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Review of the doctoral dissertation

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New Evangelization According to the Teachings of John Paul II as the Basis for the Growth of the Church in Nigeria

A Dissertation in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Doctoral
Degree in Pastoral Theology

Promoter: Rev. Prof. Marek Tatar, Ph.D.
Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University
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This review treats the defense of a doctoral dissertation as an academic act of evaluation in which the candidate's work is both recognized and subjected to systematic critical assessment. Such a framework makes it possible to balance an acknowledgment of demonstrated research achievements with the identification of aspects requiring further scholarly refinement. The defense should therefore not be understood as the endpoint of doctoral formation, but as an important stage in an ongoing process of scholarly, personal, intellectual, and spiritual development.

The submitted dissertation—the result of research and editorial revision—documents the present state of academic maturity of Rev. Joseph Inarigu Abu. It demonstrates that the candidate is familiar with appropriate research methods, can

formulate coherent and relevant research questions, and is capable of constructing and justifying an argument in support of the proposed thesis in accordance with the standards characteristic of theological disciplines.

1. Structural Components

The dissertation has 218 pages and contains the standard components of a doctoral thesis: a title page, declaration, acknowledgments, table of contents, list of abbreviations, general introduction, five chapters, general conclusion, and bibliography. Its structure is not merely descriptive; rather, it is organized so as to develop and support a clear central argument. Each chapter follows a conventional structure, consisting of an introduction, a main analytical section, and a conclusion.

The general introduction presents the missionary foundations of the Church in a concise and systematically organized manner. It also offers an operational definition of the New Evangelization that is consistent with the interpretive framework articulated by John Paul II. These theological considerations are then situated within the social, cultural, and religious context of Nigeria. The following section specifies the objectives of the study, explains the methodological procedures adopted, and outlines its structure. The introduction concludes by formulating the central claim of the thesis: “In a nutshell, this dissertation argues that New Evangelization, as articulated by John Paul II, provides a robust and formidable theological and pastoral framework for addressing the contemporary challenges facing the Church in Nigeria.” (p. 13).

Chapter I reconstructs the theological and magisterial foundations of the New Evangelization (pp. 14–64). Chapter II discusses the teachings of John Paul II and their significance for the Nigerian context, with particular emphasis on the Pope’s pastoral visits to the country (pp. 65–94). Chapter III presents an empirical and pastoral assessment of the current situation of the local Church, taking into account the clergy, consecrated life, and lay ecclesial organizations (pp. 95–134). Chapter IV identifies the main pastoral and socio-structural obstacles that hinder the mission of evangelization, including ideological trends, infrastructure deficiencies, and the effects of armed conflict

(pp. 135–166). Chapter V translates the earlier findings into structurally oriented recommendations regarding pastoral practice and church organization (pp. 167–198). The overall line of reasoning is systematic: it moves from a doctrinal framework, through contextual analysis, to pastoral application.

The conclusion integrates the earlier findings, situating the Magisterium's teaching in relation to current pastoral and structural challenges specific to the Nigerian ecclesial reality. The New Evangelization is presented here not as a separate pastoral program, but as an ongoing process of spiritual renewal. It involves coordinated collaboration among the clergy, consecrated persons, and the lay faithful, as well as the implementation of discernment and governance within synodal structures.

The bibliography contains approximately 163 entries and offers a wide-ranging source base. It includes the Holy Scriptures, biblical commentaries, Church documents, magisterial teachings, the works of John Paul II, monographs by Western and African authors, theological articles, online materials, and statements of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria. This literature effectively connects the general theological tradition with the social and pastoral context of the local Church under analysis. From a methodological perspective, it would also be advisable to expand the representation of Polish-language scholarship, especially since the dissertation was prepared in Warsaw at Cardinal Stefan Wyszyński University and Polish theology includes extensive research on John Paul II.

The dissertation contains 536 footnotes, attesting to the use of an extensive body of sources and the careful documentation of the argument. The footnote system generally follows the conventional citation format used in the humanities. Nevertheless, the recording of some references requires attention, especially the frequent and occasionally ambiguous use of the abbreviation "Cf.," which appears approximately 169 times. Some footnotes contain small mistakes (e.g., 107; 159; 227; 236; 289; 312).

The language of the dissertation is, on the whole, syntactically and grammatically sound. Only minor editorial errors occur, and they do not diminish the substantive value of the work. One example is the capitalized spelling of "Inculturation" on p. 60 (line 8), which should be rendered in lowercase.

2. Content Evaluation

The title of the dissertation is correctly formulated and accurately defines both the material and formal object of the investigation. It highlights the relationship between the teachings of the papal Magisterium and the pastoral situation of Nigerian Catholicism, with particular emphasis on John Paul II's reflections on the New Evangelization. The study also demonstrates the extent to which this doctrinal and pastoral framework can foster the development and maturity of Catholic communities in Nigeria. It addresses both theological premises and pastoral and evangelization contexts, correlating universal missionary principles with the social, cultural, religious, and institutional realities of that country.

The dissertation examines how the papal concept of the renewal of evangelization can address contemporary challenges in Nigeria, such as "the influence of modern ideologies, the impact of globalization, the rise of Pentecostalism, socio-economic instability, political corruption, and the erosion of traditional values" (p. 12, Chapter Four). These phenomena are presented as factors affecting the mission of the Church and the stability of its communities. The thesis also analyzes the possibility of shifting pastoral practice from the maintenance of existing institutional structures toward a more explicitly missionary and evangelizing paradigm (Chapter Three).

The study clearly and systematically reconstructs a wide range of issues related to the research topic. The descriptive-analytical method and deductive reasoning lead from general theoretical assumptions to specific contextual applications. First, the foundations of evangelization were reconstructed, and then the origins and development of the concept of the New Evangelization in the teaching of the Church's Magisterium were presented, with particular emphasis on the contribution of John Paul II (pp. 14–64; 65–94). These doctrinal and historical findings were then related to the contemporary ecclesial context in Nigeria (pp. 95–134; 135–164). The analysis is based on an extensive bibliography comprising primary and secondary sources, including Sacred Scripture, the Catechism of the Catholic Church, the Code of Canon Law, papal encyclicals, apostolic

exhortations, conciliar documents, scholarly monographs, peer-reviewed articles, and reliable online resources. The researcher's personal experience and rootedness in the social and religious reality of Nigeria also remain an essential element of interpretation.

The thesis's topic is developed within a coherent and sequential interpretive framework: from the reconstruction of theological foundations, through the identification of key pastoral actors, to an assessment of the most significant contextual challenges, such as terrorism, corruption, inadequate infrastructure, and syncretism. On this basis, proposals for pastoral reforms were formulated, including, among other things, the strengthening of Basic Christian Communities and the consolidation of diocesan commissions through increased institutional capacity.

The dissertation assumes that, in the Nigerian context, mere participation in religious rituals is insufficient (pp. 165–166). Evangelization is therefore conceived as a comprehensive undertaking, combining the proclamation of the Gospel with a genuine commitment to the benefit of a society that is “shaped by rapidly changing cultures, emerging ideologies, and complex social realities.” This perspective gives rise to the assertion that “the Church must remain steadfast in its mission to transform the world with the Gospel of Christ” (p. 166).

The author further emphasizes that effective missionary practice depends on authentic inculturation. The term itself appears 37 times in the text, which also refers to liturgical, cultural, and creative adaptation. This issue is addressed in the definition of the New Evangelization in Chapter I, in the discussion of John Paul II's teaching in Chapter II, and in the reflection on the challenges facing the Church's mission in Nigeria in Chapters III and IV. On the basis of doctrinal references and descriptions of Nigerian social and ecclesial realities, a valuable—and often overlooked in theological works—conclusion can be drawn: inculturation and adaptation depend not only on church leaders but also on broader engagement and on listening to the voices and experiences of the laity. It is therefore essential to create spaces in which the presence of lay faithful is heard and can have a real impact on processes of evangelization and inculturation.

As the preceding observations show, the dissertation has clear scholarly merit. It is not a casual reflection, but a systematic and critical study based on material corroborated by collected sources, relevant literature, and broader contextual studies. The methodology is particularly convincing in the sections devoted to data collection and doctrinal reconstruction (pp. 95–134). From the perspective of scholarly research, the adopted approach is acceptable; nevertheless, its one-directional movement from theological premises to Nigerian realities raises certain reservations. Such an approach calls for caution, since conceptual frameworks developed in different cultural contexts may, when implemented uncritically, acquire features associated with a colonial mentality. This issue deserves greater attention, especially because African communities are particularly sensitive to such dependencies. It is also worth recalling that John Paul II, when addressing inculturation in the encyclical *Redemptoris Missio*, emphasized the contribution of evangelized cultures to the life of the Church:

“Through inculturation, the Church incarnates the Gospel in different cultures and at the same time introduces people, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within. Through inculturation, the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what **she** is and a more effective instrument of mission.” (RMis 52).

3. Suggestions for Further Growth

If the research findings presented in this dissertation were to be published, it would be advisable to supplement the current study with two additional analytical tools. Their use could strengthen the coherence of the argument and deepen the interpretation of the relationship between the teachings of John Paul II, the processes of inculturation, and the local pastoral conditions. The proposed tools do not serve as criteria for disqualifying the dissertation, but rather indicate possible directions for further developing the Fr. Abu's research potential.

The first of these is Stephen Toulmin's argumentation model. It can serve as a tool for assessing the coherence and correctness of the logical structure of the argument, especially given the extensive material gathered in the dissertation. This concept is based on six interrelated components that enable a systematic breakdown of the argument and verification of the line of reasoning in both individual sections of the dissertation and in its entirety. Applying this model would facilitate the refinement of paragraphs, subsections, chapters, and the overall composition of the work.

A hypothetical application of Toulmin's model may be made to the central thesis of the dissertation. Its core element would be the assertion that the New Evangelization, as conceived by John Paul II, constitutes a vital tool for the transformation of the Church in Nigeria. Such a thesis should not be considered in isolation, but should be grounded in empirical and source material, including Magisterium documents, historical findings, and sociological analyses of Nigerian realities.

A logically valid transition from premises to conclusion requires the identification of a warrant—that is, an inferential rule explaining why the cited data allow for the formulation of a specific thesis. In situations where this warrant may be questioned, additional backing becomes necessary—for example, through reference to Revelation and Tradition, the authority of recognized theologians, the norms of canon law, or verified scientific paradigms. Since—apart from dogmatic assertions—conclusions in the humanities and theology rarely attain the status of absolute certainty, a qualifier is also needed. Such a qualifier specifies the degree of the assertion and the scope of the validity of the thesis, e.g., as a highly probable, conditional, or context-dependent claim.

The argumentative structure is rounded out by a rebuttal, understood as the identification of potential exceptions, counterarguments, and boundary conditions under which the thesis could be challenged. In the example under analysis, this would require a systematic identification of factors limiting the effectiveness of the proposed strategy. These include, among others, infrastructure collapse, the high adaptability of neo-Pentecostal movements, and criticism formulated from the perspective of colonization theory. Taking these factors into account would allow for a more precise determination of the explanatory power of the position and its practical implications.

The second suggestion concerns the actor-network perspective (ANT), which—despite certain limitations—can serve as a useful analytical tool when appropriately adapted to the context of missionary and evangelistic work. It enables the identification of the strengths of the dissertation as well as areas requiring further refinement. Its application could also contribute to a deeper reflection on the quality of the Church's missionary and evangelization efforts in Nigeria, which are a particular focus of Fr. Abu's interest.

This interpretive framework, co-developed by Bruno Latour, departs from the classical distinction between active social agents and passive elements of the environment by introducing the principle of symmetry. Agency is not attributed exclusively to human beings, but is understood as a property distributed across a network. Institutions, technologies, infrastructure, objects, geographical conditions, and communities—usually perceived as passive—can therefore also function as actors that shape reality. In this framework, no individual, idea, or pastoral program operates in isolation. Rather, the effectiveness of evangelization depends on how a given concept is connected with other socio-ecclesial elements. Church structures therefore exist insofar as this diverse configuration is continually sustained, strengthened, and renewed.

Applying this perspective to the evaluation of Fr. Joseph Inarigu Abu's dissertation highlights its epistemological merits. The study offers a comprehensive "inventory" of local nodes, actors, and mediators necessary to reconstruct the configuration of the network under study. It describes traditional Catholic structures, the principles of the New Evangelization program, and significant counter-actors, such as poverty, sociopolitical tensions, and infrastructural limitations. It also documents processes of disintegration and fractures within the Catholic network that facilitate the shift of certain practices and affiliations toward more flexible Pentecostal movements. As a result, the dissertation offers empirical material rich in interpretive depth. When analyzed through the ANT framework, this material allows one to capture in detail the confrontation between a universalistically formulated pastoral vision and the resistance stemming from local social, material, and religious conditions.

At the same time, the network approach allows us to identify one of the fundamental weaknesses of a typical evangelistic-missionary and theological mindset, which can be described as “pastoral idealism.” This involves viewing pastoral and administrative processes primarily through the lens of clergy, theology, documents, active laypeople, and the context in the broadest sense. It tacitly assumes that evangelization constitutes a simple and conflict-free transfer of the kerygma “from mind to mind.” From the standpoint of ANT, this assumption is reductive. Even the most coherent pastoral concept fails to achieve its intended results without materialization and without being integrated into a network of relationships through adequate resources: organizational structures, buildings, media, stable internet connections, local leaders, and less visible groups of the faithful. Omitting the full spectrum of mediators leads to a situation in which the description of the New Evangelization remains suspended in a kind of social vacuum.

The ANT framework also allows for a more comprehensive conceptualization of the causes of inculturation failures and of measures to support individuals and communities experiencing a crisis of faith. This involves an attempt to implement, within the Nigerian context, the principles of evangelical renewal initiated by John Paul II. The normative content of papal teaching encounters resistance from local material, infrastructural, and human conditions. These factors may limit the stabilization of a lasting Catholic network of relationships and practices. In this light, religious phenomena in Nigeria appear not only as a conflict of theological ideas, but also as a rivalry between heterogeneous systems of agency. These systems encompass both human and non-human actors. An analysis of evangelization processes based solely on documents and isolated social groups therefore limits the ability to adequately diagnose their complex dynamics.

The fragility of social bonds is also a key factor explaining the expansion of neo-Pentecostal movements. Compared to the Catholic Church, numerous Pentecostal communities operate within relatively loose and flexible institutional structures. Such organizational arrangements facilitate adaptation to conditions of social fragmentation, infrastructural limitations, and unstable communication networks (pp. 152–153).

In situations where Catholic catechesis is weakened due to geographical distance, limited access to electricity, or insufficient pastoral presence, Pentecostal communities can partially compensate for these deficits by employing forms of religious communication that require fewer institutional capacities and less material resources.

One possible avenue for further developing the dissertation under review could involve moving away from a linear understanding of the New Evangelization as the simple application of doctrinal principles in a specific local context. It seems more appropriate to view it as a complex socio-ecclesial process, constituted by a heterogeneous network of mediations. Although the teachings of John Paul II remain a key theological point of reference, their pastoral effectiveness depends on interactions among church institutions, clergy, consecrated persons, catechists, lay movements, families, educational systems, media infrastructure, material resources, transportation networks, the degree of electrification, and local forms of religious experience. From this perspective, ANT can serve as a framework for describing the mechanisms by which universal doctrinal principles are translated into pastoral practices. It also allows us to capture the ways in which these principles are internalized, negotiated, contested, and reconfigured in the concrete practices of Catholic religious life in Nigeria.

The dissertation demonstrates a thorough understanding of many elements of this network, particularly pastoral, social, ideological, and infrastructural constraints (pp. 135–166). However, it would be further strengthened by an explanation of how these components interact in practice. It treats clergy, lay associations, infrastructure, and ideological currents more as separate analytical domains. Meanwhile, the effectiveness of evangelization depends on the dynamics of the relationships between them. Poor transportation infrastructure, unstable electricity supplies, limited communication capabilities, centralization of clergy, insufficient formation of the laity, and the appeal of Pentecostal movements not only coexist but can also mutually reinforce, weaken, transform, or block one another. An ANT-based interpretation would therefore shift the focus of the analysis from an inventory of obstacles to the mechanisms through which pastoral activity is materially and institutionally enabled or constrained.

4. Questions for the doctoral candidate

1. How, and through what specific strategies, can John Paul II's concept of the "New Evangelization" be realized as a framework for interreligious dialogue with Islam?
2. Could you provide a comparative analysis of the attitudes of Catholics and members of neo-Pentecostal movements toward local cultures and traditional religions? In your response, please consider the degree of accommodation, adaptation and strategies of inculturation, mechanisms for adapting norms and ritual practices, and the resulting social consequences of these attitudes.

5. Final conclusion and recommendation

The dissertation authored by Rev. Joseph Inarigu Abu constitutes a rigorous scholarly study with a clear theological and pastoral orientation. The analysis conducted in this review leads to the conclusion that the submitted work meets the criteria applicable to doctoral theses in the discipline of theological sciences. It makes a substantive and methodologically sound contribution to research on the papal concept of the renewal of evangelization within the Nigerian ecclesial context. The study confirms the candidate's competence in conducting independent research and applying theological knowledge while maintaining methodological rigor. Furthermore, it fulfills the formal and legal requirements stipulated by the applicable provisions of Polish law. In view of these findings, I hereby recommend the admission of Rev. Joseph Inarigu Abu to the subsequent stages of the doctoral procedure.

Lublin, 18 September 2026

