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Chapter Twelve

Religion and Politics- Perspectives of the Social Teaching of the Church: The Case of Nigeria¹

I. The Christian Challenge and the Mandate to Transform Society

“You are the light of the world. You are the salt of the earth. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden.”²

The aim of this paper is to show that the *Christian Churches* have a role to play within *Civil Society* in influencing a constructive and positive social change in the world. This affects values on the cultural, socio-economic and political levels of nations. Such change is necessary towards transformation of society for the common good. It follows that this is the challenge facing many developing countries such as Nigeria in the genuine search for credible and sustainable systems that can maintain efforts put into building credible institutions and partnerships. If this is done, the polity can be stabilized to guarantee peace and promote solidarity in our fragile communities.

It follows, therefore, that the basic questions for my presentation as already conjectured are: *How can the Christian Churches contribute to the establishment of civil societies? To what extent are Church institutions recognized as participants in civil societies? And do they take any political responsibility and what kind of political influence do they exploit?* The answers to these questions are manifold, different and contentious as they form the thrust of this paper.

I argue, however, that Christian Churches especially the Catholic Church have both a mandate and mission based on their essence, organizational, institutional, personnel and technical capacity and with their many years of local and international experience founded upon credible human and spiritual values to assist in this search for answers to these questions. Christian Churches have a role to play in transforming the social order. As the position of the leadership of the Catholic Laity Council of Nigeria in the past has shown, there is agreement that:

¹ IKE, O. F.; paper contribution at the Konrad Adenauer Foundation Conference in Berlin, Germany, 2006

² Mathew 5:13-14.

“The churches, as well as other religious groups, have continued to play a part in the ongoing process of societal modernization and have contributed to the concurrent discourses on civil society. In some instances, the churches have actually gained importance and have reached a new level of significance... Furthermore, it should be kept in mind that within the Christian Churches there are also a lot of different movements, and their influence on society needs to be fully evaluated at the present time”.

Within the Christian Churches, there are also various movements from the moderate to the fundamentalist and extreme that may suggest that one cannot give a blanket response to the thematic without clarification of concepts, for if not properly qualified, religion could even impede people's active participation as citizens and hinder their rational economic behaviour instead of supporting it. The theme “*Church and Civil Society*” comes to straighten the position of the churches as active and dynamic agents within the society, which, although “*faith based*”, have a capability and momentum for social mobilization, value creation, prophetic engagement and concrete action. The Christian Churches have the potential to transform and complement the efforts of government in achieving these aims.

2. Focus on Nigeria

Nigeria is Africa's most populated nation, with 140 million people (Statistics of the census figures held in Nigeria in June 2006). With a large Christian and Muslim population of over 50 million people each had a strong presence of adherents of indigenous and traditional religion. Nigeria, remains a country, which has diversity of religions, cultural settings, language groups numbering over 350 and ethnic groups of over 400. What holds Nigerians together is surprisingly a belief in their deep religiosity founded on traditional African and cultural values of co-existence; ability to reconcile and interest factors. What could also split Nigeria is the inability to manage the great positive potentials which these values of religion and religiosity bring.

Nigeria, and indeed much of Africa, is blessed by a benevolent creator with abundant human and mineral resources, with rich varieties and diversities in situations of both Church and society. Yet, there is abject poverty and the general misery of the people, traceable to human factors such as failed leadership, colonial and neo-colonial past, oppressive structures of injustice and sin. These include a myriad of vices uncountable to mention, such as, bad governance which has been teleguided and promoted by successive military dictatorships and bad civilian governments; the exploitation and

degradation of the environment as has never been known before; desertification of large areas of the country; deforestation of the mangrove forests; oil spillages and the destruction of the Niger Delta and other solid minerals of Nigeria, sometimes without social or corporate responsibility by businesses and corporations to the people or the earth; the mismanagement of scarce resources; ethnic bigotry; corruption and the economic disparities of a people so richly endowed, yet so unable to manage these resources due to other global and international aspects of a world unjust economic and political order and the religious fanaticism which hopelessness drives people into when all hope is lost. This is the background of the growing Islamic religious tensions in Nigeria leading often to violence and destruction.

On the topic of religion and what it means for Africans generally, we chose the wise and true words of John Mbiti who writes in his book on the *'Religions and Philosophy of Africa'* that African peoples *"eat, dress, live, think, work, dance and breathe religiously. Indeed, every activity of these people is founded on religion, be it name giving, food, dance, celebration to mention but a few"*.

For our context in this work, this *"Religiosity"* is important as a point of departure as it is fundamental to the reality of the Church as an organization. Religion brings with it spiritual wisdom and meaning which has content and vision about God, the world, morality, man and society. This is what Nigeria needs at this time, to have people and organizations with rational religious faith and belief in Nigeria, its people, its resources and, therefore, its future. It means the gifts of patriotism, the ability to fight corruption, the ability to govern oneself and promote good governance, the rule of law, transparent economic practices, respect for human rights, promotion of freedoms of both individuals, groups and women, the encouragement of education and health initiatives, counselling of the aged and disabled. Following the Africa Synod, the Catholic Bishops of Africa pleaded for a collaboration and partnership of the Church and the State in African countries as the Synod conclusions contained in the document *'Ecclesia in Africa'* of Pope John Paul. These Synodal conclusions include an agenda to promote: *Proclamation, Enculturation, Dialogue, Justice and Peace and the means of Social Communication*.

3. The Church and Civil Society

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council in 1965 reflected in deep detail on the role and place of the Church and the Christian in the

modern world. In its statement published in the last document of that Council known as the decree “*Gaudium et Spes*”, the Church determined that it had a Mission from its founder and a role to play in the life of world. The document states very clearly that the Church must “*consider the signs of the times and translate them in the light of the Gospel*” (GS No. 2). In this understanding, events, situations and aspirations of people have a direct link to faith and the role of organized religion in offering a response that is concrete and healing. In this approach, scriptural passages long neglected make new sense. The demands of the Gospel are applied to the massive injustices prevalent on modern society, both national and global and are translated to reflect on their relevance on how a better life can be achieved. Thus, faith and life are linked. Far back in 1963, Pope John XXIII understood this challenge for in the Encyclical Letter *Mater et Magistra*, he writes:

*“ Though the Church’s first care must be for souls, how she can sanctify and make them share in the gifts of heaven, she concerns herself too with the exigencies of man’s daily life, with his livelihood and education and his general welfare and prosperity.”*³

Applied on the universal level, therefore, there is a challenge for participation in the world wide call for institutional and individual engagement especially of the Christian Churches in actions that lead to societal transformation. These include activities that border on areas where the State is a competent provider of goods and services. Thus, the promotion of education, social services, health issues, healing wounds, reconciling divided people with the ingredients of justice development and peace, promoting the rule of law, support for the demands of accountability and transparency, good governance and the principles of democracy upon which the stability of a nation depends.

Christian engagement on these matters could be effectively done through the knowledge and spread of the Church’s Social Teaching which anchors the need for Church and Civil Society to promote the ‘Common Good.’ This is the practical ambient for realizing the ambition of the role of the Church and Civil Society in the transformation of Nigeria from *poverty to wealth, ignorance to knowledge, apathy to action, backwardness to progress, disease to health and exclusion to an all-inclusive society*. No wonder, the document of the Synod of Bishops on the theme “*Justice in the World*” in 1971 states very clearly that:

³ *Mater et Magistra*, no. 3.

“Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the teaching of the Gospel, or in other words, of the Church’s Mission for the salvation of the human race and its liberation from oppressive situation”.

Earlier, the great Pope John XXIII had declared that achieving such aim was possible on the conditions of knowledge and spread of the Social Doctrine of the Church:

“But today more than ever, it is essential that this doctrine be known, assimilated, and put into effect in the form and manner that the different situations allow and demand. It is a difficult task indeed, yet a most noble one. To the performance of it we call, not only our own sons and daughters scattered throughout the world, but also men and women of goodwill everywhere”. (Mater et Magistra).”

Concluding, the Pope calls for the unity of Thought and Action. *“It is not enough merely to formulate a social doctrine. It must be translated into reality. And this is particularly true of the Church’s Social Doctrine, the light of which is truth, justice its objective and love its driving force” (Mater et Magistra).*

4. The Church Transcends Civil Society and the Political Community:

“You are in the world but not of the world (John 15: 18-25).”

Since this is the thrust and the understanding of the issues, the current debate in some circles should actually not be focused on whether the Christian Churches and Faith Based Organizations as well as religious groups and indeed religion as such could play a role in the positive transformation of the world and society at large for here they belong as citizens. There are civic obligations and it is clear that they must be engaged. The debate at all is on whether the Christian Churches could in themselves be described as part of Civil Society. This of course is a debate that is difficult to conduct for it touches on areas that deal with the mandate and Mission of the church and are beyond the competence of temporal authorities. They are accepted as given in many societies since they are transcendent and affect the self-understanding, identity, essence and Mission of the religious organizations involved themselves, beyond what external factors may want them to be or

attribute to them. Of course this point of view is an expression that may not be generally shared, thus the debate.

Paragraph 76 of the document of the Second Vatican council “*Church in the Modern World*” states that it is highly important, especially in pluralist societies that a proper view exists of the relation between the political community and the Church. The position of the Catholic Church is such that:

*“She must in no way be confused with the political community, nor bound to any political system. In their proper spheres, the political community and the Church are mutually independent and autonomous.” Yet by different titles, each serves the personal and social vocation of the same human beings. The more they co-operate reasonably, the more effectively they will perform this service to everybody’s advantage. Man is not confined to the temporal order. The Church rooted in the Redeemer’s love, helps to make justice and charity flourish more vigorously within nations and between nations. She preaches the gospel truth and brings the light of her teaching to be on every province of human affairs with the witness of her faithful. Thus she respects and promotes political liberty and responsibility. Always and everywhere the Church must be allowed to preach the faith with true freedom, teach her social doctrine, carry out her task among men unhampered and pass moral judgments even on matters considering politics when fundamental rights or the salvation of souls require it.*⁴

From the above, it is clear that the Catholic Church does not understand its destiny or see its existence as one that clearly a part of the Civil Society. The Church is a global player and has remained so even before the birth of virtually all the modern nations and civil society organizations that exist today. This historical role and the core of its Mission to heal, to sanctify and to lead and to reconcile all things in Christ places the mandate of the Church as one that has even a Mission to bring back to the heavenly Father the gift of both the State, Civil Society Organizations, the Private sector, communities and individuals most of whom are fragile and are broken into a reconciled whole. The Church in her self-understanding stands as the agent of Christ in the service of evangelization to entire creation and mankind.

⁴ Gaudium et Spes, para.76

*“Go into the whole world proclaim the good news of salvation to all creation”
(Matthew 28:20).*

Indeed, the Catholic Church (and some other Christian Churches) understand its Mission as one that is moral and transcendental, hence, a divine mandate that is before the State, beyond the State and yet in service of the State for the salvation of the State, its peoples and all humanity. Because of this claim to transcendental origins in God, who in Christ has given the Church its Mission, mandate, end and means, the Church cannot be easily be called a part of Civil Society. Yet, the Church collaborates and partners very closely in an integral manner with State, the private and public sectors and all people of goodwill in building up a sustainable human society.

This position, clear as it is, could pose problems if not well understood. It is the task of the current debate to make reasonable propositions to find a proper balance in the advanced views so that a correct understanding and role for the Christian Churches is found. The purpose of the Church is Mission for the ‘Integral Salvation of Mankind.’ It is not just a Mission that targets simply the temporal satisfaction and provision of people’s needs and freedom that is meant. That would be too limiting. The Church works towards the total salvation and liberation of mankind – body and soul and the reconciliation of entire creation with God in Christ.

But does this imply that the Church is beyond the State and the civil society? A response to this question is not easy for this is a question that has universal appeal. Religion and religious values and institutions have affected virtually every nation, people, cultures and races on earth. The experiences may be different but people see ‘Religious Institutions’ as God’s mission that is even beyond the State. In some instances, from the historical point of view, the State was even placed under Religion. God was considered the absolute maker and creator of the universe upon whom all power depends: “Power and Might are in his hands” as the Psalmist writes. In our time and age, it has become very urgent to make a proper balance between the roles of the Churches and religious organizations and re-assess their competence *vis-a-vis* the State. Collaboration, joint partnership and inter-dependence appear as the right concepts to apply in this connection.

5. Challenges and Activities of the Christian Churches in Nigeria

Christian Missionary enterprise started in Nigeria in the mid-19th Century, around 1850 with various Christian denominations involved, particularly, the Catholics, Anglicans, Baptists, Methodists, Evangelicals and other Protestants engaged in the work of evangelization. Later, the African Christian Churches

emerged with their emphasis on enculturation and the mixture of the Western-received-euro-centric Christian faith and their traditional practices. The phenomenon of the Pentecostal Church's in Nigeria is very current and, therefore, falls outside the scope of this work. Just for the sake of reference, Islam had been in Nigeria particularly in the Northern parts for centuries earlier. In Nigeria, the Catholic Church with other confessions and religious groups, often acting separately in the past, contributed differently and on various levels towards building up a genuine foundation for the emergence of Nigeria, a country that is struggling to emerge within the international community as a nation that guarantees human freedom, the satisfaction of human wants and the preservation of the integrity of its peoples. Christian Missionaries especially have championed and contributed to Nigeria's development in the past and present historical epochs expected to continue into the future by engaging in many activities:

- **Fight Against Slave Trade and Abuse of Human Dignity:** The fight against slave trade and other manifold abuses against human worth which according to history records was an abhorrent and nefarious denigration of human dignity. Slave trade was the business of selling human beings from various African nations through the North Atlantic Ocean axis to Europe and America; but also on the trans-Saharan axis to Arabic nations; as well as on trans-Indian Ocean axis to Asia. The slave trade was fought against and stopped by humanists, philosophers, free thinkers, groups of enlightened people acting with a Christian and human conscience. Much later on, the work of Christian missionaries within Nigeria itself made the complete stop of this trade possible. By fighting against the slave trade and stopping it effectively, the Christian Churches both in the West and in Nigeria who collaborated, fulfilled their mandate to enhance the sacred dignity and worth of individuals and indeed the black race. Missionaries such as the Anglicans and the Catholics set up centres where ex-slaves were received and rehabilitated, given education and guaranteed protection. They also purchased and paid the price due on ex-slaves whose slave masters demanded for the original price paid on them, to mention but a few of the activities related to this traumatic and shameful practice of slave dealings and the trade of human beings as goods.
- **Decolonization:** The fight for decolonization was also championed by various interest groups, humanists, politicians, some Christian persons and the indigenes themselves who came to realize the monumental injustice which colonialism brought with it. Today, the Christian Churches are leading in the decolonization campaign as we witnessed in the case of

South Africa, Kenya, Zimbabwe, Biafra (which did not survive then) and many other nations the promotion of education for all.

- **Health:** The promotion of health, social institutions and welfare homes in the pre-nation-state of Nigeria was mainly a primary method of evangelization by the emergent new Christian missionaries. Orphanages were built to cater for the socially disadvantaged in many rural areas by Catholic Missionaries; hospitals were constructed in the urban and peri-urban centres since under colonial rule, the British in Nigeria did not care for the rural areas and the lives of people there but focused on infrastructure within some urban towns of pre-colonial Nigeria. These hospitals and the training of adequate personnel both within and without Nigeria and the supply of equipment and drugs helped in no small measure to guaranteeing the foundations of a healthy nation. Today in Nigeria, the Catholic Church remains the largest and strongest health services supplier amongst all the Christian and religious denominations in the country.
- **Education:** The promotion of educational institutions such schools, evening bible classes, centres for learning at the primary, secondary, tertiary and skills acquisition levels. Through the schools, people were empowered and encouraged with the capacity to fight for their own liberation, engage the oppressor, gain independence and self-reliance which education brings with it; cultivation of culture, morality and conscience as ingredients of good character and the overall impact of education in nation building. It is on record that the best schools in Nigeria till date are those with Christian origins and background. With meagre resources that is much less than what the State has, Mission and Christian Churches have built up massive training programmes and educated millions of Nigerians at all levels from childhood to adulthood. This is an area where collaboration and partnership is called for, instead of the hostile State attitude to Mission schools and even the complete takeover of such schools at a certain period of the nation's development, at the end of the Biafra war. Education is key to a nation's development. In Nigeria the products of Christian missionary schools participated actively in nation building as politicians, teachers, administrators, entrepreneurs, civil servants in both the public and private sectors and community leaders. Upon these products of Christian Mission Schools rest to a great extent, the human and social capital which the people of the nation can showcase as their strength and asset. Christian Churches made this possible and this has continued in the absence of European

missionaries as the local priests and educated elite have continued to see education as one key area where the Nigerian State has failed and where they, the Christian Missions themselves cannot fail.

- **Social Mobilization Potentials:** The power of mobilization of people and the reality of grassroots support and control of the churches on their believers is a factor which is critical in Nigeria. African peoples believe their religious leaders and respect the impact of religion on their own personal life and destiny. Not to be religious is to be un-African and indeed un-Nigerian. Christian Churches have a potential as social organizations to influence their followers, not just in a prayer or faith encounter but even on social and political matters. Through this mobilization, people were encouraged to go out to vote and to effect changes in their society on the social, economic and political levels of the society. This element of grassroots mobilization is highly relevant and critical in today's Nigeria. Even though the Churches did not found political parties or make their members join the political parties as these were more ethnic at the onset as religious, they could with the present state of things at least influence the process of a credible election by election monitoring, call for a boycott of elections, influence candidates for political post and indeed, they do influence who gets what post in some relevant government and political postings.
- **Leadership Roles:** The Nigerian Christian Churches seem to be assuming greater responsibility in leadership roles. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) writes public statements often much of which are orientations of the State and the citizenry towards higher values and the position to take on matters where one demands to take a stand. This leadership role makes the Bishops and priests to be consulted by various stakeholders in matters concerning the common good and public good.
- **Missionary Awareness:** The country with the largest number of seminarians and persons entering the seminary to become priests in the Catholic world of today is in Nigeria. Statistics from the Vatican show that this is followed by India and Poland; Nigeria is now ready to send missionaries to other countries of the world including Europe, America and Asia, which are countries that once sent their own missionaries to Africa. In assuming this internal God given gift and role as a missionary producing country, Nigeria is now gaining respect from the Catholic

Church as a leader in the provision of trained agents of evangelization who work, not only in their own countries, but even abroad. No one shall doubt the great effect of a country known as a provider of missionaries. Placed besides countries that produce technology, ICT merchandise and other goods, this is a notable achievement and a worthy contribution of the Nigerian Church to universal Christendom at this age and time.

- **Constructive Criticism of the State and Advocacy:** The country where the Christian Churches are both loyal to the State, yet are the greatest critique of the State. Because of the weight of the opinion of the leaders of Christian religious groups, the Christian Association of Nigeria which is a union of all the five major groups of Christian religious denominations has emerged, besides the singular voices of the Bishops or their positions in plural as is often noted under the Catholic Bishops conference of Nigeria (CBCN) and other voices which attract both international and local audience and attention. What religious leaders matters to the State, the adherents of these religions and the citizenry.
- **Promotion of Dialogue:** The promotion of dialogue of life and of religions especially with Islam and traditional societies, with the modern world and technology and with the various levels of society is one that falls squarely into the portfolio of the Christian Churches. Dialogue is all about finding a common ground in the search for truth without necessarily compromising one's own position. Dialogue minimizes the urge for the use of violence and other means in the settlement of issues. With a large percentage of Muslims and Christians, numbering on either side over fifty million people, Nigeria has the largest population of these religious groups more than any other country on the continent. Its challenges, therefore, in maintaining religious peace and harmony are a must, difficult as it may be.

6. Moving Nigeria Forward - The Role of the Christian Churches:

There are definitely challenges that face Nigeria at this period of its search for unity and progress as a great nation within Africa. With the background of several years of attempts and failures caused both by historical, contingent, human and natural factors, the Christian Churches cannot stand aloof and watch as the nation goes apart and its great mission of reconciliation and announcing the good news of salvation thwarted. It has become clear that with many years of military dictatorship, the Nigerian State became a failed experiment which fabric and architecture had to be re-done. This is the

challenge of the present times. Making this possible demands enormous sacrifices of all and sundry including individuals, NGO's and civil society organizations, local and national actors, private sector led organizations, communities, the international community and of course religious and traditional leaders. The Churches fall into this category.

Thus, the entire attempt towards nation-building to which the Churches are called to act together as stakeholders and salvage the nation cannot be achieved through prayer and preaching alone. This is good but not enough. It has to be followed by concrete action as is currently carried out by the various agents of the Catholic Church in Nigeria in the commissions for Development, Justice, Peace and Caritas. These activities have to be intensified. Such action can be played out by articulate programmes that address and support the national and public efforts of the politicians in the following areas:

- *promotion of the rule of law,*
- *support for economic stability with programmes for sustainability,*
- *enhancing good governance,*
- *assisting the State in the monitoring of elections to avoid rigging,*
- *advocacy work which makes the Church the voice of the voiceless,*
- *supplying assistance in education, health and other social projects,*
- *collaborating with government in the fight against poverty at the grassroots levels,*
- *maintaining high ethical profile and calling for justice, peace and reconciliation,*
- *building communities for peace and educating its own members in tolerance,*
- *leadership and focused action,*
- *Helping to build inclusive and integrated societies.*

Using the agenda of the **Eight Millennium Development Goals**, the Secretary General of the United Nations **Mr Kofi Annan**, recognized the role religious and Church leaders can play in building the civil society and the nation. According to him:

“The eight Millennium Development Goals are a set of simple but powerful objectives which, together, make up the world’s agreed blueprint for building a better world. They have been embraced by donors, developing countries, civil society and major development institutions alike. Enlightened religious leaders and scholars of all faiths also have a key role to play. Their advocacy can influence

political leaders and ordinary citizens alike. Their teaching and guidance can inspire people to new levels of responsibility, commitment and public service. And by their example, they can promote interfaith dialogue and bridge the chasms of ignorance and misunderstanding. The decisions taken at the 2005 World Summit, and the mobilization of Civil Society groups throughout the world, offer encouraging signs of gathering political will to reach the Goals. I encourage religious leaders and scholars to do their part in defeating poverty and hunger, and in delivering the world's poorest and most marginalized people from despair."

7. Catholic Social Teaching and Guiding Principles:

We come to a conclusion of this reflection and offer some suggestions on the fundamental values and choices which the Christian Churches and indeed all religious groups may need to emphasize as crucial for the survival of society. These values are of priority in the promotion of core principles that sustain the nation. They stem from the Christian conception of life and society as envisaged in Catholic Social Thought and even find parallel in the wisdom of traditional Nigerian wisdom thought and practices in ancient culture, therefore, they are not necessarily borrowed principles.

