

The Evangelising Nazareth Maiden (Luke 1:39-45): Paradigm for the New Evangelisation

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Introduction

Faith, the belief in the God revealed through Jesus Christ and, evangelization, facilitating this revelation to humankind remains the primary objective of the New Testament text. In the infancy narrative of the Gospel according to Luke, the author, through the instrumentality of the maiden from Nazareth, demonstrates clearly the affinity between faith and evangelization. The Nazareth maiden, Mary, having been evangelized by the God-self through the agency of angel Gabriel, offers back to society that which she received by becoming an evangelizer. For Luke, evangelization seems to suggest simultaneously a reception of the gift of the faith and an appropriate response to the gift by proclaiming that same faith in word and deeds. This essay appropriates similar understanding. Written in the characteristic of the Septuagint (LXX), Luke casts his Nazareth maiden in the mode of Israel's matriarchs, heroic women whose faithfulness assisted in accomplishing the will of God in Israel.¹ In Luke 1, 39-45 the author substitutes his strong interest in Gentiles narratives for a pair of traditional Jewish women, Mary and Elizabeth. Drawing from this same Judaic background, Luke weaves his narrative around Elizabeth, a figure from the Old Testament, to meet Mary,² *proto evangelium* of salvation in the New Testament. Luke's interest, however, is not in these women as such. But his interest in them is primarily as vehicles of the Spirit, bearing witness to the good news, Jesus Christ, who is the Son of God. Historically interpreted from a Christological perspective, however, advocacy criticism³ offers other readings of this Lukan text (I, 39-45). Reading from the perspective of the Nazareth maiden, hermeneutic of faith, suggests coming to faith as well as proclaiming that faith as primary insights from this Lukan text. Gender hermeneutics as well as cultural hermeneutics enables the rendering of the passage from "below". That is to say, evangelization is not a top-down phenomenon. In the context of their witness to Jesus Christ, early Christian depictions of Mary in writings and tradition, provide the main source for her life. Thus we can appropriate her as a paradigm of faith and evangelization. After considering the coming to faith of the maiden of Nazareth, the essay explores an exegetical survey of Luke 1, 39-45. Then it will move to insights drawn from the text to support the Church's new evangelization initiatives.⁴

¹ Dennis C. Duling, *The New Testament: History, Literature, and Social Context*, Fourth Edition (Belmont, California: Thomas Wadsworth, 2003), 383.

²With these echoes from the Old Testament Luke ties the story of the beginning of the Jesus movement firmly to the on-going narrative of God's one redemptive purpose. See, Richard B. Hays and Joel B. Green, "The Use of the Old Testament by New Testament Writers", in Joel B. Green, ed., *Hearing the New Testament: Strategies for Interpretation* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Eerdmans Publishing, 1995), 236.

³ Brown, Raymond E, *An Introduction to the New Testament* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 2010), 20-47. Furthermore, advocacy criticism duly acknowledges the Historical-critical methods and goes further to interact with the text from an approach of "the world in front of the text" or a "reader-response approach". This approach allows the reader to "create" her/his encounter with the text. Eisegesis, that is, manipulating the meaning of the text to reflect the opinion of the reader, is one of the dangers associated with "reader-response" interpretative tool. This pitfall is cautiously rejected in this present work.

⁴ Evangelization, as many understand it, includes the many ways of bringing the Good News of salvation to the world. What then is the newness of the so-called new evangelization? The position taken in this essay is that New Evangelization begins with the self. It is a journey of faith, a reawakening that originates from the depths of one's being and embraces the immediate environment and extends to all humanity. The paper retrieves insights from

Mary Comes to Faith

The backdrop of Luke 1:39-45 is the annunciation pericopé (Luke 1:26-38). In this text, Luke through the various layers of relationships establishes Mary's faith, as a faith borne out of a personal relationship with God: *ivdou. h` dou, lh kuri, ou* (Lo! The handmaid of the Lord). The Nazareth maiden perceives herself in relationship with God through God's Word: *ge, noito, moi kata. to. r`h/ma, sou* (be it done unto me according to thy WORD) (1:38). Through Mary's utterance, the reader comes to perceive and identify relationship with the WORD as fundamental to faith. Grounded in her native religious tradition, which is rooted in fidelity to the covenant, Mary's faithfulness disposes her to trust the message of the angel Gabriel. Stated differently, Mary was already grounded in her own native religious traditions, the good news did not come to her on a *tabula rasa* (empty slate). Mary expressed her profound faith in her *fiat* (Luke 1:38). Mary's whole being received the WORD. She thus becomes an embodiment of the new covenant, in which God's word is written not on tablets of stone, but deep within the human heart (Cf. Jer 31:31-34). Unlike the Jeremiah text, Luke alludes to the planting of the word deep into the heart of Mary through the various movements: fear, listening, hearing, and pondering (vv. 26-38). A close reading of the process demonstrates a progression ultimately climaxing in owning that which was heard: Mary ponders the word in her heart and also treasures it in her heart. Deep down in the heart, is where the word finds room to mature, germinate, and begins to sink roots. Maturation of the word occurs deep within the heart. From here, the word grows and begins to spread. Pondering and treasuring brings forth a new relationship. The new relationship with God, which Mary foreshadows, is rooted in an intimate union with God. One may suggest that Mary brought her cultural hospitality to bear on the gospel as well in the process of her being evangelized. This relationship represents an important aspect of the dynamics of evangelization.

Mary, having come to faith, the divine evangelizer, Gabriel, withdrew and left her on her own (v. 38b) but not without assistance. Verse 38b, "Then the angel departed from her", offers a point of entry into Luke 1:39-45. The angel left Mary but not without the creative power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), to assist her. The Spirit plays a connective role between the prophecy of Israel and the prophetic activity surrounding the birth of Jesus of which Mary is a central figure.⁵ The transformative power of this same Holy Spirit thrusts Mary forth, she departs with haste to the hill country (v. 39). The suggestion here is that Mary, a Nazareth Jewish maiden, gradually constitutes a product of the new evangelization.

Luke's infancy narrative to weave what it considers an evangelizing process of the Mary of Nazareth. First Mary had to be evangelized before she could evangelize others. In other words, evangelization is not only for the world out there. It is always two-fold. The Church and members have to first of all know, experience, and live out in their own lives the gospel as Good News before they can preach it to the world as the Good News of salvation. No one can give what s/he does not have. That was exactly what Mary did. She brought with her to Elizabeth's household everything she had and experienced: the Word made flesh in her womb, the Holy Spirit, the joy and strength of the Lord, and fullness of grace. Mary also experienced the Gospel as Good News in the sense that it lifted her up from the shadows, it was liberative and promoted or enhanced her human dignity as a woman in that ancient Jewish patriarchal culture, among others. She experienced the Good News from the angel as life-giving and life-affirming as she expresses in her *Magnificat*. This is the meaning of evangelization as used in the New Testament to understand the ministry of Jesus as *euangelion* and *euangelizomai*. It was all of these experiences and more that she brought with her to Elizabeth and her household. See, also Teresa Okure, "A New Testament Perspective on Evangelization and Human Promotion," in Justin S. Ukpom et al., *Evangelization in Africa in the Third Millennium: Challenges and Prospects* (Port Harcourt, CIWA Press, 1992), 84-94.

⁵ Raymond E. Brown, *The Church the Apostles left behind* (New York: Paulist Press, 1984), 65.

Exegetical Survey of Luke 1:39-45

Luke 1:39-45

During those days Mary set out and traveled to the hill country in haste to a town of Judah, 40 where she entered the house of Zachariah and greeted Elizabeth. When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting, the infant leaped in her womb, and Elizabeth, filled with the Holy Spirit, cried out in a loud voice and said, "Most blessed are you among women, and blessed is the fruit of your womb. And how does it happen to me that the mother of my Lord should come to me? For at the moment the sound of your greeting reached my ears, the infant in my womb leaped for joy. Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled (*The Catholic Study Bible*, Second Edition).

Luke 1:39-40: With an earnest and strong affection, Mary, fresh from her encounter with the angel Gabriel, "set out and travelled to the hill country in haste" to visit her relative, Elizabeth. Akin to the prophet Jeremiah, Mary would not settle down until the word she has received is proclaimed. For like the prophet, the word was like fire burning in her heart, imprisoned in her bones (Jer 20:9). The word cannot be boxed neither can it be caged; it must be proclaimed. The beauty of this word, the good news, remains in its sharing. Only in sharing does the word becomes life-giving to the many. The prophet Isaiah praises the one who bears good tidings thus: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, Announces peace bearing good news, announcing salvation" (Isa 52:7). Mary bears good news, a wholesome gift to all who hear them, Elizabeth and her entire household (Zachariah was dumb at the time (1:20) and perhaps he was also deaf (1:62).

Privy to a divine disclosure of Elizabeth's advanced pregnancy (1:36), Mary makes bold to undertake the journey, through the hill country. Although the hills dominate the geographically landscape of Judea, metaphorically, "hill" can mean a difficult situation. Thus traveling through the hill country reinforces the complexity of the environment evangelizers must navigate in the service of the word. While no instruction was given in the text, the inference was clear: Elizabeth would be an encouragement to Mary. Thus Mary quickly prepares and left with haste to visit this older female relative who at some level elucidate the experience of her divine visitation. Though Mary's immediate designation was the home of Elizabeth and Zachariah, the neighbours were not left out. In the African context, a visit of one's relative in a village setting becomes a visit to the neighbours as well. The assumption here is that Elizabeth's neighbours also shared the good news Mary brought. The reason why this could be is because the then Jewish society was as communalistic as is the situation in Nigerian.

The new evangelization invites a rendering of Mary's speedy visit to Elizabeth privileges the fruit of faith, which connects in a profound manner with good works. Faith does not stand alone; faith must be accompanied by good deeds. The Letter of James puts it clearly: "What good is it my brothers, if someone says he has faith but does not have works? Can that faith save him?... In the same way, faith by itself, if it does not have works, is dead" (James 2:14-17). An interpretation of "good works" can also mean proclamation or assertion. Good deeds evoke light, a "light shining in the darkness". This light represents something which moves those who

experience it to praise God (Matt 5:16), as Mary did in her *Magnificat* (1:46-55). Mary's good works shone before Elizabeth and she proclaims God's greatness (1:43).

Other scholars proffer, yet another interpretation to the word "haste" as it relates to Mary's journey to the hill country to visit Elizabeth.⁶ Raymond Brown (et. al) contends that Mary's haste is consistent with an attitude of her total obedience to God. Brown contends that "Luke continues the portrait of Mary as the obedient handmaid of the Lord (1:38) by having her respond with haste, going to the house of Zechariah to greet Elizabeth".⁷

A further rendering of the urgency to visit Elizabeth may not be unconnected with a confirmation of Mary's faith. The sight of heavily pregnant Elizabeth would confirm a sign Mary was privileged to hear from the angel (v. 36). Elizabeth's pregnancy was to her a proof of God's great works now at hand. In this case, seeing ratified her believing. Unlike Thomas (John 20:24-29), who said unless I see I will not believe, Mary's seeing only ratified and burgeoned the already existent or perhaps nascent faith at best. The sight of pregnant Elizabeth was critical to understanding the unfolding events that was engulfing Mary's own life. Elizabeth Johnson puts it thus, "Mary . . . has to figure out how to live with a blessing that causes more problems than it solves".⁸ Thus, Elizabeth's praise of Mary served as further confirmation of Gabriel's words to the maiden. The two witnesses required for the confirmation of an event in Jewish thought was realized: Elizabeth and the angel.

Luke 1:41-42. An ordinary greeting from Mary brought significant changes in the life of Elizabeth. Her yet to be born child participated in the aura of the moment as well. By divine inspiration, Mary's greeting educes prophecy in Elizabeth. Although Luke does not give her the title of a prophet, but the phrase "filled with the holy spirit", is suggestive of the action of a prophet (Act 2:17-18). "When Elizabeth heard Mary's greeting", the baby in her womb rejoiced and she recognizes Mary's expectant state. In presenting the Spirit-filled and prophesying pregnant Elizabeth, Luke breaks the gender barrier in making a case that women may be limited so far as their public ministry is concerned, but not so far as their spirituality and intimacy with God. At this point, Elizabeth now knows the secret of Gabriel's annunciation to Mary.⁹ Elizabeth blesses Mary in a typical Hebraic manner that addresses women of valour.¹⁰ Famous Israelite women, heroines, whose fidelity to the covenant delivered God's people from peril, received appellations such as "blessed". A few examples include: "'Blessed be Jael among women' (Judg 5:24) and 'O daughter [Judith], you are blessed by the Most High God above all women on earth' (Jdt 13, 18; see also Gen 14:19-20)".¹¹ This first woman bearer of the WORD and first evangelizer in the New Testament was not only full of faith (*pistis*) but also enjoyed blessedness (*makarios*). Mary's visitation to Elizabeth draws attention to the power of silent witness. The young maiden offers the first Gospel testimony without words in her visit to Elizabeth. Her faith-filled presence is recognized even by the child in Elizabeth's womb. Elizabeth acknowledges Mary's faith, a faith born out of an encounter with the living God who calls her and reveals his

⁶ Raymond E. Brown, Karl P. Donfried, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, John Reumann, eds, *Mary in the New Testament* (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1978), 134-135.

⁷ Brown, et al., *Mary in the New Testament*

⁸ Elizabeth A. Johnson A. *Truly our Sister: A Theology of Mary in the Communion of Saints* (New York: Continuum, 2006), 260.

⁹ Brown, et al., *Mary*, 135.

¹⁰ Caroline N. Mbonu, *Handmaid: The Power of Names in Theology and Society* (Eugene, Oregon: Wipf and Stock, 2010), 36.

¹¹ Brown, et al., *Mary*, 136.

love to her. The love of God is that which, according to Pope Francis, precedes us and upon which we can lean for security and for building our lives. Transformed by this love, we gain fresh vision, new eyes to see; we realize that it contains a great promise of fulfilment and that a vision of the future opens up before us".¹² Mary would proclaim this vision of the future in her *Magnificat* (vv. 46-55).

The text witnesses hearing as a process of Elizabeth coming to faith: "as soon as I heard your greeting". Hearing and coming to faith was significant in the encounter between Phillip and the Ethiopian Eunuch. One cannot come to faith "unless someone instructs me" (Acts 8:26-39). Similarly, the Apostle Paul argues persuasively on evangelizing stressing on how anyone can believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? The preacher, the evangelizer is key to aiding people come to faith. Paul sums up his argument using a formula which became classic: *fides ex auditu*, "faith comes from hearing" (Rom 10:17). In hearing knowledge is connected to the word heard. Knowledge linked to a word is always personal knowledge. Such knowledge recognizes the voice of the one speaking and opens up to that person in freedom and follows the speaker in obedience (1:38). Paul could thus speak of the "obedience of faith" (cf. Rom 1:5; 16:26).¹³ The verses that follow speak of this personal knowledge that hearing brings forth.

Luke 1:43-44: Elizabeth recognizes the power in Mary's voice. John the Baptist had not yet been born, and Zachariah was still mute. Yet, something as innocuous as a mere greeting made significant impression on the lives of the members of a household. Earlier in the chapter, without a word being spoken by Zachariah, Elizabeth believes the word of the Lord given to him in the temple (vv. 5-20). Elizabeth harnesses a long life of attentiveness to the Spirit to make sense out of her own situation. Attentiveness to the Spirit enables Elizabeth to acknowledge a primordial and radical gift which upholds the lives of humankind. Faith and humility blend together in Elizabeth's joyous reception of a younger relative who has been so highly favoured: "the mother of my Lord should come to me". Like Mary who received faith and joy from the God-self, Elizabeth also received faith and joy from God through Mary. I propose that Elizabeth's fruitfulness is not only in the fruit of her womb but in something much larger: the fruit of her spiritual life, a life filled with joy, which is the clearest sign of faith's grandeur. Her outburst of praise shows a believer completely taken up into her confession of faith. Elizabeth recognizes Mary's faith as playing an active role in her receiving the promise: "Blessed is she who believed". I agree with Johnson that wanting to encourage Mary's faith, Elizabeth declared to her that there will be a fulfilment of those things which were told her from the Lord.¹⁴ The interplay in the texts suggests that God's promises should never make one passive; rather, God's assurance is designed to make one passionate, and by faith seize these promises.

Luke 1:45 makes it clear that physical motherhood is not the only ground of Mary's blessedness. Rather, believing God remains the prime source of blessedness: "Blessed are you who believed that what was spoken to you by the Lord would be fulfilled". Faith, therefore, is the key to understanding God's ways. The first beatitude (*makarios*) in the Gospel of Luke is pronounced

¹² Pope Francis, Encyclical Letter *Lumen Fidei*, No. 4.

¹³ *Lumen Fidei*, 29. Actually, the etymological root of the phrase, the "obedience of faith," connotes "attentive listening, heeding, and doing." The word obedience is from the term "oboedire" which is a combination of "ob," and "audire" which connotes to hear, to carry out the instructions or orders of; to heed and to observe.

¹⁴ Johnson, *Truly our Sister*

on Mary because of her belief in the things spoken to her by the Lord. Elizabeth's song of Mary draws the reader's attention to the fact that God has chosen Mary and Mary responded in faith.

Faith is a gift from God. A descending gift from God, faith demands a response. A response of faith is good works, an ascending gift. Thus faith is two dimensional, descending and ascending. Luke confirms the ascending dimension of faith later in his Gospel (11:27b) in the nameless woman who blesses the womb that carried Jesus.¹⁵ Jesus redirects her thus: "Rather blessed are those who hear the word of God and observe it". Matthew emphasizes the importance of observing or doing the word, "whoever does the will of my father in heaven is brother and sister and mother to me" (Matt 12:46-50). A blessing on those who hear and keep the word points to the eschatological dimension of Jesus' fictive family in which those who keep his words take pride of place over his own close relatives. In other words, biological relationship does not bring the blessing that is earned by hearing and keeping the word. Hearing and observing brings about faith. A faithful person is none other than the one who believes in God and God's promises. God is equally faithful by granting those promises. Elizabeth recognizes this faithfulness, so also does Mary, who treasures all that she heard in her heart. Her treasuring enabled the word take root deep within her heart where the pondering is done. There is an allusion that this honest and good heart, which bears much fruit (Luke 8:15), portrays in no uncertain terms the faith of Mary. Thus Elizabeth would say: "Blessed is she who believed".

Though not stated in the text, women's reflection draws out more insights from Mary's visit with Elizabeth. Given the relationship and the circumstances of the young maiden, the presumption is that the older woman would take in the younger and nurture her, affirm her calling and nourish her confidence. Although Luke left to the imaginations what transpired during the three months of Mary's visit, it would be safe to state that she was being chaperoned by Elizabeth and Zachariah during the period. Mentoring and spiritual direction may have punctuated her stay in this remote village of Judea.

Furthermore, dialogue functions significantly in communicating faith. A dialogical process marked the evangelizing encounter between the young Nazareth maiden and the angel Gabriel. Thus an interaction, verbal and/or non-verbal is fundamental in gaining access into the space of the other in order to make an impressionable impact. Luke employs the same evangelizing strategy in the meeting between Mary and Elizabeth. Only Mary's greeting and not preaching, causes a stir in Elizabeth. Note that the reader does not hear Mary's voice. Elizabeth voices her presence. Yet, her silent but profound presence spoke all that Elizabeth needed to come to belief (v. 41). The incident supports the assertion that through dialogue the God-seeker gains greater appreciation and understanding of God, a gift that faith offers. In the verses that follow (vv. 46-55), traditionally called the *Magnificat*, Luke shows that Mary finds protection and empowerment from God.¹⁶ She responds to Elizabeth's praises of her by offering her own praise to God (v. 46ff). Both women drew strength from each other. While Mary's presence honoured Elizabeth, Elizabeth enables the former articulate her self-understanding. Luke later encapsulates the overall theme of the *Magnificat* in Jesus' evangelizing vision statement (4:17-18). In essence,

¹⁵ Caroline N. Mbonu, "Drawn from the Shadows: The Significance of the Galilean Mary for Women in Igbo Society", in Robert Lassalle-Klein, ed., *Jesus of Galilee: Contextual Christology for the 21st Century* (Maryknoll, New York: Orbis Books, 2011), 141.

¹⁶ Vasiliki Limberis, "Mary 1", in Carol Myers, ed, *Women in Scripture: A Dictionary of Named and unnamed Women in the Hebrew Bible, The Apocryphal/Deuterocanonical Books, and the New Testament* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 2000), 117.

the goal of faith is to foster an ambience of freedom that enables God-seekers enter into the Reign of God where “I shall know fully, as I am known” (1 Cor 13:12). For those who draw upon the Bible for guidance towards spiritual growth, this homely interaction between Mary and Elizabeth offers insights that can be appropriated for the new evangelization initiative.

Insights for the New Evangelization

A faith that is deeply rooted in the God remains the thrust for the new evangelization. Faith as proper response to the Reign of God has several dimensions of meaning.¹⁷ The biblical word for “faith” refers most basically to faithfulness or fidelity in the sense of putting one’s trust in God.¹⁸ In appropriating insights from Luke 1:39-45, I borrow as communicative tool Marcus J. Borg’s categories of the three primary dimensions of faith: faith as faithfulness or fidelity, faith as trust, and faith as belief.¹⁹

i. Faith as faithfulness or fidelity: faith in the sense of fidelity implies relationship. To have faith in God, therefore, is consistent with being in relationship with the God-self. Israel’s patriarchs and matriarchs understood and lived this relationship codified in the first three commandments of the Decalogue (Exod 20:2-6). The synoptic authors sum up this relationship in the first of the two great commandments: “You shall love the Lord, your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind” (Matt 22:37; Mark 12:30; Luke 10:27a). Observe, therefore, that faith appears as a transpersonal experience. Significantly, a faith experience comes alive in interpersonal relationships. Here the second half of the greatest commandment comes into play: “You shall love your neighbour as yourself” (Matt 22:39; Mark 12:31; Luke 10:27b). The reader observes the love dynamics in Luke 1:39-45, where the relationships are both active and positive. We note the positive and active relationships the two women, Mary and Elizabeth, have with God and with each other. Their fidelity to God is also seen in the fidelity between them as persons. Their relationship fosters self-gift. A faith devoid of total self-gift appears hollow. A barometer of our faithfulness is manifest in our relationships with our immediate environment, that is, family, friends, job, community, and the local church. Austin Echema expresses the faith that articulates grassroots evangelization thus: “Specific to the apostolate of the laity is the evangelization of the temporal order, that is, to bring the spirit of Christ into the ordinary arena of life such as the family, the arts and professions, science and culture, trade and commerce, politics and government, mass media and recreation.”²⁰ In this lies fidelity, a commitment that cannot be separated from fidelity to God (Matt 25:31-46; 1 John 4:20). Indeed, faith in the sense of fidelity or relationship points to good deeds, a proof of one’s

¹⁷ The proper response to God who is faithful to the covenant then entails, first, that one must accept God’s word or promise as true because God is Truth; and second, that one must show passionate and abiding compliance, that is, an active readiness to comply with the word. The prophets did this by opening themselves up in docility to God’s word and carrying it out unswervingly, and were thus, in that sense, persons of faith. The true Israelite must also be docile to God’s word and steadfast in carrying it out. In this way, the fidelity of the prophet or the true Israelite becomes an earthly replication of God’s own fidelity and abiding love {See Avery Dulles, *The Assurance of Things Hoped For: A Theology of Faith* (New York/Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1994), 8.

¹⁸ Daniel Harrington, *The Church According to the New Testament: What the Wisdom and Witness of the Early Christianity Teach us Today* (Chicago: Sheed & Ward, 2001), 27.

¹⁹ Marcus J. Borg, *The God We Never Knew: Beyond Dogmatic Religion to a more Authentic Contemporary Faith* (San Francisco: HarperCollins Publishers, 1997), 168-171.

²⁰ Austin Echema, “Religious Formation of the Laity: Reinterpreting the Image and Role of the Catechists in our Parishes,” in *The Church in Africa: Witness to Justice, Peace and Reconciliation a Post-Synodal Reflection and Reception* (eds.), Luke E. Ijezie, Stephen Audu and Agnes I. Acha (Nigeria: CATHAN Publication, 2013), 280.

faithfulness. Good works tend to lubricate the wheels of relationships. Active proclamation of the word is consistent with creating various avenues of relationships that facilitate the cultivating, nurturing, as well as sustaining the faith. In light of the forgoing, the new evangelization must not only promote doctrines, it must question believers' relationship with family members, colleagues, business associates, the local church, and the local community. Faithfulness to the physical environment cannot be ignored. Being evangelized by the God-self through the instrumentality of the angel Gabriel, Mary bore the good news first to her relative and subsequently to others. Recognize the order in which evangelization progresses. Attention to members of one's household is imperative in an attempt to proclaim the good news to outsiders.

ii. Faith as trust: again relationship plays a role in this understanding of faith. To have faith in someone indicates trust in her or him. It follows then that trusting God denotes having faith in God. Mary trusted the One who spoke to her. This trust in the sense of faithful relationship, led Mary on a mission to the hill country of Judea. Trust obliterates doubt and its handmaid, anxiety. The text (1:39) is silent on anxiety. Luke tells us the Nazareth maiden went with haste to the hill country. One can read that the disposition of haste does not give room for detailed preparations even as she faces a rough and rugged trip ahead. Like the lilies of the field and birds of the air (Matt 6:25-33; Luke 12:22-33), the maiden's trust enabled her fulfil her mission. Possessions and material security appear to put a wedge between us and this kind of trust that faith demands. A critical assessment of our relationship to possessions serves as indicator of the level of trust we possess. Like Mary, believers must trust that the One who has called them forth would not abandon them. Doubt, the opposite of trust, can be crippling. Doubt produces anxiety and anxiety enervates, leaving one hollow and confused. Without passion for the word evangelization would not be possible. Faith as trust can show forth in zeal, passion, and complete trust in Divine Providence.

iii. Faith as belief is consistent with knowing that there is something to which faith leads. In other words, faith as belief stands as a pointer. This sense of faith involves believing enough to respond to a situation. Knowledge of God is implicit in faith as belief. Faith as belief demands a response. Mary's response *ge, noito, moi kata. to. r`h/ma, sou* (1:38), exemplifies this characteristic of faith. Thus Elizabeth could say "Blessed is she who believes". Faith as belief is radical, that is to say, it is fundamental. Faith as belief does not have any set doctrinal teaching, but only a sense of confidence in a God who is faithful. Positive thinking encourages one to "believe in one's self". The aphorism "believe in yourself", does not negate a belief in God. Rather the saying challenges one to reach down deep within and call forth the God-energy within; the God-energy can be described as the *imago Dei*. Bénézet Bujo points out that following from the relationship of the "God within", is the Christian understanding of the human capability deriving from the *imago Dei*, that is, the idea that "a person is 'capable' of God (*capax Dei*)".²¹ That capability reinforces the sense of *knowing* that there is something to which it leads. The empowering influence of the Holy Spirit (*imago Dei*) in the life of the believer confirms this expression of faith. A spirit infused person is fired up with passion for the Word and the Reign of God. There is a direct correlation between faith and passion. Lack of faith is manifest in lack of zeal, apathy, lethargy, among others. Faith remains a fundamental virtue that is able to move

²¹Bénézet. Bujo, *Ethical Dimension of Community: The African Model and the Dialogue between North and South* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications of Africa, 1998) 146.

mountains (Luke 19:5-10); manifest in God's word spoken amidst the cacophony of daily life and Jesus' redemptive presence changed those touched by his word.

Faith is a lively virtue, it is organic and it grows. Since faith grows, it must be nourished and nurtured. A faith that is neglected dies. Cultivated in her tradition, and nurtured by the Holy Spirit, Mary's faith became solid as rock (see Luke 6:46-49). Each Christian, therefore, must actively grow her/his faith. Through fidelity to spiritual exercises such as reading as well as works of mercy, the faith can be nourished and sustained. Evangelizing through spiritual directions enables a God-seeker discover God's will and the grace to act on them.

Faith as fidelity, trust, and belief, remain bound up in the will of God. In seeking God's will, God gifts seekers of God's will with the Holy Spirit, who enables them to engage the world fruitfully. Thus a person can go with haste because s/he has been gifted with an extraordinary power. To use the words of Pope Francis in his *Lumen Fidei*: "In God's gift of faith, a supernatural infused virtue, we realize that a great love has been offered us, a good word has been spoken to us, and that when we welcome that word, Jesus Christ the Word made flesh, the Holy Spirit transforms us, lights up our way to the future and enables us joyfully to advance along that way on wings of hope".²² In other words, haste in responding to God's call becomes a routine for both adults and children who have received the good news of God's grace.

New evangelization is for everyone, children and adults alike. Mary's evangelizing presence sanctified John the Baptist even while still in his mother's womb. John's movement in Elizabeth's womb suggests that evangelizing starts at a very early period of existence. We can no longer continue to wait till children are ready to receive first communion before teaching them the doctrine of the Church. We must teach the children the faith even in light of contemporary advancement in technology. Encouraging children to tell their stories and write their prayers can help them grow in the knowledge of the faith. Mary's mission as evangelizer never ended with infancy narrative, it continued to the foot of the cross (John 19:25-27). Thus Mary continues her proclamation of the word at the crucifixion, the resurrection, and the ascension. She carries on with the proclamation of the word even after the ascension. Luke locates Mary, a woman of faith, and a silent witness, who accompanied Jesus all through his life at the Upper Room in Jerusalem in his second volume work (Acts 1:14). She returns to this place of divine encounter, the Last Supper scene (Matt 26:26-30; Mark 14:15-26; Luke 22:7-20; John 1-30), with the disciples after the Ascension. Brown points out one reference to Mary after the Ascension: "In the Luke-Acts corpus (Acts 1:14), there is one reference to Mary as part of the small group who returned to Jerusalem after Jesus' ascension, a further hint of her understanding and support of her son's special identity and mission".²³ Furthermore, Johnson reflects the last Lukan depiction of Mary. According to Johnson, Luke "places her in the upper room along the 120 women and men disciples and the brothers of Jesus, all in prayer awaiting the coming of the Spirit".²⁴ Mary's sustained witnessing to the mission of her Son after the ascension together with disciples, who had come over into early Christian life, ensure the continuity Jesus wanted.²⁵ That continuity remains the mission of all who by baptism have been incorporated into the body of Christ and thus commissioned to go "make disciples of all nations" (Matt 28:19-20).

²² Pope Francis, *Lumen Fidei*, No 7.

²³ Brown, *The Church the Apostles left behind*, 64.

²⁴ Johnson, *Truly our Sister*, 115.

²⁵ Brown, *The Church the Apostles left behind*, 64.

All four Gospels have significant episodes on Mary as one who proclaims the word. An example from the Gospel of John would suffice. Although Mary featured less in the Gospel according to John than in the Lukan tradition, her roles in John were not without significance. Reading through the evangelizing lens, one can attribute Mary's role at the wedding at Cana to a proclamation (John 2:1-12). By her instruction to the waiters at the wedding, she demonstrates her faith and an intimate knowledge of the son, the Word made flesh. Thus her intervention serves to point him out to the waiters, who were privy to the water turned wine. Scripture is silent about what happened to the waiters thereafter. By today's reflection, the waiters would become Jesus followers having witnessed the miracle he performed (John 2:7).

Furthermore, the paradigm of the Nazareth maiden in reflecting the Bible on Faith and evangelization is particularly instructive for Christian women. In the text (1:39-45), Luke allows us to see Mary not only as virgin and mother but also as a woman full of faith and one who proclaims that faith to others (evangelizer). Paul VI reflects this aspect of the Nazareth maiden when he states that "she is an exemplar not in the particular social conditions of the life she led, but in the way in her own life she heard the word of God and kept it".²⁶ To "keep the word" means more things than one. However, it does not in any way suggest hoarding. Rather to keep the word implies owning it. Owning the word means making the word one's own. Only in owning can one have full possession, a concept that also implies understanding. Thus, owning/having, effects sharing because *nemo dat quod non habet*. The example of Mary of Nazareth challenges all women to be active participants in spreading the Good News of the Reign of God. Established by the sacrament of baptism as members of the covenant, women as well as men share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ. The constant challenge remains to carry on the mission of evangelization entrusted to all Christian people in the Church and in the world. The power of the word impels women to use their generative powers to nurture and build up healthy lives in the social and natural world.²⁷ Hence, Catholic women can no longer continue to envision themselves at the receiving end of the evangelization program, they must regard themselves *primus* evangelizers in church life. Like Mary who first thought Jesus the rudiments of Jewish life, which is consistent with the *Tanakh* (Jewish Scriptures).²⁸

Reflecting on the Christian vocation to be bearers of Christ, that is, evangelizers, Augustine of Hippo appropriates Mary's role as Christ bearer for all Christians. "We do have the nerve to call ourselves the mother of Christ";²⁹ "because by being heavy or pregnant (*gravida*) with belief in Christ, by carrying him in our hearts full of love, we bring forth the Saviour into the needy world."³⁰ This expression portrays a profound faith that demands proclamation.

Women, particularly Catholic mothers, remain the undisputable primary teachers of the faith to the children. Women's active participation in cultivating a faith-filled existence cannot but impart the upbringing of offspring. Such mode of existence guarantees that the future generations of Catholics would, without doubt, grow and become strong, filled with wisdom and in favor of

²⁶ Johnson, *Truly our Sister*, 286.

²⁷ Johnson, *Truly our Sister*, 287.

²⁸ The name *Tanakh* is an acronym of the first Hebrew letter of each of the Masoretic Text's three traditional subdivisions: Torah ("Teaching", also known as the Five Books of Moses), *Nevi'im* ("Prophets") and *Ketuvim* ("Writings")

²⁹ Augustine, *Sermons*, 3:288 (Sermon 72A.8)

³⁰ Johnson, *Truly our Sister*, 119.

God and humankind. Fidelity to the word in all ramifications guarantees that the glory of God will dwell in our land (Psalm 85:10).

Conclusion

The Lukan pericopé studied offers a paradigm for the new evangelization in Nigeria. Traditionally designated the Visitation, the passage offers a rare glimpse of two Jewish women in the first century Palestine, living together and sharing faith for three months. The Visitation undergirds women's approach to transmitting the Good News. At the beginning of his Gospel, Luke presents a homely scene that depicts women's fidelity to each other, and commitment to their faith tradition. From a Christian perspective, we deduce how the commitment is carried over to the WORD, the essence of the new evangelization. Evangelized and empowered by the Holy Spirit, the maiden of Nazareth demonstrates that those who believe in God become transformed by the love to which they have opened their hearts in faith reflected in fidelity, trust and, belief. And believers manifest this same love by proclaiming to the waiting world. For Catholic women especially, the example of Mary of Nazareth in accepting the WORD and proclaiming same in a familial setting remains a strong paradigm for family evangelization. But Mary, the evangelizer, must first and foremost be grounded in the paschal mystery. She or he must not lose sight of the cross for the cross remains an integral part of the Good News. That is to say, Christianity without the cross, a strong Pentecostal influence on Nigeria Catholicism, cannot be part of the new evangelization. The new evangelization calls us to balance the joys of the spirit with the cross of Christ. Mary of Nazareth, a model of faith and the *primus* evangelizer in the New Testament, remains for all time a paradigm of the new evangelization, which the Church calls us to embrace with passion.