienation is the biblical description for sin."34 The hunger for reconciliation and restoration in humanity points to this foundation and truth which continually looms in the very heart of one who wants to break from a life of sin or evil and live in the righteousness of the children of God (Rom. 6:2-12). This yearning itself which is the fruit of the grace and compassion of God is rooted in forgiveness.

34 Bernard Cooke, Sacraments and Sacramentality (Mystic, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 1985), 51.
With the help of God's grace and Spirit, forgiveness comes as what Karl Rahner calls "the yearning and stretching of something which may or may not happen. Rather, it becomes the very condition of all life which is human, even in the most humdrum of settings, for men and women are always and already on the way to God whether it is known or willed intentionally."\(^{35}\) God has allowed God-self to be continuously experienced by humankind in and through an approach to God as a guarantee of humanity’s future and continuity.

The Exodus from Egypt (Ex. 36:23-26), that formative experience of Israel becoming the People of God, can serve as a clearly defined example of how the compassion of God works in the Old Testament for the salvation of humanity. Richard M. Gula says: "Nature, historical events, and the people (pre-eminently Jesus) are the primary media in and through which the Bible speaks of experiencing God's saving love."\(^{36}\) As humanity is confronted with evil unleashed within itself and finds itself helpless in the face of evil, humanity needs salvation, a liberator.

The Exodus provides insight into the process that humanity experiences. First, a band of slaves are brought to freedom by Moses. After the event comes the sharing of the experience by telling the story over and over again. Through storytelling, a growing awareness dawns that recognizes not Moses, but God, as the one who freed the slaves and made them a free people (Ex.14:15-15:1). The people of God sing in joy and gratitude for the liberation granted them by God. Then annual celebrations of the event continue to make the presence and action of God in this liberation event alive for each generation. Gula sums up the power of this liberation effects among the people of God and for people of future generations in stating:

Re-telling the story of Exodus as one's own story about this new experience of a liberating God which shed light on the present and opened the future to a fresh response to God through liberating deeds. The God who once freed slaves held in bondage continues to call the people of every age who lived by this story to a freedom they only dimly perceive. The Exodus follows the recurring biblical story line: God frees people from a death-dealing situation for a new life which they are free to choose and pursue. This is the paradigm story of reconciliation and forgiveness.\(^{37}\)

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37 Gula, 47.
In the gospel story, in and through the life, death, and glorification of Jesus we see not only the continuation of this story, but also the revelation of new depths of God's loving, sustaining grace which gives us the assurance of final victory (Phil. 2:13). God is continuously calling God’s people back to reason and love through covenant events and relationships, especially through the prophets, kings and their ancestors (Heb. 1:1-2).

Chris Aridas, a great contributor on the topic of reconciliation as celebrating God's healing forgiveness, says that throughout the Old Testament, covenanted communion with God was considered the only source of life. A break or a rupture in that communion was death itself. In the words of Deuteronomy: "I am offering you life or death, blessing or curse. Choose life, then, so that you and your descendants may live, in the love of Yahweh your God, obeying his voice, holding fast to him; for this your life consists (Dt 30: 19-20)."38 Despite many fractions and infringements in that covenantal relationship with God, the people of Israel came to the understanding that God's love for them was eternal, and that God would continually forgive them for the sake of his name. The pages of the Old Testament abound in testimony to the various ways in which the Israelites celebrated penitential practices to reclaim God's abiding forgiveness through change of heart, and the renewal by God of God's covenant with them which culminated in the life and death-resurrection of Jesus, the sole bearer of the new covenant in the New Testament (Jer. 31:31, 33). God is a merciful God but the people of God are called to conversion.

The heart of reconciliation is described by Walter Burghardt in terms of communion. "Reconciliation is re-entering into communion between God and ourselves, between ourselves and others, between ourselves and nature."39 To celebrate reconciliation is an unimaginable privilege and gift. God takes the initiative in offering communion with God back to humanity and human beings respond through conversion (Jn 6:44; Eph.1:4). Conversion is characterized in terms of crisis resolution, coming to one's senses, a turning from something to something else.

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Mark Searle describes conversion as the loss of tranquility, the feeling of dissatisfaction and disillusionment that is apparent at the outset of the conversion process.40

Searle's description points to the feelings and nature of a journey toward true conversion which is marked by more than mere movement. It involves real struggle and searching, honest evaluation, recognition, and acceptance. Such is the effort to find an abiding reconciliation which is peace. And within the human heart is a yearning for the peace and communion with God that God offers.

Conversion demands change, a turning away from the way one now lives to a new way of living. According to Christian faith tradition, God has given humanity a second chance through the gift of his only Son Jesus who has come to the rescue of humanity, by offering humankind reconciliation with God through his life, death and resurrection. Forgiveness is the effect of covenantal reconciliation from the journey through the events in the Old Testament to Christ as the liberator in the new covenant.

The ineffable love of God in offering forgiveness to sinful humanity through the death and resurrection of his Son, an ultimate sacrifice, suggests that love requires giving up something for somebody (Mt. 18:3). God gave his life that we might live. Therefore, it means that in order to experience salvation, one needs to give up sinful habits to enter into the joy of God's kingdom. This is a true nature of reconciliation in that conversion embraces both pain and hope (Col. 3:10).

William Cieslak analyzes the contradictory aspect of the two notions of reconciliation and conversion that includes at the same time both pain and hope. He points to reconciliation with its paradoxical atmosphere when he says:

Peace, communion, patience, sympathy, and open welcome in one hand; and conversion with its atmosphere of disillusionment, dissatisfaction, painful recognition, humble admission, struggling to return to another way, and sees these two elements, reconciliation and conversion as the very stuff of Christian living, the very fabric of the Church seeking to manifest the threads of the Kingdom.41

He insists that reconciliation and conversion have been the very way of life of the Church in the world as it awaits in joyful hope for the coming of the Lord again. The Old

Testament is full of yearning for forgiveness, reconciliation and restoration, which humanity is unable to attain on its own, and the urgings and promptings of a merciful God to dispose man to connect and reconnect and receive his unearned, free gifted forgiveness (Wis. 7: 22-27; Prov.3:13; Ps. 110: 10). The meaning of connecting and reconnecting is what James, H. Olthius described so beautifully when he refers to the divine compassion, and what it opens up to humanity. Olthius approaches it this way:

The cosmos is a spiralling universe of the ever-flowing, interconnecting energies of love, wild spaces of love in which we are called to do this connecting and reconnecting. We connect with ourselves by cultivation a sense of our own identity-in-relation to others, to creation and its creatures, and to God - or we disconnect by seeking our identity in a mere role. We connect with each other in intimacy or disconnect in mistrust. We connect with creation in care or disconnect in abuse. We connect with God in faith or disconnect in unbelief. In a world broken by suffering and evil, the passion of love is a suffering love. This is compassion.42

Humanity is only able to attain this connection and reconnection process through the grace of God given in its fullness in the gift of Jesus Christ who is God's in-road into human life and history (Jn. 1: 14-16). The story of Jesus assures us that life is stronger than death, and that grace abounds greater than sin again. This is the story we live by. Jesus is our everlasting point of connection and reconnection with God, and with the entire creation in its brokenness and disconnectedness.

Jesus Christ: The Embodiment of God's Forgiveness

Jesus is the one who gives birth to the New Testament, the new and everlasting Covenant with God. As Jesus himself says, "I am the way the Truth and the Life. No one can come to the Father except through me (Jn. 14: 6)." The German-American theologian and one of the most influential theologians of the 20th century, Paul Tillich reflected upon the reality of Jesus as a forgiveness of the Father and the fulfillment of the hope of humanity as he carries in himself the fidelity of obedience to the will of the Father, which gives life and hope to our sharing of life in the fullness. He puts it this way, "Jesus

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bridges the gulf of estrangement between God and humanity. In Jesus everything is transformed and grace conquers sin."43 Jesus has brought closer that which has been so far away from us - the God who is with us (immanence) but at the same time, the God who is totally other (transcendence). "I am the way and the truth and the life. No one comes to the Father except through me (John 14: 16)." There is no other way for us who are body-persons except Jesus Christ who is the bridge and the link. The pre-eminent mediation, or sacrament, of God for us is Jesus Christ. Edward Schillebeeckx has captured this insight succinctly in the title of his book on sacramental theology: *Christ, the Sacrament of the Encounter with God.*44

God, in Jesus, reveals his unbounded and unbounding forgiveness. This omnipresence of reconciliation is the basis for understanding the nature of God, and God’s way of being and relating to creation. This cues us to the realization that the death of Jesus is part of the divine plan of salvation as is evident in the scheme of salvation history. Osborne asserts that Jesus is the fundamental sacrament of reconciliation as well as the basic and inexhaustible fountain of the living expression of the forgiveness of God,45 Jesus, as the primordial sacrament of reconciliation, Osborn contends that we must view this from two compelling aspects: (1) from his message of reconciliation, (2) from his life-death-resurrection. Jesus' message which is called "preaching the good news to the poor" indicates the prodigal extent of God's reconciliation. It was precisely this aspect of the teaching and preaching this message by Jesus in a public way which caused the Jewish leadership to turn against him so decisively.46 The amazing consequence of this event being the risen life of Jesus, a new way of life with and in God, unheard of in our human history. This new way of being with and in God is the goal of all salvation (justification and salvation) and comes to us only through the once-and-for-all life, death and resurrection of Jesus. This, Osborne says, "since it is unheard of, it is totally gratuitous."47

Through this enactment, the inimical pattern of human behaviour encounters the living presence of God. Osborne describes the enactment as the destiny-approach of the death of Jesus and beautifully explicates it in two agreements: (1) Jesus is the passive

45 Osborne, 37.
46 Osborne, 38.
47 ibid, 51.
figure standing between two active subjects - on the one hand, humanity, and on the other, God himself, (2) Jesus as the Son of Man does not stand between two opposing sides, but God, who is the sole initiator, hands over the Son of Man to the sons of men.48 This reflects the inner life of a God whose love is so indescribable, and as, well as his power over everything marching with the longing in human life which often bursts out its power into negative and destructive patterns, and yet sees God's love as bigger than human limitations and brokenness. This is the infinite driving power of God holding everything in goodness and sustaining all creation, as different from the limited power of human beings with humanity’s mixture of good and evil, and very susceptible to enacting evil.

Donald Senior echoes the same divine salvific drives in his analysis of the death of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew in his book, "The Passion of Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew." He reiterates that:"Jesus is the obedient Son of God who fulfills the Scriptures and is faithful to God's will unto death, a death that saves."49 Senior emphasizes that the Gospel of Matthew presents the death of Jesus as inevitable, foreseen, and accepted. While human forces move to quench the life of Jesus, on another level, that death is absorbed into the mysterious redemptive plan of God and transformed into a life-giving force. It is on this level that the Gospel portrays Jesus as the Son of Man committed to going to Jerusalem and offering his life in ransom for the many.50 Jesus' acceptance of God's will saves humanity; as he says: "My Father, if it is possible, let this cup pass from me; yet not what I want but what you want (Mt. 26:39)." The obedience of Jesus is indicative of the vulnerability of love, the dynamic love that exists between Jesus and his Father, the love that is extended and expended to humanity and to all creation. The death of Jesus at the height of his obedience to his Father offers us inexhaustible insights into the love and compassion of God, a love and compassion which is not only empathizing but empowering.

Jon Sobrino also describes the great and wonderful love of God through the passion and death of Jesus Christ saying: "On the cross of Jesus, God himself is crucified. The Father suffers the death of the Son and takes upon himself all the pain and suffering of history. In this ultimate solidarity with humanity he reveals himself as the God of love.

48 ibid, 43.
50 ibid, 166.
who opens up a hope and future through the most negative side of participating in this same process whereby God loves the world in the very life of God.”

Through seemly negative events of the human acts, God turns into good what human limitations have reflected through evil and wickedness. This is the one prong of forgiveness seen in the salvific act of God and so much praised in Christian liturgy, especially in the Exultet of the Easter vigil, where we read: "O truly necessary sin of Adam which gained for us such a redeemer, Christ!" This reveals in such abundance the depth of God's love for humanity such that not even the human failures and sinfulness can deter God from loving his children. Hence, St. Augustine insists that even if man has not sinned, God could still have died for humanity if that is required to demonstrate his ineffable love for humankind. What a fortunate sinners we are and what a length God has gone to make us co-heirs with his Only Son!

Jesus is the incarnation of God's mercy and fidelity, demonstrated in God's love for us, especially in the love which forgives and perseveres in the face of betrayal and infidelity. Commenting on the redemptive actions of Jesus, Gula re-iterates that Jesus' parables in Luke's "Lost and Found Department" (Lk. 15) emphasizes the reality that God loves us with unceasing fidelity. The parables of The Lost Sheep, The Lost Coin, and The Lost (Prodigal) son, express well the drama of grace and challenge us to face anew the reality we often find so hard to believe: God's love for us is an undefeatable love, which perseveres and is always ready to accept us. Jesus is the living and the fullness of God's ineffable love for humanity. The whole of Scripture is a living testimony and assurance of the God with us in Emmanuel, and God saves us in Jesus. As Jesus is alive, so humanity lives and will live eternal life with God.


Forgiveness is necessary and gives and renews life for us in all of our relationships. Without forgiveness, our hearts become hardened by anger, bitterness and jealousy. With this type of burdened heart we cannot receive God's love, Spirit or freedom...We will not be able to love our neighbor as ourselves. This message is at the center of the New Testament as the efficacy of God's love and grace. Aridas summarizes the concept of forgiveness in the New Testament succinctly when he says: "A hallmark

52 Osborn, 40.
53 Gula, 65.
of the New Testament expiation is the constant reiteration that God's initiative, realized in the dying and rising of Jesus, is pure gift offered by God who "wanted all fullness to be found in him [Jesus] and through him to reconcile all things to him" (Col 1:19)." This initiative in as much as it fills us "with exultant trust in God, through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have already gained our reconciliation" (Rm 5:11) carries with it the clarion call for a heartfelt response and acceptance. Give us today our daily bread and forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us (Mt 6:11) as the age long longing of the human heart that has received its fulfillment in the New Covenant through Christ.

Kennan Osborne points to the fact that every page of the Old and New Testaments speaks of reconciliation. This is the Good News. The words of Jesus, his actions, his cures-all betoken reconciliation. From the New Testament period onward, the Christian tradition has understood the message of Jesus as a message of peace and reconciliation. In an unbroken way this same tradition has understood the death of Jesus, both as a powerful statement about reconciliation and also as the universal means for reconciliation. That peace and communion is a responsibility. This is God's offer which is to be gracefully accepted with an attitude of conversion.

A contemporary American Protestant theologian, Charles Hanna points to this when he says: "The primary purpose of reconciliation is to keep people aware of their true condition, the tension between the good and the evil in themselves." Such awareness is what Jones insists should be seen as the reasonableness for forgiveness, because of our culpable complicity both in specific breaches of relationship - and in a pervasive reality of always-already human brokenness and diminution. For L. Gregory Jones, an ordained minister in the United Methodist Church and, a dean and professor of theology at Duke University Divinity School, Durham, North Carolina, "Christians forgiveness must be embodied in a way of life, a life marked by specific practices that enables us to unlearn patterns of sin, to repent for specific sins, and to foster habits of holy living." Jones exemplification here shows how the grace of God when working with the human freedom can produce an amazing result. God's amazing grace of

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54 Aridas, 15.
forgiveness coupled with the divine inspired ways of human responses to this offer of forgiveness is the foundation of the sacramental understanding and celebrating reconciliation as is lived and propagated in the life and mission of the Church.

The Sacrament of Reconciliation

God's offer of reconciliation and unity in God's ongoing self-communication to humanity is a constant challenge to our mode of being and living out relationships in harmony with God, with self and with all creation. Unaided by God's grace humanity cannot attain the holiness and harmony that God in Christ has offered. Richard Gula expresses it in the following way: "In the light of the life-death-glorification of Jesus, the power of sin has been broken in our lives. Grace-the redeeming love of God-affects our lives to the core.... God's unconditional acceptance of us affects our very being before we ever make a free choice."58 This sets the tone as well as the way to live the new life of grace. God's offer of salvation in Christ is guaranteed by the Holy Spirit living and at work in us, guiding us into the way of peace.

The theology of grace is the theology of salvation and forgiveness. Indeed, we are graced from the beginning, and with that, we have the ability in cooperation with the Spirit of God to do good, and to stand firm in the authenticity of who we are. Gula says, "though never without grace, we are only more or less open and transformed by grace. Just as a gift cannot be given unless it is received, so grace cannot transform us unless we allow it to."59 God's self-communication of love is an ongoing commitment evoking our own life of love to be empowered by the presence of the indwelling Holy Spirit working within us. The experience of forgiveness is the state of being forgiven by God's strength, the human response to reconciliation. This experience becomes manifest as we come to more awareness of our initiation into the Body of Christ, as we are strengthened, and are constantly nurtured in that Body and kept in good standing through the sacraments. The Church exists as the means of bringing humanity into the fullness and everlasting love of God.

58 Gula, 59.
59 ibid, 59
Doris Donnelly in her wonderful book: "Learning to Forgive", captures this by saying that the Church's understanding of the theology of God's mercy and forgiveness is a relational continuum.\(^{60}\) The life and mission of the Church is solicitude to reconciliation, and celebration of forgiveness through the sacraments.

Forgiveness is largely expressed in the Church's treatment of the theology of Penance and the sacraments. In this regard, Peter E. Fink notes: "Within the Catholic community we speak not only of the mission and ministry of reconciliation and forgiveness, but of a distinct sacrament that brings this mission and ministry to public, liturgical expression."\(^{61}\) This mission in the sacrament of Reconciliation (CSL2), "is thus the outstanding means by which the faithful can express in their lives, and manifest to others, the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church."\(^{62}\) Reconciliation and forgiveness stand at the center and mission of the Church as she confronts human brokenness together with God's solidarity in overcoming the division and alienation within and among human beings.

God permeates the depth of human history working through the complexities of the human choices to bring about human completeness and salvation. It is through our experience of God that we experience forgiveness, and not only are able to forgive, but also empowered through the practice of forgiveness. Gula agrees that the energy for conversion and forgiveness comes from grace in the power of the Holy Spirit.\(^{63}\) Whether this energy is exercised in religious acts or in social or political environments, it reflects an experience of the divine. If we find such experiences in our lives, says Rahner, then we who live by faith have in fact experienced God, perhaps without quite realizing it. Rahner offers a set of questions which point to the horizon of human experiences which disclose the Spirit of God at work within humanity and within the complexities of our giving and receiving forgiveness:

Have we ever kept silent, despite the urge to defend ourselves, when we were being unfairly treated? Have we ever forgiven another although we gained nothing by it and our forgiveness was accepted as quite natural? Have we ever made a sacrifice without receiving any thanks or acknowledgement, without

\(^{63}\) Gula, 60.
even feeling any inward satisfaction? Have we ever decided to do a thing simply for the sake of conscience, knowing that we must bear sole responsibility for our decision without being able to explain it to anyone? Have we ever tried to act purely for the love of God when no warmth sustained us, when our act seemed a leap in the dark, simply nonsensical? Were we ever good to someone without expecting a trace of gratitude and without the comfortable feeling of having been unselfish?⁶⁴

These intriguing questions from Rahner reflect the Spirit of God working within the human spirit in care and healing of the brokenness in humanity. This is the example of the Body of Christ the Church, and life of grace it brings to the world. Forgiveness is the reason for the Christian message as the mission of Christ, upholding and sustaining human dignity and destiny. Bernard Cooke lends strength to the idea of the mission of the Church as forgiveness in saying that "our destiny is life and joy and God's action in our lives is one of liberating us from evil and freeing us for joy."⁶⁵ William H. Woestman concurs in saying that the theme of penance and reconciliation concerns the Church, which stands at the service of the human destiny as everlasting abode with God.⁶⁶ Forgiveness reflects God's intent at healing relationships between God-self and humanity, and among human beings themselves. An author with a long experience in the liturgical Rites of the Church as a reconciling community, James Dallen focuses strongly on the relationship between God and human beings in his book, "The Reconciling Community," underlying the mystery of the Church in relation to Christ and sinners; and traces the complex development of ecclesial repentance from the Church's first century to the present time.⁶⁷ Here, Dallen emphasizes the healing effects of God's salvific plan in Jesus in his analysis of the introduction of the Rites of Penance, and the sketch of the pattern of humanity's reconciliation with God. He refers to the fact that God always takes the initiative, as is clearest in Jesus, who shows divine compassion by calling people to conversion and welcoming sinners. His cure of the sick signifies his power to forgive sin.⁶⁸ These various ways and means that Christ has revealed forgiveness are where the

⁶⁸ Ibid, 250.
human mind is caught up in wondrous contemplation as it ponders on the boundless nature of the divine philanthropy.

This is what the Church preaches in God's word. The preaching which Rahner insists upon is not mere instruction about facts—which in principle can be learned without God's help, nor is it simply instruction in moral theory, but the proclamation of God's eternal plan for human salvation (Gospel) - hidden in itself - carried into effect when God attaches an efficacious (eschatologically victorious) grace to the word that is preached, and this grace, as the divine self-communication, secures its own acceptance by human freedom.69

The ceaseless drive of human spirit to keep on digging deeper into the mystery of salvation as it unfolds in the reality of reconciliation, is itself the fruit of forgiveness/grace. How do we talk about the deeds of God and understand what they mean? What does it really mean to say that all my sins are forgiven me? This is the Church's kerygma, the kerygma, that Rahner again ponders as the primary source and norm of dogma and theology, and that finds the most intense fulfillment of its own nature in the word of faith that is spoken to the individual in the sacraments as the manifestation of God's salvation, giving itself by effecting its own manifestation (its "sign").70 The Church of Christ carries the kerygma that reaches the humanity in every age in its religious distress constant yearning and longing for salvific forgiveness.

The Theological Understanding of the Mystery of Forgiveness

The reality of failure in human life lies deep, and is only surpassed by the unfathomable miracle of the divine redemptive grace for humanity. Human failure is matched with divine mercy, and forgiveness is an invitation to redeem failure. Hannah Arendt notes: "without forgiveness, we would never be released from the consequences of what we have done or what has been done to us, and our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover."71 The theological context of forgiveness is grounded in the theology of redemption, within the economy of reconciliation and salvation planned out by God in the birth, life, ministry,

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70 Karl Rahner and Herbert Vorgrimler, 250.
death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. Our soteriology, our making sense of this, in fact, our theology evolves under the effects of Jesus' life in our own personal experiences, as the inspiration and guide to making a better version of ourselves and the best person we can possibly become. This is the dream and hope of any growing human person.

Gregory Jones describing the impact of the reality of Jesus on human lives calls it, "Embodying Forgiveness," which is the title of his book on a theological analysis of forgiveness. God embodies forgiveness in a human body and lives forgiveness among us. To this, Jones comments that "most fundamentally, forgiveness is not so much a word spoken, an action performed, or a feeling felt, as it is an embodied way of life in an ever-deepening friendship with the Triune God and with others, but a life to be lived in fidelity to the eschatological salvation of the Triune God." Jones stresses the fact that a Christian account of forgiveness is not only-or even primarily focused-on the absolution of guilt; rather, it is focused on the reality of sin, reconciliation of the human brokenness, the restoration of communion with God, with one another, and with the whole of creation. He insists that "because of the pervasiveness of sin and evil, Christian forgiveness must be at once an expression of a commitment to a way of life, the cruciform life of holiness in which we seek to "unlearn" sin and learn the ways of God, and a means of seeking reconciliation in the midst of particular sins, specific instances of brokenness." Jones' theological analysis focuses on the fact that forgiveness is God's benevolent initiative and commitment to keeping humanity in relationship, in connection with his kingdom of love and holiness here and now, and as yet-to-come in the reality of Christ, the Redeemer. Jesus' life and teaching stand as a living example and inspiration for humanity to grow.

Theologically, there are two foundational approaches to understanding forgiveness. One is God embodying forgiveness in Christ for and among humanity, and secondly, the necessity for embodying forgiveness for one another as being empowered by God's Spirit in human history, especially through the Body of Christ, the Church. This analysis sees forgiveness as integral in the relational life of God. Forgiveness is deeply rooted in the life of God and flowing into the life of humanity, one necessitating the

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73 Jones, 67.
74 Ibid, Xii.
other. God, who has no need of forgiveness, shares forgiveness with sinful humanity in a circle of life. Humanity is to live forever by being forgiven by God.

A theological understanding of the mystery of forgiveness has an eschatological dimension. As Jones explains: "God's Spirit is at work forgiving, healing, and re-creating us in the likeness of Christ for life in God's Kingdom ... that Spirit is at work in the way we are learning to forgive and be forgiven, to heal and be healed, to re-create and be re-created, in our life with others." In this light, it becomes apparent, once again, that Christian forgiveness is not so much a word to be spoken as a life to be lived in fidelity to the eschatological salvation of the Triune God. Forgiveness is living the life we hope for and long for in the kingdom of God; sharing as it were, in God's life.

This is the root meaning of forgiveness. From the Christian perspective, the entire events of the birth, life, ministry, passion-death and resurrection of Jesus Christ become our teachers forever, about forgiveness. Fundamentally, they are theatres on which God's reconciliation and invitation to reconciliation with and among humans is forever performed and continued to be enacted perpetually through the actions of the Holy Spirit in the mission of the Church, in the sacraments, as well as in human history. Edward Schillebeeckx, a Belgian Catholic theologian, with experience in the ecclesiology of the Church, affirms that the Church is the human story of God. He argues that God's saving activity in history is about the life of men and women, and their bond with God as God has become visible above all in Jesus of Nazareth, confessed as the Christ by the Christian churches—which are increasingly aware that they live in a secular world amidst other religions; and does not violate but seeks the fulfillment of humanity and the cosmos. This gives the sense that in the world of so much evil and suffering, yet the human spirit is ever inclined towards the alleviation of poverty, misery as well as injustice in the world.

The true hope of forgiveness stems from the grace of the resurrection of Jesus that gives meaning to his passion and death, and gives meaning to the mystery of human sufferings, and to the human hopes and aspirations to conquer human misery, suffering and poverty. In this sense also, the death and resurrection of Jesus can be understood as integral to God's solidarity with the human condition, and God's offering of reconciliation.

75 ibid, 67.
and forgiving love to humankind. God's solidarity with humanity described in various theological terms like redemption, justification, expiation, salvation, sanctification, ransom, and divinization, gives a unique light to the human needs for salvation in our inadequacies within human brokenness. None of these terms however, has an adequate theological interpretation if they only take into account the death of Jesus. Osborne notes that each of them must equally encompass the resurrection of Jesus. Without the resurrection, none of these terms can adequately encompass the mystery of the grace of Jesus Christ. Each one in itself falls short of the reality of Jesus to humanity. The resurrection gives an everlasting meaning and firm hope to the pain of forgiving, and makes forgiveness entirely a gratuitous gift and fruitful love, either coming from God to humanity or given by one to another.

Borrowing from St. Paul's expression of God's boundless love, "what no eye has seen, no ear has heard, nor has it entered into the mind of man what God has prepared for those who love him (1 Cor.2:9). Osborne uses these words in his description of the wealth of God's salvation and forgiveness in Christ Jesus. He notes: "Reconciliation does not simply restore: the result is a union which eye has not seen, ear has not heard, and which has never entered into the human mind and heart what God has prepared for those whom he is inviting to himself." Osborne again argues that "Justification is not simply a forgiveness of sin, a making up for evil, a restoration of an original holiness and wholeness. Rather, the resurrection speaks about a new risen life, a new way for Jesus in humanity to be united with God. Reconciliation must include this newness of life, this risen life in God." This is the true nature of reconciliation. Salvation is love, but not a cheap love, nor what Bonhoeffer calls "cheap grace." Forgiveness calls for conversion, for involvement and active participation in relationship. Jesus, in his life, death and resurrection mediates the inner life of a Triune God, who is deeply compassionate, and offers reconciliation to broken humanity. All that this implies is that forgiveness is an invitation to a new way of life. The resurrection of Jesus is what solidarity is all about. Forgiveness in this context, explains a personal experience of salvation and mission.

Conversion is at the heart of the experience of forgiveness. As Doris Donnelly proposes, "conversion is about death and life. Dying to the pervasive and perverse

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77 Osborn, 48.
78 ibid, 46.
79 Osborne, 49.
80 Cf. Jones, 47.
orientations that are very characteristic of human nature, a sincere desire to discover the
patterns of evil in our hearts that disable us from doing the good we would do, but do not,
and living in the new life of grace that the Spirit of God is constantly inspiring in us. Donnelly seems to imply that forgiveness and reconciliation feeds from one another; springing from the compassion of a reconciling and forgiving God. What God is doing is uniting us to God-self. Reconciliation means to bring together that which is apart. To reconcile means to bind, to heal, to effect wholeness, to bring peace. This is what God is doing in and for us. Donnelly explains: "The act of reconciliation brings together God and humankind; it brings together men and women as they are, and men and women as they ought to be. Reconciliation is a hard vocation that ultimately cost Jesus his life. And any participation in this vocation will enable a sharing in the victory of that event." This is what a theological understanding of forgiveness seeks to underline; that in our weakness God comes to help us and empowers us, directing us and giving us new vision through the inspiration of his Spirit to overcome that which is disabling us.

Forgiveness becomes the way of life for humankind and the human vocation to live out and express forgiveness as is encountered in God. Henri Nouwen suggests: "Forgiveness is only real for the compassionate person who has discovered the weakness of his friends and the sins of his enemy in his own heart and is willing to call human beings his brothers." Although, God has no trace of human sinfulness, and is incapable of sinning, God enters into reconciliation with sinful human beings out of love and compassion to restore us to holiness and wholeness. This is again underlined by Osborne when he says:

God incarnate in Jesus, in the church, in liturgy, in the world, is not only a holy presence, but his presence is holy-making. It is not only a presence of the divine, but a divine-making presence. God's presence in the Sacrament of Reconciliation is a holy-making presence, but with a holiness that far exceeds our deepest hopes. God's presence is a divine-making presence which makes reconciliation and justification too small a word. Reconciliation cannot encompass that profound unity, a resurrection unity, which this central mystery of our faith, the salvation of Jesus, truly means and truly is.

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82 Doris Donnelly, 70.
84 Osborne, 50.
The more deeply one goes into reflecting on this aspect of God's love, the more he/she discovers the beauty of a great and awesome God. Forgiveness is at the heart both of Christian theology and the practices of Christian community and life. As in community, we come to deepen our awareness of a life of forgiveness, as we simultaneously learn to embody what it means to be forgiven by God and by one another. In community, we come together as members of God's family.

Community becomes an ideal place to live and practice forgiveness, since in community we can offend one another, St. Paul urges the community of the faithful to forgive one another as we have been forgiven in Christ Jesus (Ephesians 4:32). Forgiveness among Christ faithful becomes even more compelling on account of the eschatological undertone of forgiveness, as a means of bringing the Kingdom of God to us. Jones argues powerfully to the eschatological nature of forgiveness and the Christian vocation when he writes:

At the center of Christian forgiveness is the proclamation of God's kingdom and the call to repentance so that we can live as forgiven and reconciled people with God and with one another. We learn to become more forgiving as an integral feature of our life in God's Kingdom, precisely as we are also unlearning our deeply entrenched habits of sin—whether that sin is manifest in prideful-assertion or in shameful self-diffusion, or perhaps elements of both.85

Recent theology, both Protestant and Catholic, has enlarged our view of the theological and soteriological importance of the resurrection of Jesus as the foundation for reconciliation. The resurrection of Jesus is seen and interpreted as essential to the theology of salvation (reconciliation, justification, deification). This gives meaning as well as impetus, reason and principle for relationship with God, and with one another in our relationships in community through the help of God's grace. We love because we are loved and loving people; we forgive because we are forgiven in Christ. We die for one another because Christ died for us and is risen, so that we too can rise from the dead and live for righteousness.

The idea is further elucidated by Adolf Darlap in his treatise on God's mercy as the readiness of God to come to the aid of God's distressed creatures out of free grace, and that of human person's primal experience of God as the God of mercies, compassion, and forgiveness is recorded in many ways in the books of the Old Testament and New

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85 Jones, 47.
Darlap states that this reality is disclosed in God's universal salvific will in the redemptive action, by which he takes the world to himself, in the incarnation and glorification of his Son, in the justification of the individual, and in the eschatological consummation of the world. God's love and God’s mercy interact and are definitively and irrevocably present in the world in the mercy of God's incarnate Word (cf. Heb. 2:17; 4:15f). This speaks clearly about the attitude of God- an attitude of God's free will. The Divine attitude when reflected upon, encourages and gives impetus to the human spirit to deal with human brokenness and healing relationships and reconciliation.

The Divine attitude inspires the human attitude to the positive direction. As we insist in acting responsibly, we make the human hope realizable. Gula contends that "the roots of our sense of responsibility lie in our grasp of the fundamental fact about being human: to be human is to be in relationship ... to be able to enter into relationships requires the capacity to give and to receive love." This also is true regarding the reality of forgiveness as an element of relationship. The Biblical God reveals God-self in relationship, and there we apprehend the fact that God is a relational being who enters into a covenant relationship with humanity, a covenant relationship that is for the good of human beings.

A 2nd century Church Father, in the Patristic tradition, St. Irenaeus of Smyna, bishop and martyr, whose writings have paved the way to the theological understanding of God-self in relation with humanity, had long ago grasped the essence of this when he writes: "The reason why God seeks the service of men is that, good and merciful as he is, he wishes to bestow blessings on those who persevere in his service. God stands in no need of anyone else, but man stands completely in need of God." God's effect upon relationships with human beings is not out of need, but out of pure and gratuitous love. God stands very responsible in his love for humanity. Such responsibility has been present right from the time of the patriarchs and the prophets, reaching its high point in Jesus Christ the fullness of God's revelation. The apostles, early church fathers and through modern theologians have been calling humanity to this faithful relationship with

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87 Darlap, 955.
88 Gula, 95.
the theme of a responsible love of God and love of neighbor and self (LK 10:27; cf Mt 22:37-39; Mk 12:29).

In effect, the theology of forgiveness is a very dynamic theme in the history of the Christian religion, and in relationship as far as the love of God for humanity stands. As the Christian God is a relational God who holds everything in his being, the need for forgiveness arises when a relationship has become damaged. Forgiveness leads to the restoration of relationship. Joseph A. Favazza, an expert in sacramental experience of penance and author of "The Order of Penitents: Historical Roots and Pastoral Future," is of the notion that forgiveness comes from God as in trust, and is demanded of human integrity. He says that "the Gospels attest to one fact with extreme clarity: Jesus forgave sinners. His was a forgiveness that manifested the beginning of a new era, the beginning of the reign of God."\(^{90}\) Favazza claims that this is well documented throughout the pages of the Scriptures that forgiveness is the purposeful mission of God; that Jesus embraced sinners and called them to an internal repentance and reconciliation for the sake of the Kingdom.

Roger Grainger, a modern expert in forgiveness, relationship and liturgy, points to the fact that the gospel message about reconciliation with God is expressed in terms of forgiveness as something to be passed on, spiritually present in every personal encounter, embodying the essence of personhood itself. In his own word: "To be in relationship with someone else is implicitly to accept them, and to be accepted by them, even when forgiveness is not called for, such acceptance carries a relational requirement."\(^{91}\) Forgiveness is a necessity in divine-human and in all relationships. God has shown this in Christ, and it is at the heart of the Good News that God will give us what is good. It is the ethos of the goodness of God that God sustains relationship with creation, especially with human beings, despite our faults and failures and our human brokenness.

Forgiveness is a necessity not only for human relationships but for human survival. William Klassen in his book *Love of Enemies: The Way to Peace* explains why this is so:

> What Jesus taught us about loving our enemies is fundamental, not peripheral, to the Church and its understanding of its own existence. Indeed it is

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fundamental to the survival of the human race. Unless humans learn to live with their enemies, indeed, unless we learn to love our enemies, our days on this earth are numbered.  

The theology of forgiveness is about God's care for humanity and the survival of the human race. Forgiveness and reconciliation strengthen the interface between divinity and humanity. between two or more people; between groups of people, between communities, and states and nations of the world. Donnelly describes forgiveness as love: "Love is never wasted, and this special rarefied form of love-forgiving love-seals the world perpetually to its destiny. When forgiveness occurs, an event of cosmic proportion takes place: divisions are healed and the world moves closer to the state in which it was created."  

Also, the horizon of human vocation referred to by Rahner is to embody God's love to all creation in the example of the life-death-resurrection of Jesus Christ. And finally, this horizon fits well with what St. Thomas Aquinas had earlier reflected on as a natural predisposition of humanity. Aquinas notes: "Man is by nature inclined to harmony and to unity among men, forgiveness re-establishes the lost bond, the disturbed communion, there is a natural predisposition for forgiveness in the heart of every man." This life of forgiveness is the cruciform life of the Body of Christ, imitating Christ the head.

Forgiveness brings humanity in solidarity against our common inhibitions. Paul Schilling says, "whatever it is that militates against the self-realization of the human person from achieving his or her God given potentials is the evil that should be overcome." God has given us the way in Jesus Christ’s triumphal life, and has given us also the Holy Spirit. We have the grace to live out forgiveness and enter into harmony with God, with self and others. Gregory Jones would insist that forgiveness in God's self-revelation is more than just an isolated act rather, it enacts and reflects a quality of character and the personality of God. The character and personality with which humanity is imbued and should constantly put in the forefront.

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93 Donnelly, 99.
96 Jones, 37.
To be forgiven in Christ is to attempt to forgive others, a character that seems to put forgiveness into a shared responsibility between divinity and humanity. God plays God's own role in reaching out to us in mercy, and we in turn play our own role by opening ourselves up to reconciliation with God and with one another. To this we are graced to do through the love and mercy of God in Jesus Christ. 97

In this exploration of the theological context of forgiveness we refer to Gail Ramshaw-schmidt's gratitude of the freed man praise, when she says: 'we recall in the Apostles' Creed that the divine life of Christ in the Spirit is expressed in a variety of images: the holy Catholic Church, the communion of saints, the forgiveness of sins, the resurrection of the body, and life everlasting. Here God's Spirit is pictured as an ordering of human chaos, a model of justice in the world, our final return to wholeness, and the overcoming of death, as well as the forgiveness of sins.' 98 In other words, Christ is Forgiveness, Resurrection, Messiah, Saviour, Logos. This writer believes that to come to the full clarity of the mystery of Christ, it is always the task of the theologian to continuously, and in an endless endeavor, search for the mystery of God's redemptive love and express it in the language of the living people, in the study of biblical and traditional Christian images of hope. This is in line with the contemporary categories of human need. For Ramshaw-Schmidt, this is the goal of theology, as she insists that "forgiveness is the meaning of humanity as it reveals the throbbing inner life of God." 99

This is what the theological context of forgiveness aims to achieve. To bring to everyone the grace that God has given in Christ and to make it more explainable in the language that the modern person can relate to.

97 Ibid, 38.
99 Ibid, 11.
Chapter Two
Forgiveness Among the Igbo People

Igbo People and Their Cultural Values

An examination of the Igbo people's experience of reconciliation and forgiveness in the pre-Christianity era falls under the purview of the African notion of reconciliation, a theme examined at the Second African Synod on Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace. Concerning this, Peter Henriot says: "What the synod pointed out represents the most important end of a continuum, for the concept of reconciliation in Africa involves many facets. An integral reconciliation includes both the invisible (God, spirits, ancestors) and the visible worlds (community of the living, and the cosmos)." Touching on the importance of a background knowledge of the African notion of reconciliation and forgiveness, Paul Bere explains, "in the mind of African Christians, reconciliation with God through the sacrament of penance necessarily entails other components to be effective and to bring back harmony and wholeness." Bere affirms these components to include reconciliation with self, and reconciliation with the visible and invisible world.

These concepts are crucial in understanding reconciliation and forgiveness in the religio-cultural matrix of the Igbo people of Nigeria, and will guide our exploration of this area. To undertake a task of articulating forgiveness among the traditional Igbo society is like searching for fossils of antiquity where one has to excavate in many places with the hope of stumbling onto something for analysis. The Igbo have no recorded history from the earliest communities that one can make reference to in research. Ours is an oral tradition and one has to rely solely on fragments from storytelling. A good starting point is first of all to locate and identify the Igbo on the world map. Then their life patterns and aspects of their socio-religious, economic and political life and institutions can be investigated for cues with respect to their tradition and culture, leading back to their origins in traditional African life.

The Igbo people constitute the majority of the people who occupy the South-Eastern part of Nigeria in Sub-Saharan Africa. Most scholars agree that there was no real

sense of pan-Igbo identity in the pre-colonial period, and that the village groups felt a strong sense of local patriotism. European scholars have failed to grasp core Igbo political philosophy; and their world view. For example, in Law and Authority in A Nigerian Tribe: A Study in Indirect Rule, Calvin K. Meeks referred to the Igbo people as "ungovernable,"\(^{102}\) forgetting that the Igbos by political nature are republicans, and do not like leadership imposed on them without going through their established process of selecting leaders, due to the insensitivity of the colonial agents to their system of indirect rule.

Some Igbo scholars have been attempting to throw some light on such gross misunderstandings and misrepresentations of the Igbo people of Nigeria. Michael Echeruo, among many Igbo scholars, made reference to such claims:

All the earlier travelers who visited our part of the world never failed to comment on the fact that there did not appear to be any kind of central pan-Igbo authority among us. Every man, they observed, was a god in his own house; every village was an autonomous community; federations and alliances, were exactly that: affiliations of convenience which did not pretend to be new political entities capable of transforming the primary patterns of political sovereignty in the federated society.\(^{103}\)

What is salient in Echeruo's exposition about Igbo traditional organizational structures is his mention of the confederate structure in the Igbo community and cultural grouping. The Igbo culture, rural or urban, manifests distinctive characteristics or traits which mark the Igbo. Martin A. Onwuejeogwu identifies six such traits: "the linguistic, social, political, economic, ritual and cultural traits."\(^{104}\) Where these traits of the Igbos are deeply rooted and clearly seen and expressed is in religion. The Igbo are a highly religious people. Igbo thought, life and ideations revolve around religion so much so that this was noticed by European groups who first visited Igboland.

Writing about the Igbo in the early 1900, Major Arthur G. Leonard remarked that:

[t]hey are in the strict and natural sense of the word a truly and a deeply religious people, of whom it can be said that they eat religiously, drink

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religiously, bathe religiously, dress religiously and sin religiously. In a few words, the religion of these as I have all along endeavored to point out is their existence and their existence is their religion.\textsuperscript{105}

Leonard is not alone in this observation. John S. Mbiti, one of the pioneering writers in the African Traditional Religion, not only echoes something similar about the Igbo, but he pushes it even further to say that religion is a common phenomenon among the Africans. Referring to the traditional religious attitude of the Africans, Mbiti said:

Africans [Igbo] are notoriously religious, and each people has its own system with a set of beliefs and practices. Religion permeates into all the departments of life so fully that it is not easy or possible always to isolate it. A study of these religious systems is therefore, ultimately a study of the people themselves in all complexities of their traditional life. Religion is the strongest element in traditional background, and exerts probably the greatest influence upon the thinking and living of the Igbo people.\textsuperscript{106}

Similarly, after observing how religion thoroughly permeates the life of every Igbo, Bishop Shanahan, one of the pioneering missionaries in Igbo land, came to this conclusion:

The average native (Igbo), was admirably suited by environment and training, for an explanation of life in terms of the spirit; rather than the flesh. He was no materialist. Indeed nothing was farther from his mind than a materialist philosophy of existence. It made no appeal to him.\textsuperscript{107}

Leonard, Mbiti and Shanahan, all agree that religion defines the Igbo and defines their lifestyle, and is a guide to their practical living. Igbo religion is not currently codified or formulated into systematic dogmas. It is culturally learned and adopted. It is a tradition. Religion is an intrinsic part of culture. As Byang Kato, a great researcher in the area of the African cultural revolution and the Christian Faith, once says:

Culture is itself the totality of knowledge and behaviour, ideas and objects that constitute the common heritage of a people in a given society. And as a lifestyle, culture covers every aspect of the society's life in their efforts to relate with their environment, with one another and as well as the ideational elements within the society.\textsuperscript{108}

\textsuperscript{107} John P. Jordan, \textit{Bishop Shanahan of Southern Nigeria} (Dublin, Clonmore & Reynolds, 1949), 115.
Kato's insight exposes the fact that in religiosity, one finds the Igbo idea of forgiveness. Where do we find this exactly? The Igbo world view is deeply expressed in their religion, and Igbo cosmology has the color of their religion.

What this cosmology means is that the Igbo see the world as chaotic and requiring an order. Igbo see themselves as agents of order and meaning-making, so that the existential highway will open to everyone to ply their trade as existential gatherers. Traditionally, the Igbo people believe that the cosmos as it left the creator's hand is incomplete or broken. This is reflected in their myths of origin like the famous Nri myth of creation upon which as we will discover, the Igbo idea of forgiveness revolves. The myth claims that the world inherited by Eri, the founding father of the Igbo people from Chukwu (God) was not the best of worlds. According to Elizabeth Isichei, the famous Igbo historian:

Chukwu sent Eri-the first man-and he landed at Nri, according to Odinani (tradition). His task was to come and put order in the people of Anambra. When he landed, because the earth was waterlogged, he complained to Chukwu who sent him to a blacksmith from Awka to use bellows to dry the flooded land. When in need of food, Eri complained to Chukwu who demanded him to sacrifice his first son and first daughter. This he did, and from the spot where he buried his son, yam and palm tree sprout up; and from the spot he buried his daughter, vegetables and cocoyam grew up. It is because of these events that the earth is regarded as the greatest supernatural alusi (deity) that produces man's food. It is sacred. One day, four supernatural beings visited Eri who, by trick, got their names as Eke, Afor, Nkwo and Oye whose names bear the Igbo market days.

The Nri myth, as found in Isichei's, is important not only historically but also religiously in the exploration of the identity and origin of the Igbo people. It exposes their ideational ethos especially in the understanding of reconciliation and forgiveness. The Igbo acknowledge their divine origin and not that they came into existence by chance. From the Nri creation myth, one can come to the following understanding: that the Igbo is a product of Chukwu (the Supreme God) through proto-ancestor Eri who was sent by Chukwu, (God) and made his home in a chaotic incomplete universe, waterlogged. As this is not a scientific documentary account of the Historico-religious origin of the Igbo,

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109 Njoku, 121.
with all proven evidence, there are certainly inconsistencies in this story or myth, but inconsistency as it is known is part of the realm of myth. As Ernest Cassirer testifies:

Because mythical consciousness is not, like the theoretical consciousness, concerned with gaining fundamental constants by which to explain variation of change. Nevertheless, the mythical consciousness arrives at an articulation of a place and time not by establishing the fluctuation of sensuous phenomena but by introducing its specific opposition-the opposition of the sacred and the profane-into spatial and temporary reality.\(^\text{112}\)

Cassirer's understanding of myth as a story of origins provides direction for a construction and reconstruction of the Igbo world. The Igbo have a sense of their origin, although, limited by lack of documented history, there are cues and evidence within the traces of their culture, language, tradition and institutions. The Nri myth tells the story of a people: about Chukwu (God), the Eri (the greater ancestor and intercessor); about humanization of a rough world through human effort (Eri and Awka blacksmith's technology); about food; about social and economic intercourse of life (market-business); and the Igbo week or calendar. These concepts are rooted in the Igbo culture, which constitutes their beliefs, customs, ethos and manners, and enshrine morality, within which the traditional religion and philosophy of the Igbo people, have their meaning and significance.

The world left Chukwu's (God) hands chaotically, or broken, and Chukwu settled or landed the first ancestor in a chaotic universe. This gives clues to the Igbo mindset and ground for understanding the Igbo metaphysical, philosophical, as well as sociological and theological approach to reconciliation and forgiveness. Igbo scholars have made significant contributions in the fields of Igbo cosmology and religious world view. Francis Njoku has written on the Igbo and African perspective on the problem of identity and conflict resolution. In his work, he focuses mostly on Igbo philosophy and existential outlook and explores the Igbo relational matrices in a volatile cosmos.

Francis Njoku, a celebrated expert on African perspective on problem of identity and conflict resolution, describes the Igbo world as a "closed and open system of many randomly moving thought particles. The randomly moving thought particles are human beings. Human beings are on the move; movement is their nature. In movement, they

occupy unique places, having received a unique mission from Chukwu."¹¹³ What Njoku points to in his explication of the Igbo cosmology, or the understanding of the Igbo worldview, is that the Igbo do not brood over the world in disarray, for chaos is a fundamental ground for the coming into being of the Igbo world. The world left God's hand broken, signifying a broken humanity in need of reconciliation. Therefore, the mission of the Igbo is not to create a world where chaos is absent, but to find a living in the midst of chaos. And as Chidi Osuagwu, another Igbo scholar in this field has pointed out, “the guiding principle of the Igbo in this state of affairs is the principles of truth and justice.”¹¹⁴ In other words, awareness of our human limitations and the incompleteness of the world in which we live becomes the basis for openness to harmony, peace and justice, and reconciliation. Njoku insists that "the mission of the Igbo is to make a living in the midst of existential struggles, ironies and weariness presented by the world. He must learn to make himself at home in his environment, using his ako na uche (reason and mind/will)."¹¹⁵ This is in line with the general view that forgiveness is a matter of the will, more than mere fleeting feeling or emotions.

This is where the Igbo situates forgiveness, a will for attempting engagement as a harmonious co-existence with others who share the same existential space finding their way in a chaotic universe. Njoku elaborates in saying: "when people negotiate the social space meaningfully and peacefully, it results in mutual enrichment and prosperity. This is the condition in which the Igbo needs to flourish. As an existential gatherer and frontier businessman, he flourishes best where the conditions are most favorable."¹¹⁶ The Igbo believe that negotiation is a pathway. Dialogue is a movement in manifesting and sharing meanings. The Igbo individual, though autonomous, is typically social. One recalls that Chukwu sent Eri to his neighbors-the Awka people to help him dry the swampy earth.¹¹⁷ Thus, a world of chaos is not necessarily a world in which everyone is in conflict with everyone else. Rather, it is a world of possibilities through co-operation, dialogue, negotiation, an invitation to and openness to forgiveness and reconciliation within the shared existential space and highways.

¹¹⁵ Njoku, 121.
¹¹⁶ ibid, 127.
¹¹⁷ Isichei, 23.
Against this backdrop, negotiation is seen as a process of communication that brings about joint agreements or positive outcomes. Michael Palmer and Simon Roberts who have done a lot of works in conflict management, agree to this; when they said: "Negotiation involves communication, leading to joint decision-making. It is a process over which the parties retain control; exchanges take place within a common universe of meaning; and these determine the outcome in immediate terms." The Igbo believe that social relations enlarge one's existential space, minimize conflict and consolidate the space already gained. Thus, a person's children, friends and in-laws are his/her existential space enlarged, and there, one makes his/her unique contribution, having made peace-pacts or covenants with his neighbors, or people among whom he lives or resides. This is why, among the Igbo people, the killing of kinsmen, with or without mens rea, calls for a chain of penal measures in addition to the ritual cleansing of the perpetrator, if allowed to survive the act. A similar attitude in attending to reconciliation, recovery, restoration and forgiveness is also known to be found in other African culture and experience. As Desmond Tutu, the Anglican Archbishop of South Africa speaks of the Ubuntu, he says: "In the spirit of ubuntu, the central concern is the healing of breaches, the redressing of imbalances, the restoration of broken relationships, a seeking to rehabilitate both the victim and the perpetrator, who should be given the opportunity to be integrated into the community he has injured by his offence.

There are three important themes from the Igbo religious worldview to be deduced from the Igbo understanding and practice of reconciliation and forgiveness. The first concept is that of the theory of the "Thermodynamic Cosmos." Njoku borrows this concept—which is about energy storage mechanisms—whereby energy is not lost but conserved from physics, to explain the concept that the Igbo world is a closed and open system; a thermodynamic world does not lose energy, but rather, it conserves energy, and the energy spent is the energy transformed in the enlargement of equilibrium. What this means is that the individual in the Igbo universe of meaning has an inseparable connection with God or Chukwu, who released him into the universe. Chukwu, as the source of motion, keeps everything in motion, being or action, since He orders the

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121 Njoku, 96.
universe through his sustaining motion. The individual is part of the thought motion realized by Chukwu, and linked to Chukwu. The individual is unique and with a specific mission and talents to share.

This means that the individual linked to God is also connected to others who share the universe with him/her. This brings us to the understanding of Njoku's claim "that the self is not what it is solely on the basis of its individualism but an individuality located in the midst of other individualities, that is, an individuality that is actually fulfilled by a network of responsibilities to others and the community. Thus, an Igbo social theory is an integrative one."122 This explains that a reading of Igbo social theory solely from the individualist or collectivist bent will be reductionistic and not telling the whole story. The heart of the matter is reflected in what Richard Vernon, a political scientist in Western University, London Ontario, said regarding civil society and the politics of living together: "Political society should be organized in such a way that it is transparent to public dialogue, individuals defining themselves not as bearing essential rights against one another, but as co-participants in a common enterprise, and as having the identities disclosed by the enterprise itself."123 No one operates in a vacuum but in the human community-our shared world. Thus, while the Igbo gathers, he is essentially pulled in two directions: the inner voice of autonomy and the external voice of duty to the community that struggles to tame excessive individualism.124 This is the backdrop within which reconciliation and forgiveness are approached in Igbo land, a background reminiscent of John Paul Lederrach's saying that "reconciliation is understood as both a place we are trying to reach and the journey that we take up with each other."125 The Igbo believe that a person is better known when he/she interacts with others; is capable of holding self in relation, and accommodating the other as having his/her unique way to be respected and not hindered.

The second assumption is that the individual has two inherited rights that are incumbent on his nature, namely: the right of identity/recognition and the right of property. Every being is set in motion by Chukwu, and to live is to remain in motion, and be recognized as such. That which is, must be.126 It is a matter of justice that each being

122 Ibid, 147.
124 Njoku, p. 148.
126 Njoku, 132.
is not hindered or put out of existence in its existential or ontological axis. This is exemplified in the Igbo existential axiom: "Egbe bere Ugo bere," which literally means; "Live and let live." Njoku captures succinctly the Igbo concept of identity and recognition when he writes:

The need to survive or remain in motion can lead to causal traffic within the world of interaction of life-entities. One claims that to say that a state of affairs is chaotic is not necessarily a descriptive statement. Besides, this preceding claim is not a denial that there is causal traffic in the world of interacting entities. Identity requires that entities retain their true nature as dynamic interacting entities. Recognition is an affirmation of being; hence tags such as 'strange', 'foreigners,' 'settlers,' 'non-indigenes' or 'cockroaches' as used by Hutus against Tutsis, deny and demean the identity of others.127

The individual, while in motion, also wants to retain the space gained. This understanding again fits in well with the interpretation of the Igbo universe from the point of view of the law of thermodynamics employed by Njoku, as he explains that "to deny one space gained is to deny his property. A denial of the rights of recognition and property is a major source of conflict."128 A famous contributor in the Center for Peacemaking and Conflict Studies at Fresno Pacific University, California, Larry Dunn corroborates this view when he writes:

What we disagree about raises questions of who we are and who we want to become. In other words, conflict is related to identity. The things we care about most deeply are likely to engage us in the greatest conflict. When conflict strikes at the core of who we are and may become, it can profoundly affect us. It can even transform our entire religious, social, or cultural group for generations to come. 129

Affirmation and recognition contribute to re-assuring individuals existentially that they belong and are safe. Conflicts need to be resolved for people to make head-way. Our fields of experience need to overlap for effective communication. This overlapping of fields of experience is akin to what John R. Bittner calls Homophily. Bittner says: "The more the homophily that is present, the more chances for effective and meaningful

127 Njoku, 130.
communication that will lead to the understanding of one another." And in organizations, for example, understanding conflicts in terms of competition can bring about increased productivity and high performance. Conversely, conflicts can be destructive, and are more likely to be destructive, as an expert in domestic violence and the author of "How to Listen Better," Pramila Ahuja states, "when people come into them harboring past resentments rather than mindful of each other's previous pleasing behaviors." In order words, affirmation and validation of people's good qualities can contribute greatly in enhancing meaningful relationships and overcoming negative behaviors.

The third way of understanding the Igbo religious worldview in respect to forgiveness and reconciliation embraces the area of boundaries. The attempt to reach out to the other in the existential space contains the possibility of breeding confusion as individuals have privileged access to their worlds; hence their manifestations or signs produced by them in the world of immediacy may not unlock, without pain, the meaning in the heart of the other. We are often left with the question: how do individuals interact with one another? As it has been explored in the context of Igbo understanding of forgiveness, within the chaotic universe order and disorder can co-exist, although, one can be mistaken in one's position regarding a state of affairs. Maintaining one's position in the cosmic order is crucial in the existential and metaphysical sense of the Igbo people. As Njoku puts it, "the Igbo world presents itself as a living through conflicts. However from Chukwu's (God) point of view, in the operational theory of the Igbo cosmos, there is good enough space for each being to ply its existential trade. Although, the right to the common space of all by each entity might bring friction; hence right may variably be a source of conflict."

This concept can be further analyzed to reflect that conflict arises when people deny the existence of an entity, or attempt to force it out of the space it has already gained. Ho-Won Jeong explains what this existential highway traffic means in ordinary daily life when he says that: "Sources of group violence can be attributed to a lack of security, suppression of autonomy and identity and an unequal distribution of life

132 Njoku, 116.
133 Njoku, 118.
chances." It is possible that the existence of many entities on the existential highway of dynamic motion can result in causal-traffic; this is only a contingent fact, and not a genetic one. As Njoku insists "to be is not consequent on the struggle to survive or conflict. Being implies self-sufficing action and self-sufficiency; survival of the fittest or evolutionary signification through natural selection is predicated contingently on the second-order of existential organization." No Igbo person likes to be denied his existential space, either by being ignored, or by evasion of his or her person or properties by another. The Igbo sees his/her lawfully acquired space or property as his/her own allotted portion by his/her chi; and should not be dispossessed of him/her but respected as sacred. One recognizes other's right and hopes to have his/her own safe-guarded by others. When one respects what belongs to the other, his/her own is respected as well. This is Igbo ethics and ties in with the Igbo saying that that which people have, should remain for them, and be recognized and respected as such. This is one of the Igbo strong bases for understanding and approaching dialogue and forgiveness, as well as healing relationships and for growth, development and prosperity.

Attesting to this prevalent philosophy of the Igbo, Chidi Osuagwu rightly points out that "in truth and justice, the Igbo makes their way or orders his chaotic world. The representation of the Igbo religious philosophy or identification, based on truth and justice, are predicates that make sense in the world shared by the other as attributes appreciated in the world of immediacy." For the Igbo, it is understandable that Umunna Kwenu, which stands for harmony among kindred is the basis of life. Belongingness is participation which contributes to the life and welfare of the individual. This life-view is common not only to the Igbo people, but to Africans as whole. The African philosophy of life is built on the sense of community and solidarity. John Mbiti summarizes this point this way: "the individual is conscious of the himself in terms of "I am because we are, and since we are, therefore I am." The individual is truly human in so far as he/she is an integral member of society and exemplifies that in his action and behaviour.

Osuagwu affirms that "through negotiations in the shared world of other interacting beings and forces in an atmosphere of inter-subjective relations, the individual

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135 Njoku, 132.
136 Osuagwu, 17.
recognizes the need to bridge the gap between his own interiority and that of the other." Osuagwu hold that solicitude or conciliation is the Igbo system of putting into action the philosophy of "live and let live" within the Igbo world view. To this, the entire community has a stake in. Conflicts need to be resolved for people to make headway. As Michael Palmer and Simon Roberts rightly explain: "Throughout the process of negotiation, the primary and undisputed role must be to engage in the process of information exchange and learning that lies in the interiority of the mind/heart." This interiority of mind/heart is what is aimed at in communal conflict resolution process whereby individuals in conflict are have an opportunity to state their grievances and bring their proof. In this way, individuals who were not talking to each other are helped to start talking and in that way they will begin to understand each other's point of view, and therefore, not only can they empathize with each other, but will begin to enrich each other again with their unique individuality.

The Igbos believe that an encounter with the other results in mutual enrichment and solidarity. Every being has a role to play in the Igbo universe, in its allotted role. And these contributions or enrichments both to self and the other are achieved through dialogue and negotiation. Hence, negotiation involves communication, leading to joint decision-making. Palmer and Roberts further confirm this by re-iterating that "it is a process over which the parties retain control; exchanges take place within a common universe of meaning; and these determine the outcome in immediate term." The individual being or thought moving particle in a system of thermodynamic-where energy is not lost, but learns, as it is not a matter of attraction and repulsion, but rather, how to negotiate for one another's existential highway for mutual survival.

Within this understanding, therefore, to negotiate the other’s existential highway is not simply dealing with specific issues as creating a model of negotiation in which participants see themselves in a network of actions. This existential highway networking resonates with what John Paul Lederrach says about the journeys towards reconciliation. He strongly holds that the "individual beings within a shared cosmos, see themselves as largely embedded in a set of relationships. In most instances, these were

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138 Osuagwu, 23.
139 Michael Palmer and Simon Roberts, 16.
140 Palmer and Roberts, 63.
141 Njoku, 119.
life-long relationships between friends who are now enemies.\textsuperscript{142} The particular individual negotiates his way in the supposed chaotic world through external relations and communication. By means of communication, meaning is shared and bridges built in communication as a justification of the fact that man is a social being, or a being-with-others. Man's nature equips him for communion with others, in the context of which he gives himself to others, and receives self in return. The German foremost social and political thinker of the 20th century, Jurgen Habermas, agrees that the process of self-donation implies that action discharged in the world of being-with-others or communication is acknowledged by the other. Habermas postulates; "In so far as one wants to participate in a process of reaching understanding with others, he cannot avoid raising the following-and indeed precisely the following-validity claims. He has to be: a) Uttering something understandably; b) Giving (the hearer) something to understand; c) Making himself thereby understandable; and d) coming to understanding with another person."\textsuperscript{143} Communication at the service of reconciliation stands as a means for enlarging existential meaning and reason.

Michael Echeruo describing what he calls "affiliation convenience" found in the Igbo way of life, writes: "When one enters into friendships and marriage, for example, one reduces the horizon of his given chaotic environment, and enlarges in service what one has already gained, transforming what one has or oneself into new forms of relationship."\textsuperscript{144} This is in line with what Palmer and Roberts have said, noting that as entities interact, they enlarge and better themselves through the process of communication and minimize hostilities and conflict, having created certain social relationships or constructs such as marriage, in-laws, cousins, and friends and so on.\textsuperscript{145} This description is at the heart of the Igbo social institutions and network of bonding, and one that guarantees lasting social relationships, and rests fully in what the Igbo call covenant.

The process of reconciliation in the covenant mind-set is brought about through learning how to retrieve and create original patterns of relationship in order to restore people where they once were. Lederrach explains this further when he says:

\textsuperscript{142} Lederrach, 56.
\textsuperscript{144} Michael J. C. Echeruo, \textit{Conflict Management in Igbo Rhetoric: A Contribution to Igbo Ethnomlinguistics and Inculturation Theology} (Bonn: Verlag Nober M. Borengasser, 2001), 29.
\textsuperscript{145} Palmer and Roberts, 68.
"Reconciliation is understood as both a place we are trying to reach and the journey that we take up with each other."\textsuperscript{146} This squares well with the traditional Igbo societies that are basically both agrarian and business communities that needs peace and a conducive atmosphere to till their land, and harvest and sell their crops with the help of one another. A well established socio-religious channel of peace and reconciliation within Igbo traditional set up lies deeply in the framework of covenant. It touches on their existential and social meaning and understanding of their existence and mission to live out peace and harmony with their neighbor. Covenant is not only a strong means of bonding, it helps in minimizing hostile attitude towards members of the community and resolving conflicts.

Towards A Conflict Resolution in Igbo Community

There is no common strategy for the resolution of conflict that is known among the traditional African societies. Each society has practiced a different system depending on how centralized or uncentralized society they live in. Nevertheless, Cyprian Nwanunobi has grouped the range of strategies found in different traditional African societies into five headings: (1) Self-help, (2) Peer group Assembly, (3) Village Council, (4) Council of Elders and, (5) Game Solution.\textsuperscript{147} Among these five strategies, two are broadly known among the traditional Igbo society. They include: the peer group assembly and the village council.

The peer group assembly method of conflict resolution is based on age grades. In Igbo society certain offences involving women are reviewed by women's groups in the first instance. It is only when such peer groups admit inability to resolve the issue that the wider society steps in. According to Nwanunobi, the guiding assumption in the reliance on peer groups in conflict resolution is that such groups best understand the intricacies of issues in which members are involved. The assumption is strongest when both parties are of the same group. Peer groups are also believed to provide the least inhibitive atmosphere for members to air their grievances.\textsuperscript{148} In the Igbo traditional society utilization of peer groups in conflict resolution refers not only to women but also to youth or young adult men and women.

\textsuperscript{146} Lederrach, 52.
\textsuperscript{147} Nwanunobi, 155.
\textsuperscript{148} Nwanunobi, 156.
For the village council (umunna) strategy, the whole community is involved as they listen to the issues under contention and offer suggestions for resolution of the conflict. The key strategy here is to enable the field of the experienced dialogue partners overlap, thereby establishing common grounds and frames of reference on which all can communicate and interact creatively. This context is where dialogue as the underlying medium in traditional Igbo practice of forgiveness is at its best. Dialogue opens a process of self-donation. Njoku captures the dialogical and dialectical nature of the village council strategy succinctly thus:

When dialogue partners begin to share their views or meanings in the presence of the community, each listens and attempts to understand. It does not matter yet whether the partner's views are stupid, interesting or strange. I can understand why you love dogs more than cats; it could be that you prefer coffee to tea, so you take your coffee, I take my tea. It is understandable that B cannot stand the presence of dogs, thus, he prefers pigeons. If we know people's histories, beliefs and experiences, we can understand, to a large extent, some of their behaviour patterns, values and preferences. The human horizon makes allowances for people's diverse preferences and values. Thus, diverse values are not necessarily irreconcilable, opposed or antinomies. Dialogue can succeed as an avenue for understanding patterns of behaviour that emanate from different root metaphors or meaning-structures. This understanding already elicits compassion, which is, steeping into the feelings or worlds of the other.149

The village council strategy is found within most Igbo communities and has been one of the most effective means used by Igbo Africans to achieve resolution of conflicts, reconciliation and forgiveness through this means of dialogue. As a forum of dialogue, individuals as members of Igbo society can freely air their views and defend their rights and experience the privilege of being listened to and heard. The success of dialogue lies in it being a communicative process of listening and negotiating each other's interiorities in order to come to an effective meaning or understanding. Dialogue is first and foremost, an encounter between persons. In these encounters "meaning and harmony are sought in the diversity of those walls and worlds that appear to separate potential interlocutors in word and action. Dialogue is a conversation, a communication, a talk, a meeting between minds in the midst of the riches of diversities"150 Also, dialogue as communication, is "a sharing of meaning; and meaning locks in the interiority of the other. The ambiguity of

150 Ahuja, 69.
carriers of meaning does not always make us clear before the other or say what we want to say."\textsuperscript{151} In this case, the Village council provides an opportunity to clarify all the convolutions. Although settlement is mostly arrived at in such a public setting by means of dialogue, it is a time consuming strategy for conflict resolution. However, it exemplifies the true Igbo communal spirit and satisfies the Igbo communal approach to life. As the Igbo traditional practice of forgiveness and reconciliation is community-based, it is to a greater extent collectivistic. This system ties in with Steven J. Sandage and Ian William's research on forgiveness in a cultural context. They reflected on the fact that forgiveness-as important aspect of human reality-cannot be fully understood without localizing it in a particular environment and culture within a particular group of people, inclusive of all areas of their theology and psychology, as well as their philosophy.\textsuperscript{152} A prominent communication strategist, John Kelly agrees that forgiveness within a cultural environment evolves in a dialogical and dialectical process. He says: "Dialogue opens up a process of self-donation within a communal system of living, where everyone's behaviour contributes to or disrupts the peace and harmony of the entire community."\textsuperscript{153}

In the Igbo traditional context, the human is viewed both in his/her collective identity as a member of the community, and in his/her personal identity as a unique individual. The sense of belonging is first to the community before the individual. It is therefore the community which confers identity to its well-meaning members. This practice offers equal opportunity and justice to the entire community thereby ensuring justice and equity for all. As Jerome O. Irukwu recalls: "Most Igbo meetings are convoked to establish the true way of getting along with one another. Truth is to be told, then the liar blamed, justice sought in order to maintain a fair equilibrium among all."\textsuperscript{154} This basis for relational ethos seems to pervade the entire traditional African belief system. As community-based, forgiveness and reconciliation are embedded in the norms and values that are inherent in the laws and institutions within the community. The community therefore provides the base and framework for mutual resolution of conflicts.

\textsuperscript{151} Terry J. Tekippe, \textit{A Primer: What is Lonergan Up to in Insight} (Collegeville: The Liturgical Press 1996), 73.
in accordance with the culture. This is handled by the community hierarchy of “Umunna” and the council of elders. And as a result, the norms and values of solidarity, cooperation, mutual benefits, and interdependence, serve as the building blocks of reconciliation and forgiveness.

Among the Igbo community, forgiveness and reconciliation cannot be achieved without corresponding restitution. One major common factor is the pronounced cohesion in living in community, and the meaningful relationships defined in a corporate existence. In this scenario, the strong is expected to protect the weak; the “haves” fend for the “have-nots.” By so doing, justice and peace are maintained in society. In the Igbo society, collective responsibility is the guiding principle of the people. The Igbo perceive “the child” as the responsibility of the community, and this is reflected in the name “Nwa oha” (the child of the community). The community in this case expects a mother to fulfill the responsibility by raising children with strong moral rectitude that reflects the laws and mores of society. The community shares with one another a mother’s love and care for all children irrespective of their pedigree. In the same manner children are subject to collective sanctions and disciplinary measures from the community. The celebrated African writer and illustrious son of Igboland, Chinua Achebe underscores this principle of collective responsibility and its role in understanding forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution in Igbo land in the episode between in-laws. He described the case of Ibe, Ezeulu’s in-law who consistently engages in domestic violence by turning his wife Akueke, Obika’s sister into a punching bag. That in its nature was an extremely provocative offence such that Obika sought revenge:

No one in Ezeulu’s compound knew where Obika had gone until he returned a little before noon with Ofoedu. On their heads was Akueke’s husband tied to a bed, almost dead. Eventually the commotion brought Ezeulu who had gone into a near-by bush, hurrying home... When he saw what was happening he wailed a lament on the destruction Obika would bring to his house and ordered him to release his in-law, his wife as their son committed a sacrilege and taboo by casing the sacred python, a community totem, in a box.  

Obika’s revenge was as extreme as the provocation. He marched unannounced to his in-law’s house, beats him up, ties him to the bed and carries him to his own village. For three weeks, the in-law could not get up from bed. The African culture and traditional

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setting impel a symbiotic brother’s keeper attitude as a community guiding virtue. To this end, Ibe’s kinsmen went to Ezeulu to seek explanation and satisfaction. They need to have the facts before jumping to conclusion and judgment. During the meeting of both communities, there was a consensus among the elders that Ibe had stretched his arms too far by consistently beating his wife and therefore no one could blame Obika for defending his sister. They also blamed Obika, however, for unilaterally taking action without consulting the elders. In a similar episode, Okonkwo violated the week of peace. In his sudden flight to anger he mercilessly beats up his wife to the extent of causing consternation and stir in the neighborhood. The custom forbids anyone from engaging in any violence even in mere altercation with a neighbor. In Things Fall Apart, Achebe provides insight into the violation of the week of peace by Okonkwo in Umuofia village.

Before it was dusk Ezeani, who was the priest of the earth goddess, Ani, called on Okonkwo in his Obi. Okonkwo brought out Kola nut and placed it before the priest. “Take away your Kola nut. I shall not eat in the house of a man who has no respect for our gods and ancestors.” At this point there was a dialogue of the deaf between Okonkwo and Ezeani. As for the chief priest, Okonkwo has broken the law...”Listen to me...you are not a stranger in Umuofia. You know as well as I do that our fore-fathers ordained that before we plant any crop in the earth, we should observe a week in which a man does not say a harsh word to his neighbor. We live in peace with our fellows to honor our great goddess of the earth without whose blessing our crops will grow. You have committed a great evil.” Okonkwo tries to exculpate himself of the violation by letting the chief priest know the gravity of what his wife had done. “Your wife was at fault, but even if you came into your obi and found her lover on top of her, you would still have committed a great evil to beat her. The evil you have done can ruin the whole clan.”156

From the foregoing, the understanding of reconciliation is based on strict justice. The offender is brought into full awareness and conviction of his offence and in readiness to receive any form of punishment and restitution. Here lies the difference. While Christianity emphasizes the gratuitousness of forgiveness, African Traditional religion perspective is based on restitutive justice. To cap their dialogue, Ezeani, the chief priest in a sudden change of tone, from anger to command delivered the following imperative. “You will bring to the shrine of Ani tomorrow one she-goat, one hen, a lent of cloth and a hundred cowries. He rose and left the hut”157

157 Achebe, 28.
Reconciliation and forgiveness are not only issues among the community of the living, they also touch the community of the living dead, known as the ancestors. Belief in the ancestors is largely on the belief that life continues after death and that communion and communication are possible between the living and the living dead. They are believed to have powers to influence the affairs of the living either for the better or for the worse. They take interest in the day-to-day affairs of the family. They play the role of the guardians of public and private morality. As Theophilus N. O. Quarcoopome puts it; “they are the unseen presiders at family meetings. They also act as intermediaries between the living and the divine beings.”

Africans have strong ties with the deceased ancestors. It is natural for any man before he drinks his wine or even water to offer a libation to the ancestors. It is similar to a Christian prayer before a meal. This is perfectly explained by Bishop Peter Sarpong in his book *Ghana in Retrospect*

When someone dies, people believe that his spirit which has become an ancestor goes to inhabit a special world of ghosts or spirits. He travels for a certain number of days during which he may have to climb mountains, cross rivers, become tired on the way, and need money, food and water. For that reason when a person is dying some tribes have the custom of pouring water into his mouth, as the last act of kindness towards him. After his death he is bathed and dressed up in a manner befitting his age and sex. When he is being placed into the coffin, he is accompanied with money, beads, blankets and other precious objects which the people think he may need on his/her way, or on arrival at his destination.

What Sarpong is reflecting on is that beyond this harmony between the living and the dead, there is symbiosis between the two worlds. When violation of any major moral consequence has happened, it is understood that the offence is not only against the victim but the community and the spirit of the land occupied by the ancestors. This is seen as a pollution of the land. Consequently, offering of atonement and cleansing have to be made to appease the gods and the ancestors. The community is alerted and a gathering convoked. The offender has the choice to either protest his innocence or admit his fault. However, if there is doubt, the community can abdicate adjudication to the ancestors who know the best form of retribution. Adjudication of justice also involves offering sacrifices to propitiate the ancestors who have been disrespected and sinned against through various

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immoral behaviors. Such propitiation usually involves the slaughtering of animals whose blood is either drained or smeared on the shrine or drunk by the penitents and their family. The meat is equitably shared by all in attendance. With these rituals accomplished, ancestors are appeased, the sacrilege effaced and the offenders receive ablution, forgiveness and reconciliation with their ancestors and the community in which they live.\textsuperscript{160} To gain total forgiveness and reconciliation, the active participation of the family, clan group, or even the whole community is required and ample opportunity is provided for the kin group to participate in the whole process of reconciliation. This process demands the total involvement of all concerned. That is why the community is involved, every step of the way in this healing and reconciliation process. This is very much akin to the spirit of forgiveness, reconciliation and restitution among the Igbo and African Traditional Religion.

\textsuperscript{160} Eugene L. Mendosa, \textit{Politics of Divination: A Processual View of Relations to illness and Deviance among the Sisala of Northern Ghana} (California: University of California Press, 1982), 100.
Chapter Three

Interface of the Igbo Traditional and the Christian Religious Understanding of Forgiveness

Chapters one and two examined forgiveness in the separate traditions of Christianity and Igbo traditional Religion. Chapter three will focus on the similarities and differences in both traditions. My thesis is that the Igbo traditional way of practicing reconciliation and forgiveness is enriched by Christ who is the culmination and the fullness of the everlasting dynamics of God's self-communication to humanity.

Two areas will be examined as we look at similarities and differences between the Igbo and Christian understanding of reconciliation and forgiveness: community and covenant. One cannot deny the fact that the reality of Christ out-reaches many aspects of Igbo life viewed as the people of God whom God has been guiding before the fullness of Christ as evidenced in Igbo ethical and moral principles. A researcher in the Igbo tradition and culture, Chieka Ifemesia observes: "The traditional dominant Igbo orientation to the ultimate is their respect for morality and so dreaded the consequences in-built in committing any offence against the Sacred or the Supreme Being, the ancestors, local divinities and deities."¹⁶¹ The ultimate way which a traditional Igbo person cherishes God is to live a good and worthy life, a life lived out in a moral order here on earth, in order to die and receive full and proper burial rites, and finally rejoin his/her ancestors who lived well and died a good death. This is the dream life and hope of eternal destination of the ordinary Igbo person: to become one and a respectable member of the ancestors, and worthy of invocation and intercession for the living ones both for the family and community at large.

¹⁶¹ Chieka Ifemesia, Traditional humane living Among the Igbo: An Historical Perspective, (Enugu: Fourth Dimension, 1980), 70.
Community

Community in Igbo life is very important and has a strong bearing in the understanding and exercise of forgiveness. Igbo life is rooted in the interpenetration between it and Chukwu (God), divinities, environment and dialogue with others as evidenced in the Igbo perspective of cosmology or theory of creation and self identification. Their sense of community stems from their belief in the common brotherhood of humanity. This common brotherhood/sisterhood is represented in the Igbo concept of Umunna or Umunne/Ikwunne, which is not easy to translate. The Igbo life-in-community is captured by the Igbo concept of Umunna. The famous author of the popular book on Igbo tradition, social values and structure, Emeka G. Ekwuru expresses it thus: "Umunna is a spiritual idea embedded in Igbo origin."162 Ekwuru explains that Igbo-kwenu as the Igbo philosophy underpinning the Umunna concept represents a constituting symbol of the gathering of umunna, which allows for the full deliberative and consultative participation of every adult for decision-making. The freedom and rights of each individual are recognized but, more important, the Igboness in every Igbo person everywhere is awakened.

A university professor, and lecturer on Igbo philosophy, Emmanuel Onwu believes that the concept of democracy which is contained in the Igbo philosophy of republicanism and deeply rooted in Igbo life and thought is embodied in the Umunna concept.163 But within the context of forgiveness, one cannot but agree with Emeka Ekwuru that Igbo-kwenu in Igboland "underscores a social action, a call to order and unity and collective will vital in all Igbo relationships to fashion its destiny as a people."164 This is a bright light in the Igbo understanding and practice of reconciliation and forgiveness within the Igbo traditional communities. The traditional Igbo had a deep sense of community. The philosophy guiding the Igbo community life is equally reflected in Igbo social institutions, and as also found in most other African social traditions.

Nwanunobi reflected on the popular sentiments of community among the African people when he writes:

164 Ekwuru, 136.
As a continent, Africa has strikingly similar social institutions in spite of the diverse influences to which the component parts have been severally exposed from very early times. It is proper that the social institutions of a continent which has contributed so much to the development of mankind in the biological and cultural sense should get a high level of attention.\(^{165}\)

Africans demonstrate the same mentality in community solidarity and in their social institutions in which they to portray their belief and ideals. This is a unique which gift Africans bring to the rest of the world. The traditional Igbo life reflected that light, not only as a community but as individuals abiding by the spirit of the community. Igbo identity is not defined by an alone life in the intimacy of one's own enclave. For the Igbo, self is inter-networked in social interdependence and a network of relationships with the creator in relation with all of his creation. The Igbo self identity in the context of community is in congruence with the African philosophy of life built on the sense of "I am because we are and since we are, I am"-which in other words defines and shapes the individual's identity.\(^{166}\) Cognatus ergo sum: I belong, therefore I am. Raphael Ngong Teh would say that "belongingness is participation which contributes to the life and welfare of the individual and community."\(^{167}\)

An expert in African cosmology, Masamba Ma Mpolo agrees saying that: "In the traditional African concept, it is not the individual's capacity to go it his/her on own way, but rather the fact that he/she belongs, participates and shares life with others leads to wholeness and guarantees the well being of the individual."\(^{168}\) Communal responsibility is centered in this philosophy. What is "good for the goose is good for geese and vice versa."\(^{169}\) Teh insists that the individual acts have repercussions either for good or for evil to the entire community. With such a very strong community consciousness, conflict resolution becomes equally an important issue for the community as a relationship repair mechanism, in holding together the fabric of society. Within this backdrop, reconciliation and forgiveness are encouraged as a way of ensuring the coherence and good health of the community, its members and in relationship to the Supreme Being, the deities, as well as the ancestors.

\(^{165}\) Nwanunobi, 15.
\(^{166}\) John S. Mbiti, 108.
\(^{169}\) Teh, 5.
Christianity on the other hand, views community from the stand point of eschatology. In its early development, the eschatological tension between the "already" of a community called to live in Christ's Holy Spirit and the "not yet" of a community struggling to surrender to the Spirit was at the center stage of the history of the church.

Controversies especially during the Patristic era have surrounded and shaped penitential institution, through the rigid and severe discipline to preserve the holiness of the Church and the ever favored lenient treatment of repentant sinners, as preached by the Church Fathers as pastoral leaders of the Church community. As Dallen articulates, "right from the first half of the third century to fifth and sixth centuries, the Church resisted the Montanist and Novatianist severity and made the adaptations necessary for a growing Church comprehensive enough to include both saint and sinner." Being faithful to the Spirit of the Risen Lord, the Church continues to preach her strong convictions of a Christian dignity made in the image and likeness of God, and the need to maintain table-fellowship as an experience of the kingdom. Evidence for the development of the sacrament of penance can be found in the fact that restrictions on penance and reconciliation showed the Church's repudiation of life-styles and behaviour that destroyed its dignity, and showed the Church's desire to help its members live according to their call. A Patristic scholar and researcher in Montanist heresy, Fabians E. Vokes, for instance, says, "When the discipline changed, it was to show the Christian community's complete authority over sin, its ability to assist its members in overcoming whatever power sin might have over them, and to manifest its holiness by sharing the lord's compassion."

In establishing their role as moderators of penitential discipline, the early Fathers of the Church found themselves put in the position of legislators and judges. So also are the bishops of the Church today, who stand in continuity with the sacred office.

The Church is a reconciling community charged with the work of reconciling humanity with God and with one another by means of the death and resurrection of Christ. Using the story of Lazarus, Kathleen Hughes describes an image of the community of the Church as a mediating locus, as a reconciling and liberating community. She says: "Jesus calls Lazarus forth from death to life, but it is the community which rolls away the stone and the community which is charged with

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170 Dallen, 51.
Although sin brings sad events in people's lives here and now and the reality of sin evident in people's experience of isolation, lack of identity, illness, a hurting relationship, non-acceptance, need for reconciliation, painful decision, Christian community sees reconciliation as a continuous process of becoming, a continuous movement from death to life, from bondage to freedom. Hughes believes that reconciliation is not only a process, but it is a mediating process and this is where the church's community stands in service of God and humanity. Reconciliation and forgiveness is the mission of the Church for the sake of the kingdom of God, which Christ has come to establish. Jesus is the sovereign king and rallying point of humanity. Because of Christ, St. Paul says: "No one lives for himself only, and no dies for himself only, whether we live or die, we live for Christ (Rom.14:7)." The type of lives we live impacts on one another. Whatever we do to one another, we do it to Christ (Mat. 25:34). Hughes recalls: "There are many ministers of reconciliation that we encounter in our daily lives, only some of whom are ordained to that ministry in the Church. All of us have been entrusted with the ministry of reconciliation in our world."173

The Christian understanding of forgiveness not only relates to the Igbo traditional practice of forgiveness, but it completes and perfects the Igbo traditional understanding of reconciliation and forgiveness with the initiative of God-self in Christ. One may not be completely in error to suggest that both Igbo and Christianity understanding of forgiveness in community are both inspired by a sense of meaning and purposefulness in caring that is both divine and human.

The Igbo have a reason for safeguarding reconciliation and forgiveness for the survival of their community. Whereas Christianity not only has a reason to care for the well-being of God's people here and now, but also hereafter, by continually bringing people into the kingdom of God by making them aware of a common desire for reconciliation in the midst of the ruptures which mark our lives. As Hanna points out, "the primary purpose of reconciliation is to keep people aware of their true condition, the tension between the good and the evil in themselves."174 Such awareness is what Jones also insists should be seen as the reasonableness for forgiveness because of our culpable complicity-both in specific breaches of relationship, and in a pervasive reality of always-
already human brokenness and diminution. For Jones, "Christians forgiveness must be embodied in a way of life, a life marked by specific practices that enables us to unlearn patterns of sin, to repent for specific sins, and to foster habits of holy living."¹⁷⁵ Forgiveness reflects the Spirit of God offered for the healing and recovery of humanity since the fall of man. Like anything divine, no human thought can ever lay claim to a clearer and more comprehensive perception of what God has prepared for those whom he loves, nor the nature of God. Only Jesus Christ, the Son of God has revealed it to us through his death and resurrection in the ministry of reconciliation of the Church.

Covenant

In comparing the place of covenant in reconciliation and forgiveness in the Igbo traditional environment, and the Christian understanding of reconciliation and forgiveness, one has an occasion for a dialogue between faith and culture. The Igbo theology of forgiveness is reflected in so many ways around the concept of covenant. Covenant is at the center of the early forms of organizations among the Igbo people. Covenant is expressed in rituals and practices. The Igbo have a mission to live even within a chaotic universe. The Igbo have to live in peace and harmony not only for their survival, but to ensure the progress and prosperity of their community. It is understandable that covenant helps in many ways to create such an environment, and to what Henri J.M. Nouwen articulates as "a mentality of hope and confidence, which makes a community flexible and adaptable to new situations and always alert for new possibilities and new perspectives."¹⁷⁶ The Igbo understanding of a covenant life is a way of adaptation in their existence and mission in a chaotic world that they were sent to by Chukwu (God), to belong and thrive. Covenant life is a condition that the community can freely develop and discover the ways that lead to harmony and co-existence with the other.

Njoku points out that by experiencing and expressing life as a communion with others, the Igbo live out their belief system in relation to the creator and all created order. By creating communions or relationships, chaos and friction can be minimized.¹⁷⁷ The idea of covenant makes a culturally diverse and multi-racial people, group, or a nation,

¹⁷⁵ Jones, 49.
¹⁷⁷ Njoku, 138.
and the whole human race to lay claim to a common fatherhood and brotherhood, motherhood and sisterhood. Marie de Paul Neiers who worked among the people of the Jos Plateau of Nigeria agrees that the concept of covenant is deeply imbedded among the people of Africa, especially among the people of the Niger. She writes: "A covenant group is a ritually established blood-related entity whose being is by a common consent a common life. This way of being can be delineated in some talks about friendship in terms of contracted-blood-brotherhood, covenant meals and oath-taking, which epitomizes aspects of people's lives." Neiers observation is also applicable among the Igbo in their understanding and practice of covenant as a tie between individuals, and between individuals and the earth or with God, in which a closer union is established, placing in what The great African poet, Leopold Sedar Senghor calls a "symbiotic embrace." Senghor states that for the African, "covenant emphasizes ethics of solidarity, stability and communion among the living and the dead-a family spirit that envelops all." To a greater extent, the Igbo code of conduct *omenani/omenala* (which literally means what happens on the land) is directly or indirectly derived from *igba-ndu*, which is the Igbo word for covenant. The link between the Igbo code of conduct (*Omenala*) and covenant, or *Igba-ndu* is inseparable. It aptly replicates what Neiser has commented on when she said that: "Man and his environment interpenetrate each other by a kind of osmosis, in an intimate fusion, cosmic unit, personality stretches itself out beyond bodily venture and echoes all that surrounds it, vibrating intensely in its contact with the world and with other personalities. The being and its milieu form a totality of which the break would leave the being rent and mutilated." Neiers' statement is at the heart of the Igbo view of covenant as a way of being together. They believe that this unifying sacred bond called covenant happens on land, and that whatever affects one person affects the land, and what affects the land, affects all people. Hence, the Igbo sense of responsibility as expressed in covenant is equally owed to the land or earth, as much as it is owed to God and to the neighbor.

Emmanuel A. Ruch and Kenneth C. Anyanwu, co-researchers on the contemporary African philosophy, approach the idea of African covenant from the point

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178 Marie de Paul Neiers, *The People of the Jos Plateau of Nigeria; their Philosophy, Manner and Customs* (Frankfurt: Peter D. Lang, 1965), 117.
180 ibid, 73.
181 Neiers, 118.
of view of ethics. They state: "African ethics is clearly anthropocentric and socio-centric. It is in this society that man finds his full dimension, a genuine and valuable ethos of humanism, which has something to teach the world at large. The key consequence of African ethics and the value, which is sought above all else is solidarity, togetherness and family spirit."

In this description of the ethics of the African covenant, Ruch and Anyanwu mention the guarantor to the anthropocentric and socio-centric in African ethics as the god of justice, equity and fairness, which is the bedrock of all understanding of relationships. This is the bedrock of ethics and covenant for the Igbo Africans. Related to this, Njoku notes that there is always the transcendence behind the African ethics or life that weds together the social and the religious, the sacred and the profane. "Ethics is rooted in "our life"/communal life which has its guarantor as God."

Covenant as a socio-religious concept is rooted in the belief in the presence of a God of justice who watches everything we do, and the spirits and ancestors as his agents. Hence, Njoku strongly insists that the goal of a covenant is not a materialist-socialist humanism but a transcendental socialist humanism that is truly "a covenant morality, A covenant concept that is based in justice, fairness, reasonableness and peace.

Senghor corroborates this view when he writes: "Among Africans morality consists in not breaking the communion of the living, the dead and the spirits, in God, but in maintaining charity. And he who breaks this mystical union is rightly punished by exclusion." Charity is the binding force of covenant, believed to be given by the God sent down through the ancestors into an incomplete world to pass on to one another from generation to generation, through the covenant obligations where forgiveness and dialogue are engaged. To act rightly is to remain in communion, and evil behaviour attracts exclusion as Senghor indicates. However, over and above exclusion are rites of reconciliation and purification meant to heal broken covenants, redress wrongs, and re-admit the errant to heal communion in common and covenanted life. The possibility of purification as a means of healing broken covenants points to the religious dimension and to the divine presence in the course of the initiation. Charity obligation is weaved

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183 Njoku, 142.
184 Njoku, 144.
185 Senghor, 79.
throughout the words of the covenant as an obligation to guide community life and to sustain reconciliation. For instance, Anotole Byaruhanga Akiki reflecting through a sample of a covenant ritual among the Nyoro of Western Uganda says: "As we have become friends, let the stomach of whoever cheats his friend swell. When I visit you, at any time, you will not send me away. If I become poor you will not discard me. We will never do anything to harm any of our relatives and friends. May our ancestors be our witnesses. May God ratify our friendship, our brotherhood."\textsuperscript{187} In these words of covenant we notice the carving of a trusting, peaceful and harmonious environment within which to thrive and co-exist with one another. One enters into a special family relationship under the guarantorship of the land, the ancestors and God, not to harm the other and to share opportunity and cooperation. And the whole community stands in custodians of this sacred bond and guarding it very strongly.

Covenant treaties among the Igbo are phrased in words related to that of the Nyoro above. As Michael E. Okoronkwo discovers:

Covenant stands principally for harmonious human interaction between the disputants as friends, brothers and sisters, irrespective of the material nature of the conflicts. The actions and rights accepted within the covenant environment come from within, that is, they are the products of the participants, and not something imposed on them; they also transcend their individual wills because they have become candidature to a world that belongs to all but to none of them. Besides the guarantor of the world is a third, who, as guarantor, safeguards impartiality; hence it is said that covenant or ritual seal of reconciliation goes beyond human control, once the mystical forces are set in motion.\textsuperscript{188}

 Thus covenant relations highlight the Igbo spiritual awareness of the cosmos as a shared sacred space that has something that is bigger than the isolated claims of partners—something that belongs to all but to none in particular. Therefore, covenant relationships transcend the isolated claims or wills of covenant partners. The cosmos as a place to practice peace and reconciliation underlines the Igbo world view and philosophy for reconciliation and forgiveness. Covenant encapsulates the Igbo spirit. In examining the place of covenant in reconciliation and forgiveness in Igbo traditional life, and the


Christian understanding of God's reconciliation and forgiveness to humankind, is an occasion for a dialogue between faith and culture.

Covenant as experienced in the traditional Igbo culture is a covenant that can be further reflected on, as an experience of God when viewed in the light of the Christian revelation. Covenantal relationships in Christian theology pertains to the close bond of love and friendship between God and ourselves. According to Richard McBrien, a professor of theology at the University of Notre Dame and the author of several books and articles discussing Catholicism, covenant is the bond, contract, or "testament" between God and Israel in the Old Testament, established with Noah, Abraham, Moses, and David, and between God and the whole human community in the New Testament, established by the blood of Christ.189 God takes the initiative in this encounter, and the people of God feel the presence of God, and a relationship in their daily ordinary events of life. God bonds with his people Israel and looks for a response of a covenant love of fidelity. God reveals himself God makes himself vulnerable through a covenant of love. God identifies with his people revealing his love in events of their history and sharing in their pain and sufferings. The Sinai Covenant is a decisive movement in the history of revelation, but it can be appreciated only in the light of the entire history of salvation. O'Brien explains it thus:

Through the Covenant, Yahweh became head of the nation and delivered Israel from Egypt. In return, Yahweh exacted a pledge of fidelity to the Law (Exodus 20:1-17) or to the "ten commandments" (Exodus 34:28). The Law discloses the divine will. Obedience brings blessings; transgression brings malediction. The whole destiny and subsequent history of Israel was now tied inextricably to the will of God as manifested in the event by which Israel was liberated from the bondage of Egypt. The prophets never ceased to apply to the events of their own day the implications of the Sinai Covenant. Whatever legislation followed was considered a prolongation of the Decalogue, also called the Ten Commandment.190

In demonstrating God's presence in the covenantal relationship with Israel, the Bible employed the techniques that were characteristic of Israel's cultural environment: e.g., divination, dreams and omens. These represented the ontological, existential and cosmological concepts of the people of Israel. The different beings that they were, of course, purified of their polytheistic or magical connotations. The Igbo spiritual

190 McBrien, 203.
consciousness did not reach that stage, however God was behind the scene guiding them and leading them in their on-going search for truth, light and justice. The traditional Igbo people needed to learn how to react to situations in a natural way.

McBrien points out that for the chosen people of God, before a war or the conclusion of a treaty, Israel would "consult" God through its seers and especially its priests (1 Samuel 14:36; 22:15). Israel acknowledged that God could be revealed in dreams (Genesis 20:3; 28:12-15; 37:5-10; 1 Kings 3:5-14). Joseph is said to be the model for interpretation of dreams and excelled in opening that gateway to communing with God. Gradually, Israel began to distinguish between dreams by which God truly communicated with the prophets and those of their professional seers, persons such as Jeremiah and Isaiah (Jeremiah 23:25-32; Isaiah 28:7-13). The Igbo, in acting within the exigencies of its environment and in dealing with one another- especially in covenantal relationships-believe that God is the guarantor. They needed the help of the unseen God who alone can guarantee existential trust and spiritual relationships.

The Igbo on their own, like any human being or any group of human beings, cannot reach God. God has to reveal God-self to humanity out of freedom and pure gratuity. But the innate moral voice or natural law or principle of order inside the humans, which is what the Igbo expressed in their understanding of covenant, is an invitation but cannot on its own bring them to God. This, in fact, resonates with the Kantian Critique of Pure Reason when Kant posits that since God operates in the moral order, it is there that God is to be apprehended, if at all. Insofar as we all seek the highest good, we must be able to presuppose that the quest is possible in the first place. In Kant's own words:

 Granted that the pure moral law inexorably binds every man as a command (not as a rule of prudence), the righteous man may say: I will that there be a God, that my existence in this world be also an existence in a pure world of the understanding outside the system of natural connections, and finally that my duration be endless.

For the traditional Igbo, before the advent of Christianity, when they embraced the light of God's self revelation to humankind in Christ, the Kantian reasoning that since

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our idea of the highest good in the world leads to the postulation of a higher, moral, most holy, and omnipotent Being which alone can unite our quest for happiness with our obedience to duty, morality thus leading to religion. The Igbo world view is religious. The principle guiding the moral life of the Igbo is their fear of God, respect for life and the spirit of enterprise to succeed in life and to be like others. For this reason, harmony and peaceful co-existence are seen as prerequisites for achieving one's life goal and becoming the person one can possibly be. This is the essence and meaning of reconciliation and forgiveness guiding the Igbo religious and cultural understanding.

General Reflection

The Igbo great grand ancestors "Eri" in Nri Myth knew God -"Chukwu," one and the same "Chukwu" who has offered the last and final revelation. In the Christian religion, the final revelation of God in Jesus Christ, is the foundation and everlasting forgiveness for humanity. The very veil which had hitherto covered people is destroyed and taken away by Jesus who is our freedom (2 Cor. 3: 16-18). The efforts of the Igbo with respect to reconciliation and forgiveness can be seen to be validated in the proclamation of the gospel to them, and letting them encounter God whom in a dim way they have been experiencing in the acts of goodness, kindness, compassion and love for one another. In the Acts of the Apostles, St. Paul makes it abundantly clear to the people of Lystra (Acts 14:16-17) that God had never left himself without a witness, and had also in time past let all nations go their own way and then later made a covenant with them in the words of Samuel the prophet (1Samuel 12:21) and through the Prophets to turn people back to himself from their useless idols that cannot rescue them. The true God is the one who was being sought after through all those means.

Theology is a constant reflection on faith and God's initiative, mercy and grace, in bringing light and hope into the darkness of human life. The Church as the living Body of Christ celebrates this reality every day. Theology viewing forgiveness through the lens of Scriptures builds on the divine initiative, and through the living experience of the Church as a forgiving community, helps us to continue to see the evidence of God in relationship in human community. This is the meaning of the celebration of the sacrament of reconciliation evident in the tradition of the Catholic Church, and as well as observed in other Christian communities. This is what is known as a living relationship between a
caring and forgiving God and a searching people. God in Christ has reconciled the whole universe to himself, and is inviting all human beings to become engaged in this ongoing work of reconciliation (2 Cor. 5: 17-20). This is the central message of the Scriptures and alive in the Church's tradition being guided by the Holy Spirit. The need for forgiveness is not only for Christian people; it is also the need of all people. The experience of Igbo people in their traditional culture is a case in point. And one cannot deny the light of God's mercy that was shining in the Igbo religious experience especially with regard to forgiveness. Their experience is also the fruit of God's forgiveness and grace playing out among people of all races, languages and tribes. God has always been with God's people in every time and space until God’s eternal plan came to the full in the revelation in Christ at God's appointed time.

The Judeo-Christian religion is not the only religion known in recorded history to have traces of the human experience of reconciliation and forgiveness as a very important aspect of the human experience. Various cultures and religions are known to have formulated varied expressions of forgiveness as it applied to their lived experience as is the case of the Igbo. Forgiveness as a spiritual experience and an experience of goodness is, no doubt, a trace of God's presence among all people. In his book, *The Experience Called Spirit*, John Shea notes a basic human reality: "we all desire to be loved. Even in its earliest and crudest mode of expression and bonding, the need for love in humans has been such a powerful and undeniable force in human history."193 Forgiveness is an element of love even in its imperfect form. Karl Rahner has a similar insight regarding these natural impulses of love in human beings, he says that "this yearning and stretching is the very condition of all life which is human, even in the most humdrum of settings, for men and women are always and already on the way to God whether it is known expressly or willed intentionally."194

Forgiveness as an impulse of God's Spirit has been reverberating in human relationships in fragmentary ways leading up to its full manifestations in Christ, and Igbo experience no doubt constitutes part of that fragmentation. Rahner has an important insight when he says that "this desire for loving mercy opens one up to the ultimate cause of desire, God, who is also the only one who can fulfill this desire, namely, Love, which

is behind all human operative principles." God's nature is love, and God is revealed as love. Relational patterns within primordial cultural groups are associated with an understanding that God cannot be devoid of love, an evidence of the intrinsic Presence and power of the love of God among all people.

The Igbo traditional religious experience is not without traces of the presence of love and forgiveness as found in the creation mythology of the Igbo people, permeating ethical life among the Igbo. A reflection of this kind brings us into their lived experience and predispositions to accept a God who has made an inroad into human history. The Igbo traditional religious way of understanding reconciliation and forgiveness reveals the ceaseless longing in humans for bonding, and yearning to live in harmony with one another in community. For the Igbo people, the ancestors and the spirit world resonate with what Chris Aridas calls the "Theology of an Exchange paradigm covenant," at the centre of the Judeo-Christian understanding of God's revelation of forgiveness to humanity through Jesus Christ, and to an understanding of this yearning in any given group of people located in any given place and time.

Chris Aridas has situated a Theology of an Exchange Paradigm within the deepest human longing. He notes that "God's incomprehensible presence, his uncalled-for self-surrender within the individual human person and humanity as a whole, the fact of the Spirit breathed into us (cf. Gn 2:7b) so that life might emerge; the fact of God's very own image and likeness unfolding within, reaching out, stretching toward the eternal embrace of Love, is a Trinitarian God's grounding and surrounding all." Even before the fullness of the revelation of God in Christ Jesus, God was already at work in an incredible mysterious relational mechanism with his people, loving and leading them even through their chaos and darkness, within their deep yearnings and searching for meaning, in their dreams, fears, hopes and aspirations. God is always a God with and within his people as the Transcendent Other-Otto's "Mysterium Tremendum," In the light of the mystery of God, one might consider that God inspired an understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation within the Igbo traditional religion and philosophy. Otto

195 ibid., 20
198 ibid, 49.
Rudolf says that the "Holy inspires the emotion of fear; man feels his creaturehood or self-depreciation, his impotence and general nothingness as against the over-powering might of God's majesty, "he Wholly Other" attracts."\(^{199}\) This is not without traces in the experience of the Igbo. The awesome attraction of God inspires compassion and forgiveness often seen in humankind amidst hostility and quest for revenge. Igbo history shows that they are God fearing people.

Edward Schilllebeeckx contributes to this understanding says:

Salvation from God comes about first of all in the worldly reality of history, and not primarily in the consciousness of believers who are aware of it. The cognitive sense of this is, of course, itself a separate gift, the significance of which we may not underestimate. But where good is furthered and evil is challenged in the human interest, then through this historical practice the being of God-God as salvation for men and women, the ground for universal hope is also established and men and women also appropriate God's salvation-in and through acts of love.\(^{200}\)

Schillebeeckx suggests that human history, or the social life of human beings, is the place where the cause of salvation or disaster is decided. He insists that religions and cultures are the anamnesis, i.e., the living recollection among us, of this universal, "tacit" but effective will to salvation and the absolute saving presence of God in our world history.\(^{201}\) His words indicate that God has not been absence in human history before humanity comes to the conscious knowledge and recollection of who God is, and God’s message and plan for us, becoming aware of God’s will for us. Salvation, no doubt, is a manifestation in progression of God's loving relationship with human beings through reconciliation and forgiveness that has its completion in Jesus Christ who is the fullness of the revelation of a God, who is God with and among us. Salvation at the heart of humanity's growth and development leads to the ultimate realization of the human drives is the root for forgiveness and reconciliation that the Igbo have manifested in their ontological search for meaning and quest for the Ultimate Holy Other, their great God, Chi. Another realization that emerges clearly through examining the similarities and differences between the Igbo traditional practice of forgiveness and the Judeo-Christian

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201 ibid, 13.
understanding of reconciliation and forgiveness is that the collectivistic culture of the Igbo (as exemplified in the traditional Igbo concept of community) significantly shapes their approach to forgiveness and reconciliation in contrast to the basically individualistic understanding of forgiveness and reconciliation within the Christian traditions. In Christianity, the Church as a body is called to repentance and forgiveness, but each individual needs to respond and avail oneself of the grace of God being offered out of his or her free will. There is a basic difference in the underlying approach.

Among the Igbo, the rituals involved in the experience of forgiveness and reconciliation are totally community based, while in Christianity forgiveness and reconciliation are a function primarily of one’s relationship with God, and then extended to the restoration of one’s relationship with the Church. As stated in the Dogmatic Constitution of the Church, *Lumen Gentium*: "Those who approach the sacrament of penance obtain pardon from God's mercy for the offense committed against him, and are, at the same time, reconciled with the Church which they have wounded by their sins and which by charity, by example, and by prayer labors for their conversion." In the Sacrament of Reconciliation the penitent asks forgiveness from the community of the Church through the bishops who are the successors of the apostles whom Christ has entrusted the ministry of reconciliation, and through the priests who are their collaborators, who by virtue of the sacrament of the Holy Orders, have the power to forgive all sins in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost." Peter J. Fink recalls the epicletic nature of the Church when he says: "The proclamation of absolution and reconciliation requires the ministry of one in *persona Christi*, that is, the ordained president of the assembly for its proclamation on behalf of God's community." To this, the Church community calls for repentance and reform within one’s life, but ultimately does not sit in judgment of the individuals. But, it is an invitation to choose between the good and the evil.

The underlying theme of covenant occurs in both collectivistic and individualistic religious settings, with covenant bonding among the Igbo people firmly grounded in communal relationships, while in Christianity covenant is first of all grounded in one’s relationship with God and then again extended to the maintenance and restoration of

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relationships within one’s life situations and in community-so much so that God saves us in community-the People of God. Forgiveness and reconciliation among the Igbo people is all encompassing including one’s relationship with the land, with the spirit world of the ancestors, and with the members of the entire community within which one lives. On the other hand, forgiveness and reconciliation in Christianity involves directly one’s relationship with God and community-one’s immediate, and global community and all of creation. For the Igbo, appropriate actions undertaken by the community and within the community leads to the restoration of right relationships. Within these efforts by the traditional Igbo community and that of the individuals to maintain attachment with the community for rights and privileges, one might say is the locus within which the grace of God is operative among the Igbo people. In Christianity, while repentance leading to conversion are initiated by human persons, the actualization of forgiveness and reconciliation occurs through the unmerited gift of the grace of God Who is Christ, the reconciler between God and human. While in some ways forgiveness and reconciliation follow similar pathways, a significant difference between the Igbo people and Christian tradition with respect to the practice of forgiveness and reconciliation is grounded in the distinction between a Christian Religion revealed by God in an ultimate form through Jesus Christ, when others among God’s people were still searching for God and groping in the darkness. Traditional Igbo religion can then become raw materials for proclamation and evangelization among the Igbo people. It stands firmly on the prophetic statement of Blessed John Paul II that “A Gospel which has not permeated a culture is a Gospel not fully proclaimed.”

Bibliography


ARTICLES


