THE WORD IS AMONG US: AN ATTEMPT TO ARTICULATE THE (CONTEXTUALIZED-CONSTRUCTIVE) THEOLOGY OF NCHEKWUBE LAWRENCE NWANKWO

Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi
Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies,
Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium
E-mail: anthony.atansi@kuleuven.be

Abstract
How can we foster a sustained systematic-theological practice that will respond to the particular needs and questions of the Nigerian (Igbo) Christian? How do we articulate the procedure, the content, and the goal of such undertaking as a unique way of theologizing within and for the Nigerian (Igbo) context? This article attempts a response to these questions through a critical-empathetic examination of the theological style and selected writings of a Nigerian theologian, Nchekwube Lawrence Nwankwo. It presents along the lines of four coordinates of context, method, framework, and content, Nwankwo’s theological vision and project. With this, the article tries to demonstrate the paradigmatic value of Nwankwo’s theological commitment, namely, his contextualized-constructive theology, reflecting on its significance for theological education and activity – as a life-giving and transforming enterprise – in Nigeria and elsewhere.

Keywords – Christianity, theology, contextualized, constructive, Nigeria (Igbo), Nwankwo

Introduction: The Issue and the Problem to be Addressed
As I draw near to the end of “my theological pilgrimage in Leuven,” I wrestle with a concern: how I will do theology upon my return to Nigeria, my mother country. Or to put it another way, what kind of theology will nourish (my) people, will be relevant and engaging to their concrete experiences and questions at the interstices of faith and life in Nigeria? What kind of theology will truly respond to their struggles and hopes for abundant life? These questions are as personal as they are academic. That is why, within the field of African Christian theology, there has been much debate about the proper nature and task

1 Chukwuemeka Anthony Atansi is a doctoral student of Theology in the Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, Catholic University of Leuven, Belgium.

of theological reflection in an ever-challenging socio-cultural, political and economic situation, and in the light of the lived experiences and realities of many Africans, Christians and non-Christians alike.

Too often, wittingly or unwittingly, the approach, paradigm, sources, framework and concepts, and arguably, the outcome of theological reflections in Africa have remained Eurocentric. In the introduction to a very recent work, *Wealth, Health, and Hope in African Christian Religion: The Search for Abundant Life*, Nigerian theologian Stan Chu Ilo poignantly captures this problematic in African Christian theology. Ilo observes that:

> African Christian religion (and theology) continues to be preoccupied with questions, agenda, and themes developed in the West. In many instances, African scholars, especially in theological studies attempt rather unsuccessfully to interpret African Christian faith and practices through Western conceptual frameworks and theological methods. The images of African Christian religion in the past and present contexts are still predominantly the stories told by non-Africans and often represent a very limited interpretation, understanding and judgment of the faith and culture in the beautiful continent.³

Because of this theological importation, marginal or relatively little attention is paid to the context, realities, and concrete conditions of people and their communities. These are supposed to be the source from which arises the most compelling theological concerns and questions, on the one hand, and the useful resources for responding to them, on the other hand. Africans study the theological thoughts and contributions of theologians from other continents but not theirs. No concerted or formalized effort is made to mine the insights of predecessors, to learn and build on the foundations they have laid. I will say more about this near the end of this article. But let me mention that this is without prejudice to the theological receptivity and solidarity that are essential in our interconnected and globalized societies or, what still Ilo refers to as “an era of World Christianity.”⁴ This is an era in which the Christian faith has become expressed in so many unique and diverse forms, which one needs also to be aware of and open to. However, there is an urgent need for a greater attentiveness to the theological reflections offered through an honest encounter of and engagement with the particular human, historical reality, and “socio-cultural

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trajectories” (to borrow a phrase from Lawrence Nwankwo) of a people and of the (believing) community within and for which a theologian lives and labours.\(^5\)

This idea touches on the questions I formulated at the beginning of this essay, of how theology is to be done in one’s own particular context. Further expressed, how can we foster a sustained systematic-theological practice that will be more relevant to and engaging within the concrete situation of the Nigerian (Igbo) Christian? How do we articulate the meaning, task, method, sources, content, and goal of such theological enterprise, as a unique way of theologizing in and for the Nigerian (Igbo) context? This article tries to respond to these questions through a critical-empathetic examination of the theological style and selected writings of a contemporary Nigerian theologian, Nchekwube Lawrence Nwankwo. It draws on insights from Nwankwo’s theological project, which is perhaps best described as a contextualized-constructive theology.\(^6\) I argue that his way and the fruits of his theologizing offer a paradigmatic value for conducting theological activity and education – as a life-giving and transforming venture – in Nigeria and elsewhere.

I will proceed thus: First, I will briefly sketch the social and intellectual background of Nchekwube Nwankwo. Within the context of that prefatory note, I will situate Nwankwo’s theological practice as a uniquely incarnational enterprise. Afterwards, I will provide a clarification of two key concepts, ‘contextualized’ and ‘constructive’, which I consider as defining categories in the development, structure, and content of Nwankwo’s theology. Second, I will discuss four schemas for understanding Nwankwo’s contextualized-constructive theology. I will do this along the lines of four coordinates under the headings of context, method, framework, and content. Third and finally, I will reflect on the lessons and significance of his theological vocation for the work – the meaning, method, and sources – of theology in Nigeria. The conclusion of the article will

\(^5\) See Lawrence Nwankwo, “Harvesting and Processing the Implicit Theologies in Popular Religiosity: The Challenge of Theological Reflection in Africa,” (Seminar Presentation to Doctoral Students, Faculty of Theology and Religious Studies, KU Leuven, 24 October, 2018), 4. In his presentation, Nwankwo argues that these socio-cultural trajectories or what he specifically identifies as “popular Christianity or religiosity,” should be taken seriously and as the starting point of theological reflection in Africa and elsewhere. He offers three reasons for that. First, “it ensures the contextuality of one’s theology.” Second, it harnesses the sources for mobilizing the people on the basis of their faith to become more committed to the transformation of their societies. Third, it fosters a kind of “inculturation from below,” and that allows for a creative interaction between the local and the global. See also Robert Schreiter who earlier had traced the lines of the interaction between the local and the global in his The New Catholicity: Theology Between the Global and the Local (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 1997).

\(^6\) Nwankwo does not use the term “contextualized-constructive theology.” It is I who use it to refer specifically to what I consider as the approach, outcome, and goal of Nwankwo’s theological engagement and works.
try to share some personal remarks in *laudatio* of Nwankwo’s personage and his theological (and pastoral) imagination in the twenty-five years of his priestly life and ministry.

As the discussion proceeds, parallels with other theological voices will be adduced in order to illuminate and clarify the subject matter – the contextualized-constructive theology of Nwankwo – under consideration. And this will be done in the light of *a* reality, the incarnate Word, who has been the subject and dynamism of Nwankwo’s theological vision and project, and whom Nwankwo embodies and enacts in keeping with his name, Nchekwube – hope. How to hear this eternal, living, and active Word, and to rekindle hope in Him for the work of human promotion in Nigeria (a nation that has become a conspiracy against hope), is both the inspiration of Nwankwo’s contextualized-constructive theology, and the challenge it poses to every follower of Christ, and those who recognize and ponder on the Word among us.

The Social and Intellectual Setting of Nwankwo’s Contextualized-Constructive Theology

Introducing a theologian can be done in a number of ways. This depends not only on the interest one may have in the theologian in question, but also on the interest of what concerns the theologian and the wider ecclesial and social setting of the theologian. A researcher might be simply interested in the theological development, the sources, the method and approach, the conceptual framework, the themes, the ideas or insights of the theologian. Another might be keen to explore the historical, social, and political context, the influences and impact of the theologian’s work. More to that, one might be interested in getting to know the personality of the theologian; to know some of the experiences and encounters that might have shaped and still shapes his or her theological engagement.

These points of reference or rather interests of the researcher in an attempt to introduce a theologian are important for the way one reads and tries to (re)present a theologian’s work. To be sure, they are important for my engagement with Nchekwube Nwankwo in this writing. For the limited purpose of this essay, in what follows, I will briefly sketch the life of Nwankwo and in view of tracing something of the influence on his theological development.

*a. An Overview of His Life and Works*

Nchekwube Lawrence Nwankwo was born on Wednesday June 26, 1968, during the civil war in Nigeria. He was raised by his hardworking parents and from his early years helped the mother in her retail trade before and after school. Later on, he was admitted to the junior secondary school (seminary) at the age of 12. It was however while studying philosophy at the Seat of Wisdom
Seminary, Owerri, Nigeria, that he was existentially confronted with the question of the rationality of the Christian faith vis-à-vis science. This led to his exploration of the rationality of science from the perspective of scientific change, that is, change in the theories of science. The thesis is titled “Scientific Change: A Critical Reflection on Changes in Scientific Theories.” In his study of theology, he was interested in African spirituality, and would write his bachelor’s thesis entitled “African Spirituality: Towards a Critical Analysis of African Spirituality.”

With the successful completion of his seminary training, Nwankwo was ordained a priest on August 20, 1994, for the Catholic Diocese of Awka in Nigeria. Right after his ordination for the sacred ministry, Nwankwo was appointed a youth chaplain at St Joseph the Worker Chaplaincy, Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. He was also to serve as a spiritual director at the diocesan Retreat Centre as well as one of the facilitators at the communication’s department of the diocese. While discharging these duties, he honed his skill of empathetic listening which was vital for his practice of spiritual direction and his engagement in the youth apostolate. He has carried over this skill into his mode of interaction with people and engagement of intellectual traditions. He is empathetic to other opinions, genuinely seeking to bring out their strengths while engaging them dialogically to gain new insights. We will say more about this later in the essay under the section on Nwankwo’s method of theologizing that places high premium on what we would safely refer to as “a hermeneutic of encounter.”

Nwankwo was later sent to the Catholic University of Louvain (KU Leuven), Belgium, in 1996, for post-graduate studies in systematic theology and the study of religions. The years in Leuven proved the most decisive in his intellectual life. Here, he came face to face with the historicity of knowledge, plurality of worldviews, the demand of contextuality, a multidisciplinary approach to issues, and an openness to new questions and experiences. His interest in change and in African Christianity moved him to explore in his Master’s thesis, historicity and the deposit of faith from the perspective of Karl Rahner’s theology of doctrinal development. And for his doctoral dissertation, he tried to open up the Pentecostal emphasis on the power of the Holy Spirit to

issues of justice and social development in what he calls “a theology of empowerment.”

Back in Nigeria after the years in Leuven, Nwankwo was engaged in administrative work as the Secretary and theological adviser to the Diocesan Bishop for eleven years while also teaching part time in the seminary. In 2015, Nwankwo became the parish priest of St Paul’s Parish Ugwuoba, a rural community. Here, the contact and encounter with the people at the grassroots remain a source of inspiration for his theological reflection, while the community provides for him a space for putting into practice the fruits of his theological commitment to social change. In the parish, he founded a school, Adrian & Gloria Kramer Model School, Ugwuoba, which is the operationalization of a vision for the provision of quality and contextually sensitive primary education to the poor through the mobilization and harnessing of community resources.

Nwankwo is also a lecturer in the Department of Religion and Human Relations of the Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. He has over 40 published articles, book chapters, and monographs dealing mostly on seemingly ordinary and everyday events, modes of understanding and practices in Nigeria. These are taken up rigorously, and critically examined in the light of the undergirding theological scheme in order to harvest insights as regards the strengths and weakness of the taken-for-granted ways of understanding of everyday life and practices. His reflections always aim at bringing about a shift in understanding and the institution of practices that are more in accord with human flourishing and social transformation. Nwankwo’s teaching and research focuses on African Christianity, human promotion, pentecostalism, theological methodology, gender and migration issues. I shall return to some of these themes in our discussion of Nwankwo’s contextualized-constructive theology.

b. Situating Nwankwo’s Theology as a Uniquely Incarnational Initiative

As varied as the research interests of Nwankwo might seem, reading between the lines of his writings and upon closer reflection on his thoughts, one may see that there is a viable point of reference for making a unified sense of his theological reflections and output. This point of reference derives from Nwankwo’s contemplation of the event of incarnation – that the eternal Word of God took flesh in Jesus Christ and entered into our world. That God became the Word made flesh in and for the life of the world. There is more to this fundamental confession which is the inherent dynamic of Nwankwo’s

theological engagement. It is the belief that the event of the incarnation is a unique, a universal, and very importantly, an ongoing one. Unique in the sense that the eternal Word took flesh in a particular time and in a particular space in history. Universal in the sense that the unique event of his taking flesh determined the whole of history. Very importantly too, the determination of history by the event of incarnation is ongoing – that he is still taking on flesh, dwelling and acting among us in our world of space and time today.

Our reflection on the three dimensions of the event of the incarnation, lead of their own accord, to the words of John the Evangelist: “In the beginning was the Word, the Word was with God, and the Word has been with us...for all that came to be and that has ever been had life in the Word, the Word was with us...in the world that had its being through him, and the Word is still with us” (cf. John 1:1-3, 10, 14). This is truly so because in the incarnation, it is revealed that God wishes to express and manifest God-self in a human, historical life. Therefore, if God’s self-revelation in the Word made flesh is to be appropriated and to be of significance, the unique event by which he does so ought to be (re)experienced in every time and space. Indeed, it is right to say that because the Word of God is and should be determinative of human words. It cannot be separated from the words of men and women. It is the Word that draws out words from us. The Word always has been given and it is continually given. This truth does not invalidate the doctrinal principle of incarnation as a complete event. It commits us to the belief that the incarnate Word, Jesus Christ risen from the dead is still fully alive and so fully human. “And being fully human, as well as fully divine, (he) must still in some sense have ‘local’ existence and thus be in continuity with our own space-time reality today.”

A Nigerian theologian Agbonkhianmeghe Orobator has expressed this perception splendidly:

[T]he Word is not a fixed, static reality; the Word embodies a divine dynamism that pulsates in Creation as God, life, light and flesh. The Word means something decisive for those who encounter it. The Word is extremely adaptable or – as Lamin Sanneh would argue – essentially

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10 Unless clearly evident, otherwise, all quotations from the Scriptures in this project are taken from the New Revised Standard Version (New York: Oxford University Press, 1989). Hereafter, NRSV.


12 Davies, “The Interrupted Body,” 39. Along the same line, Davies underscores the fact that, “the alternative to this possibility is either that the incarnation has ceased (Christ is no longer properly alive, or properly human) or that the humanity of Christ has been absorbed into his divinity: a possibility which the early church specifically rejected,” and which does not do justice to the experience of our Christian faith and existence.
“translatable”. Therefore, nothing of the African experience is strange to the Word.\textsuperscript{13}

The exploration of the theological intelligibility and existential significance of this claim to the unique, universal, and continuing reality of incarnation is at the heart of Nwankwo’s theology. Hence, he understands that the exciting work of a theologian is, together with all God’s children, to make profounder sense – that is, to give clear, meaningful, critical, and theological expression to ourselves and to others – of the confession that the eternal Word of God took on flesh for us, and still takes flesh, and lives, and acts among us today, in union with us.

From this point of view of the basic form of the Christian confession of Jesus Christ as the logos of the world and of human existence, what Nwankwo does in his theological engagement is to discern and work out the ways in which the incarnate Lord has been and is always in solidarity with our human experience. Thus, in his writings, he seeks to tell of a Word that was spoken, that spoke, and still speaks in the often complex human situation and interaction. As this is the inner dynamic of Nwankwo’s writings, one would expect, as it is obvious, that in seeking to hear and give voice to the Word, he pays empathetic attention to the context in which the Word spoke, speaks, is spoken, and is being listened to by his (Nwankwo) people.

This theological transaction of speaking and listening to the Word gives rise to dialogue, and so, has a constructive dimension. This dimension derives from the fact that in dialogue there is an encounter that makes mutual understanding of the Word possible. And in the case of theological activity in Africa, the speaking and listening act takes the form of “a constructive engagement between the constitutive elements of Christian revelation and African experience.”\textsuperscript{14} Accordingly, Nwankwo in his theological engagement tries then to provide an imaginative construction of the meaning of the Word in his context. With these considerations about the reality of incarnation and its implications for the conduct of theology, we can fill out the idea that context and construct are the defining elements of Nwankwo’s theology and of every theology in the proper sense of the word. Let us now briefly elucidate the two elements.


\textsuperscript{14} Orobator, “The Sky is Wide Enough,” 42.
c. Some Initial Clarifications: Context(ualized) and Construct(ive)

The closely related categories of context and construct or contextualization and construction have since been engrained in Christian theological thinking. But it was the American theologians, Stephen Bevans and Robert Schreiter, who in their works, Models of Contextual Theology and Constructing Local Theologies, respectively, provided a fresh and sustained systematic attention to these notions.\(^{15}\)

In his attempt to explain the concept of context, Stephen Bevans states early in his book that “there is no such thing as ‘theology’; there is only contextual theology.”\(^{16}\) For Bevans, “the contextualization of theology – the attempt to understand Christian faith in terms of a particular context – is really a theological imperative.”\(^{17}\) He makes the point that context is the third *locus theologicus* in addition to scripture and tradition. Context shapes the development of and mediates the meaning in scripture and tradition. In this sense, context is not so much a question of *ubi* but of *quid*, which according to Bevans, is the “present human experience” or “the experience of everyday world and living,” as Nwankwo puts it.\(^{18}\) Even though we can still speak of context in terms of an individual’s or community’s social location.

Bevans’ ideas about the notion of context make so much sense if one is to go back to the root meaning of the term. It has its roots in *contextus*, which means ‘weaving together’. It is that which comes before and after a word, phrase, or statement, helping to fix its meaning as proximately as possible. In this view, Bevans describes contextualization as the theological process of taking seriously, of interacting, of dialoguing with, and of keeping in balance, “human experience, popular religiosity, social location, culture, and cultural change.”\(^{19}\) Nwankwo considers this to be a very challenging task that “compels sensitivity” to the different layers in these sources, on the one hand, and that “demands a synthesis” of their rich sources, on the other hand.\(^{20}\) The synthesis, for Nwankwo, consists in re-excavating the rich treasures of Christian tradition. That is why in drawing on the sources of contextualization, he does not fail to engage responsibly and critically with the primary sources of Christianity and


\(^{16}\) Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3.

\(^{17}\) Bevans, *Models of Contextual Theology*, 3.


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theology. In fact, he fosters an ongoing learning from the tradition and moves towards their re-appropriation and integration into the present, human experience of his people. Also, how these primary sources of faith and theology spill over into the popular culture, and are taken up in the people’s “music, dances and other artistic productions.” So that in drawing upon these sources as they embody the insights into what makes the community tick, he tries “to help make sense of the flow of images (and the truth they point to), map them onto a bigger canvass, and with the aim of mobilizing life-giving resources or minimizing the distorting influence in them.”

What could be more constructive than this art or process of contextualization? Thus, we speak of Nwankwo’s theology as contextualized-constructive theology. Contextualized because “as a rational discipline and activity, theology does not defy the laws of gravity to float above the human predicament;” and constructive, because the way and “outcome of this insertion in human experience and context is neither predetermined nor amenable to dogmatic and doctrinal manipulation.”

With this effort to clarify the meaning of context and construct and in light of all the things we have touched upon in doing that, is it possible to define more exactly just what is contextualized-constructive theology? We can only attempt a provisional description. Contextualized-constructive theology, particularly in the way Nwankwo does it, is a theological (re)orientation that offers an empathetic and critical systematic reflection from and on the experiences of the People of God in light of faith in the eternal Word made flesh. To speak of contextualized-constructive theology as a theological reorientation is to position it within the existing theological tradition, and to suggest that it is not a new theological paradigm. Oliver Davies’ expression when speaking about transformation theology could be employed here to explain what I mean by reorientation. “A reorientation is like a new rationality in music; it asks us to listen differently.”

Nwankwo’s way of listening is at once critical and empathetic. It is the art of listening in the often beautiful and admirable way that a mother does to

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her child. Listening not just with the intellect, but with the kardia (heart), with the gut, and in a way that one is moved (to act) in response to what one has heard. The way mothers listen with seriousness and leniency, with joy at and admiration for the words of their children.25 Hence, a contextualized-constructive theology derives from the capacity to pay attention to one’s own milieu, to go inward so as to discern how the eternal Word has been speaking and continues to speak in the embodied experience of a people in a particular space and time. The result of contextualized-constructive theology is not the production of ‘new’ ideas or system of ideas. It is rather the articulation and expression of the mysteries and truth of the faith as the fruit of a rational and contemplative engagement with the Word of God and the words of men and women. The structure and content of Nwankwo’s own engagement in this reflective and prayerful practice is what we shall attempt to present under four coordinates in the succeeding section.

Four Coordinates of Nwankwo’s Contextualized-Constructive Theology

I have chosen four schemas to guide my brief study of Nwankwo’s contextualized-constructive theology (hereafter CCT). They are context, method, framework, and content. I will discuss each of these coordinates in relation to some of his writings, and drawing on insights from them.

a. Context: A Human Reality to be Immersed in

In Nwankwo’s CCT, I see that context encompasses the past, the present, and the imaginable future human reality. His theology is shaped by what has gone before, what takes place in the hic et nunc, in the midst of the events of everyday living, and the conceivable future that is opened up by the past and present realities. Hence, Nwankwo tries to hold the three moments in balance in the way he returns creatively to the past historical experiences of the (Igbo) people, the very roots of their social, cultural and religious traditions,26 in order to make deeper sense of their present situations,27 and in view of conceiving and

25 I am presently working on an intervention entitled “What I Learnt from my Mother about the Deepest Nature of Theology and the Urgent Task of a Theologian in a Suffering World,” for a forthcoming multidisciplinary expert seminar related to the theme of the Theology of Motherhood, co-organized by the KU Leuven Centre for Women Studies, 22-23 October, 2019.


charting the path for a more liveable future.\textsuperscript{28} This back, forth and forward movement in Nwankwo’s CCT comes across as the attempt to bridge the often existing gaps in the flow of most theological discourses in Nigeria. It is also Nwankwo’s praiseworthy effort to offer an example of a more integrated theological trajectory and corpus that will overcome the impasse of compartmentalization in theological and even pastoral imagination in Igboland.

Another very significant aspect of the talk about context in Nwankwo’s CCT is the issue of reality. We had noted earlier in our description of context that it is not simply a location. Context is a concrete human reality, which is not just to be acquainted with, but to be fully immersed in. The human reality or realities of the Igbo man and woman are the major concern in Nwankwo’s theological exploration. So, he would not privilege a theology that is overly notional, an exercise in conceptual or idealistic abstractions. This does not mean that Nwankwo’s CCT undermines the conceptualization or epistemological clarification of the “real” issues of faith and life within his community. Rather, he lets his theological reflection be directed by and also be a response to the existential realities (‘raw revelation’), the concretissima of everyday living and practices (of faith) in Nigeria.\textsuperscript{29} He lets the real experiences of real people inform his theological reflection and its outcome. And to allow his theological transmission of the outcome to be directed back to those real issues of the people’s struggle for a more just and humane society, and which they confront in their interaction with the Word of God.\textsuperscript{30} Thus, Nwankwo sees his theological commitment as a way of becoming aware of, taking responsibility for, and being committed to the realities of people.\textsuperscript{31} Because Nwankwo’s CCT is about real


\textsuperscript{31} I am indebted to the Latin American theologian, Ignacio Ellacuría, for this idea. In his reflections on the method of (liberation) theology, Ellacuría talks about the process of “facing up to real things as real.” This process has a threefold dimension: (1) “becoming aware of reality,” (2) “an ethical demand to take responsibility for reality,” and (3) “a praxis-related
experiences and real knowledge, it undoubtedly follows that it has to do with a confrontation of the theologian as a human person with other human persons who are the experiencers of reality. What this means then is that, it is within the space of encounter that Nwankwo’s theological interpretation and (re)presentation of human reality happens. This leads me to the method of Nwankwo’s CCT, which I identify as a hermeneutic of encounter.

b. Method: A Hermeneutic of Encounter

Method in Nwankwo’s CCT is not just about procedure but about encounter. The history of Christian faith in Nwankwo’s CCT is traced primarily to an encounter – a living encounter and relationship with a person (Jesus of Nazareth), the encounter of a people with Jesus in his life, death and resurrection.32 This encounter takes the form of an empathetic presence and attentiveness translated in his capacity to listen to the people in their “joys and hopes, sorrows and anxieties” (Gaudium et spes, no. 1).33 Hence, his way of doing theology is profoundly dialogical and relational.

The dialogical and relational nature of Nwankwo’s hermeneutical encounter comes very close to what Pope Francis underlines as a “hermeneutical integration.”34 According to Pope Francis, it is “a dialogical way of proceeding…capable of integrating the living criterion of Jesus’ Paschal Mystery with that of analogy, which discovers connections, signs, and theological references in reality, in creation, and in history.”35 There is something original and of a unique style about Nwankwo’s own hermeneutical integration. In his pursuit of a dialogical and relational theology, Nwankwo tries...
to develop a hermeneutical process that remains open and expansive for the integration to actually occur. A very good example of the process could be seen in his 2003 essay, “The Church as God’s Family: Prospects and Challenges of the Family Model for Christian-Muslim Relationship in Nigeria.”36 In the work, Nwankwo searches through the sources of African (Igbo) socio-cultural tradition for a usable insight that resonates with the dialogue (Muslim) partner, and that could lay claim, eventually, to both in seeking to respond to the pressing issue of interreligious relation. He argues that:

A reflection on the Igbo word for family offers an insight into the relational scheme within which the family is embedded…in South-eastern Nigeria. For the Igbo, the family is “ezinaụnọ” a compound word made up [sic] two terms – “ezi” (the outside, the road, the clan) and ụnọ (the house, the home). Their combination shows a linguistic attempt to show the connectedness of each family group with the whole of the clan…(And to show) that [d]iversity and differentiation constitute the family. The linguistic analysis offers a vision, a scheme of relations, and a way of dealing with boundaries, otherness and differences. (It is) a framework within which differences would cease to be perceived as threats, or in the worst case scenario, as enmity, but as a possibility for mutual and reciprocal enrichment.37

There is something of importance here in the approach of Nwankwo’s hermeneutical encounter or integration. It relates to his concern to let the insights of his theological reflections speak to the concrete conditions of the community out of which the theological issues and questions he tries to engage with arise. His hermeneutic of encounter fosters reflections that tries to claim the hearts and minds of the people, and to illumine the reality they confront or that confronts them, in the case cited, violence as a result of religious bigotry. What is more, Nwankwo tries to replicate the outcome of this process in linguistic frames and/or expressions that “make the community tick” (to use a phrase from him).38 It is to the consideration of this framework, particularly in his use of Igbo expressions, that the next sub-section is dedicated.

37 Nwankwo, “The Church as God’s Family,” 569, 571.
c. Framework: Igbo Proverbs and Expressions

“Proverbs are the palm oil with which words are eaten,” says the Igbo. Igbo proverbs evoke a particular experience, “a synesthesia of thought and aesthetic performance.” The great Nigerian literary icon, Chinua Achebe, in his last book, There Was a Country: A Memoir, so beautifully writes, and I cannot agree more to his conviction that, “Igbo sayings and proverbs are far more valuable (to him as a human being) in understanding the complexity of the world, and I add, of the mysteries of the divine, than the doctrinaire of the Christian faith.”\(^{39}\) Even though Achebe appreciates that the Christian faith “is also far more artistically satisfying.”\(^{40}\)

Nwankwo’s use of Igbo sayings, proverbs and/or expressions in his theological exchange are not simply for stylistic reasons. They serve as his conceptual or epistemological framework for entering deeply into what God has said and what our people are saying in their relationship with God.\(^{41}\) More to that, they offer him the rational and “relational scheme” for his theological reflections.\(^{42}\) He employs them in a uniquely creative way in many of his writings with the provocative titles like: “Ihe kwụrụ, ihe akwụdebe ya (If a thing stands, another stands beside it): Towards a Hegemony of Solidarity” (2019), “Onwe m Ozọ – My Other Self: A Discourse Analytical Approach to Rooting Marriage more deeply in the Christian Soil” (2018), “Beyond Mmadụ Abụrọ Chukwu: Justice and Mercy in the Context of Christian Witness and Conflict Resolution” (2016), “‘A na-enwe obodo enwe?’ – A Socio-Theological Reflection on a Track in Oliver de Coque’s Album” (2016), “Aka Nchawa, Re-thinking Breakthrough: Towards a Theology of Empowerment” (2014), “Egbe bere Ugo bere’: Towards a Theological Response to Violence” (2012), to mention but a few. They are titles of his essays that engage the popular culture, which Nwankwo values as an important aspect of the process of contextualization.\(^{43}\) Thus, his repristination and appropriation of indigenous categories and expression is in line with the evangelistic task set by Pope Paul VI when he writes that:

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\(^{40}\) Chinua Achebe, There Was a Country, 12.


The individual Churches (and theological communities), intimately built up not only of people but also of aspirations, of riches and limitations, of ways of praying, of loving, of looking at life and the world...have the task of assimilating the essence of the Gospel message and of transposing it, without the slightest betrayal of its essential truth, into language that these particular people understand, then of proclaiming it in this language.

**d. Content: Christocentric Imagination, Embodied and Praxeological Orientation**

The content of Nwankwo’s CCT come out in deeply christocentric outlook. In our discussion of the incarnational dynamic of Nwankwo’s CCT, we underlined the sense in which his theology regards and serves the affirmation of Christ’s ongoing reality. So, what do I mean when I say that the content of his CCT is of a Christocentric imagination, with embodied and praxeological orientation? I mean that in his contextualized-constructive theological reflections, he engages the human realities in the light of the reality of Christ’s personality and work. The fruits of this engagement are articulated and represented in primal language of life, religion, and faith within the Igbo context, as I have mentioned above. These are always largely affective, eliciting feelings, and calling forth existential commitment.

A most important additional point concerning the embodied orientation of Nwankwo’s CCT derives from his conviction that “[e]very theological reflection is supposed to be in the service of life – not only of the life to come but also of life in the here and now.” Praxeological, too, given that very early in his theological training, Nwankwo learns that “truth is pragmatic.” And he has carried on this knowledge in his theological engagement that re-orientates the thinking of Christians and exhorts them to better conform their lifestyle at the practical level in the light of their faith. In so doing, he aims to mobilize and empower people to become participants in their own flourishing. A good example of the embodied and praxeological orientation of his CCT is in an essay

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44 Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), no. 63.
47 Nwankwo, “Historicity and the Deposit of Faith,” 158.
48 Lawrence Nwankwo, “You have received the Spirit of Power…” (2 Tim. 1:7): Reviewing the Prosperity Message in the Light of a Theology of Empowerment,” *Journal of European Pentecostal Theological Association* 22 (2002): 56-77. See also Nwankwo’s “From Power Christianity to a Christianity that Empowers.”
published recently on the “theology of hope.” In it Nwankwo calls for the “articulation of a more balanced theology of hope…that connects one to the society.”49 He maintains that the consequence of this “Christian hope-filled faith” is “a commitment to actions that will impact the unfolding of history towards the enthronement of the values of God’s kingdom which consists of truth, justice, love and peace.”50

**Inspired by Nwankwo’s Theological Vocation: Theology – Meaning, Method, and Sources**

What then are the lessons from or significance of Nwankwo’s CCT in our quest for a more engaging and relevant theological activity and the flourishing of the field of Christian theology in Nigeria and elsewhere? In a modest effort to respond to this question with which I began this article, I will draw on the insights from the discussion so far. In doing so, I hope to demonstrate how Nwankwo’s contextualized-constructive theological perspectives both illumine and help in re-thinking the meaning, re-imagining the method, and re-considering the sources of theology. I begin with the lesson on the meaning of theology.

**a. Theology as the Art of Pondering and Interacting with What God Said and Says**

With Nwankwo’s CCT we are led towards a new way of thinking further and making profounder sense of what theology is. Theology has always been defined as “faith seeking understanding” (*fides quaerens intellectum*), which is the episcopal motto of Saint Anselm of Canterbury (1033-1109). However, Nwankwo’s CCT helps us in plumbing the meaning of that conventional definition of theology. With his practice of CCT, one can safely say that theology is the art of pondering and interacting with what God said and still says, not least in the words of men and women of my motherland. Theology, therefore, is a discipline that traces the process of how the Word of God, by the resonance of the Spirit, receives expression in the words of people. In the same line of thinking, it is a discipline that gathers the words of people into the Word of God.

To say this – that theology is the art of contemplating God’s Word continually being addressed to us in our world – is to mean that every good, true, and beautiful human word in its various forms echoes the Word of God. It is also to appreciate – though I do not wish to be misunderstood here – that every truly


50 Nwankwo, “Theology of Hope and Value Orientation,” 83.
human endeavour is a response to and interaction with the eternal and life-giving Word. That is why Nwankwo, as I underlined above, takes seriously the popular culture as a rich site of God’s ongoing self-revelation, and so, an indispensable source of theological exchange. I should also add, and this is a delightful point for me to make, that in understanding theology as such, the whole enterprise of Christian existence could be seen as the course of human beings becoming Word for the world as much as the Word became flesh among humans and for the life of the world.

There is a further significance of the meaning of theology offered here. It is this: theology is then a “networked” enterprise, to use a phrase from Pope Francis. So, it is no longer the work of theologians speculating or, simply speaking and listening to themselves about what they think God has said and says. This consideration repositions theological discourse “within the context of the community called church, and (very importantly) the wider society.” What this means is that “it is not enough to theologize exclusively on the basis of the intellectual acumen of the theologian, while he or she comfortably enconces himself or herself in the protected milieu of academia,” from where the theologian churns out words for other people’s consumption. As a matter of fact, the Christian faith, which theology tries to mediate (interpret and systematize) its meaning, originates in the hearts of believers, and not just in the minds of theologians. This idea already touches on the way of doing theology (in Nigeria); and it brings us to the second lesson on method as gleaned from Nwankwo’s CCT.

b. The Method of Theology: By Way of Descent and Encounter

Nwankwo’s CCT and the way it opens up for doing theology is a helpful one, especially in our world and times of incredible estrangement. The way of theologizing inspired by his CCT cannot be described simply as a new method or set of methods. Hence, I do not intend to reflect on this second lesson of Nwankwo’s CCT in terms of predefined theological procedures or ready-made techniques to be applied in every circumstance. That will be yet another example of methodologism. No! I refer to ‘method’ here as an attitudinal disposition, a mode of being, of translating or living forth one’s theological imagination.

We cannot discern and ponder what God has said and is saying just by staying in the ivory towers of the libraries of our universities, seminaries, research centres, and in pastoral offices and secretariat complexes, etc. The Word of God among us as the subject matter of theology and its practice is heard

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51 Pope Francis, “Theology after Veritatis Gaudium.”
“from the forthright observation and experience of the situation in the life of the believing community.”

This observation and experience in the practice of theology demands two things: descent and encounter. Let’s look briefly at each of them.

In speaking about descent, Orobator acknowledges that doing theology

…is not an exercise in intellectual or speculative weightlessness. Nowhere would this assertion be truer than in Africa. As a theologian (one) cannot float blissfully above the conditions and complexities of life on a continent that is chronically religious and yet so tragically impoverished. The engagement in theological activity, whether in a professional or lay capacity, demands a radical descent into context, of the theologian and his or her community, in order to engage vital issues and questions at the interstices of faith and life.

Descent is not just in the approach of embarking on field research or sociological survey, which theologians agree is an indispensable tool for theology today. The descent ought to be “radical” (as Orobator puts it). Radical would mean a participation in and an intense appropriation of the density of the real experiences of people in their struggle to make sense of what God has said and is saying in their often painful situations. Such appropriation, we must note, happens within the framework of encounter, the second move in the exciting art of pondering and discerning what God has said and is saying.

In this regard, it is interesting to speak of and cultivate the practice of theology as the “Word-World encounter,” another intriguing phrase from Orobator. It is first an encounter with the Word made flesh, and through him, with him, and in him, an encounter with the world, the created order, that is, human life and human affairs in which the Word dwells and acts. This idea can be rightly put the other way round: that we come to encounter the divine Word

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54 Orobator, “The Sky is Wide Enough,” 41.
56 I say this with the conviction that the work of a theologian does not simply entail thinking about what God has said and says, but also feeling what God has said and is saying, and what one is thinking about it, and doing so in relation to the location where it is said or being said. In the practice of theology, “it is necessary,” says Pope Francis, “to reflect on what we are feeling and doing; to feel what we are thinking and doing; to do what we are thinking and feeling.” In this way, theologizing becomes “an interplay of capacities at the service of the person and society.” See Pope Francis, “Address to the Pontifical Catholic University of Chile (17 January, 2018),” http://w2.vatican.va/content/Francesco/en/speeches/2018/January/documents/papa-francesco_20180117_cile-santiago-pontuniversita.html [accessed September 15, 2019].
57 Orobator, “The Sky is Wide Enough,” 42.
through encountering human reality. Thus, theology can be conceived as a vehicle for encountering God and his people, and also as a space for one to be encountered by God and others, such that one becomes moved to act, as a fruit of that encounter. On the basis of this encounter, the theologian is challenged to become open to other truth and life-seeking individuals and communities, and should approach “the experience of the Christian revelation from a variety of perspectives.”

This will require that the theologian seeks to advance efforts in which he or she routinely engages with other disciplines, especially cultural and social sciences, in their research and inquiry about the eternal Word. By this openness and by advancing such efforts, the theologian recognizes the divine freedom manifest in the work of the Spirit that “blows wherever it wills” in revealing God’s word and presence in the world.

What is more, theologizing, especially the way it is often done in Nigeria, will then have to shift from simply being the practice of doctrinal elucidation or dogmatic (mimetic) re-presentations of the depositum of faith to becoming an act of creative (constructive) imagination. This imaginative dynamic of the practice of theology does not make it (the practice) to become again the solitary work of an individual theologian. Imagination, while it is a gift of the individual mind, has also a social premium. “No matter how dexterous a finger is,” says an African proverb, “it cannot catch a louse.” So, the constructive imagination ought to “operate as a collaborative effort regulated by the communicative ethics of mutual listening (learning) and respectful dialogue.” To whom, and to what we should listen in this process, will form the reflection on the third lesson of Nwankwo’s CCT in the following section.

**c. Sources for Theology: The Words of our Children and their Forebears**

Still as I come to the end of my theological pilgrimage here in the West, having participated in many theological conversations and encountered many theological personages from across the globe, and in light of all that has been said so far in this article about Nwankwo’s CCT, I have already begun to discern an outline of how to do theology upon my return to Nigeria. If there is one thing I have learned in all my many memorable encounters, learning, and research, it is this: theology happens in paying deep attention to the Word of God once spoken in Jesus Christ, and still being spoken among (my own) people. The Word and words that our progenitors and their progenies heard and still hears.

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58 Orobator, “The Sky is Wide Enough,” 42.
Those are the words I long to listen more to, ponder on, wrestle with, and (re)articulate.

This is why the style and outcome of Nwankwo’s CCT challenges me to ask: Where are the voices of our foremothers and forefathers, and their children, our fellows on the journey of faith? Why are we not giving a more sustained and systematic heed to the words of our own people in the supposed effort to be a more engaging and relevant theological community and Church? Why are those words not given serious and sufficient attention in the core curricula of theological education (formation) and pastoral imagination in Nigeria? When shall we start listening to our children to whom has been revealed the mysteries of the Word (Mt. 11:26; Lk. 10:21)? Did the divine Word not enjoin us to “ask our fathers and mothers, that they may tell us and explain to us what they have searched out and discovered (cf. Deut. 32:7; Job 8:8)? And so, is it not time to design and commit ourselves more systematically to re-excavating, translating, and integrating the profound theological insights and wisdom of our mothers and fathers in faith?

So, what do I propose in this view? There are some examples that come to mind. I am thinking of the promotion of a theological learning and research about the subject of the Eucharistic (presence) Christology and pastoral spirituality of Archbishop Albert Obiefuna. These could be mined from his many pastoral letters, personal writings, and not least, from the example of his embodied pastoral solicitude. The so-called Francis Cardinal Arinze “cup” celebrated annually in Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu, can be elevated to a Francis Cardinal Arinze Chair of Interreligious Dialogue in our theological institutions. This is long overdue given the many studies on interreligious dialogue outside of Nigeria, which draw on insights from the fruitful years and writings of Francis Cardinal Arinze as President of the Pontifical Council for Interreligious Dialogue. Africans have a unique way of relating to the divine Word. Therefore, a biblical study that focuses mainly on the contemplative exegetical style and output of MaryJerome Obiorah, and Teresa Okure, will be more meaningful to us.

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The Word is Among Us: An Attempt to Articulate the (Contextualized-Constructive) Theology

We can go on. Our theology of the Church should be focused on mining the riches in the “Listening Ecclesiology” of Elochukwu Uzukwu. Uzukwu’s ecclesiology offers a tremendous resource for deepening and translating an understanding of the nature and mission of the Church in Africa, and its mediation of the eternal Word of God ever present in Africa’s social context. Also, the Nigerian theologian, Stan Chu Ilo has dedicated a great deal of his life and work to a theology and ecclesiology of abundant life. These are some examples of the rich and untapped sources, at least for the Catholic institutions of theological education in Nigeria. The Word is among us, and not beyond our reach (Deut. 30:11-12).

By Way of Conclusion: The Word is Among Us, and is Our Hope

In an essay like this, one cannot avoid sparing a moment to think about the personage whose theological ideas and style are under consideration, and that inspires the reflections here. In a modest attempt to think about the personage, I am directed back to the subject that has been of primary importance to Nchekwube Lawrence Nwankwo. We have seen that the subject is not simply a theme. It is a person, an event, a gift – Jesus Christ, the incarnate Word of God, living and acting among us (Hebrews 4:12). He is the person that grounds the personage of Nwankwo. He is the logos of Nwankwo’s logic, the Word that draws out words from him, and the Word into which Nwankwo gathers the words of his people. How to hear this Word and act with Him within the context of what He still says for the experience of human flourishing in Nigeria is both the inspiration of Nwankwo’s theologizing and theology, and the challenge they pose for us. Therefore, in the light of the discussion so far on the theological vision and project of Nchekwube Lawrence Nwankwo, and as I come to the end of this essay, we are now in a better position to offer some concluding remarks in the form of an exhortation that points to the personage, who drives this art of a contextualized-constructive encounter with the Word among us. I do this in


65 See for example, Stan Chu Ilo, Joseph Ogbonnaya, and Alex Ojacor, eds., The Church as Salt and Light: Path to an African Ecclesiology of Abundant Life (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2011).
great joy at Nchekwube Nwankwo who celebrates the twenty-fifth anniversary of his priestly ordination.

Anyone who has known Father Nchekwube in the context of his theological and pastoral engagement or, who has had the privilege of working with him knows and is deeply impressed by his characteristic recollected presence and selfless attention to others. His way of being present and attentive to others, I believe, is made possible by his attentiveness to that Other, the eternal Word. And Nwankwo’s attentiveness to this Word grants him the admirable capacity he has of listening to the words of men and women of our country, and in turn, able to speak words that answer and fulfil their search and hope for abundant life. “For the Lord gives [him] his word that [he]…might answer the weary a word that will revive them” (Is. 50:4).

Like the Word, heard most loudly and clearly in silence, Nchekwube speaks and acts from silence. From the grandeur of this silence comes his inimitable perspicacity, embodied intelligence, and uncommon creativity, for hearing what God has said and is still saying, and articulating them for the life of the world. This could account for Nwankwo’s gift and ability to unravel intricate issues and to see things in certain brilliance and depth – an inspiration for theologians and other intellectuals. Nwankwo’s depth that comes from his contemplative practice encourages us to rediscover the age-long practice of doing theology on the knees. And in doing so, (re)learn that theology is not simply the art of speaking about God, but speaking to God and with God. He challenges us to reckon that if we are to do theology, a kind that is not merely to impress people or satisfy our human ambitions for the allurements of this world, rather the kind that answers the deepest yearning of men and women of our time, we need to heed the inspired and enlivening Word, and let our words about him be an outflow of his Word in us. “The word of life…[that] we have seen and heard we declare to you, so that you and we together may share in a common life, that life which we share with the Father and his Son Jesus Christ” (1 Jn. 1:1-3). That Word is among us and is our hope.

I am convinced that in the years to come, Nchekwube Lawrence Nwankwo and his contextualized-constructive theology will be further appreciated as a unique effort to develop an Igbo theology capable of (re)conceptualizing the faith and (crucially) the struggles and hopes of the people “to have life and have it abundantly” (Jn. 10:10).