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Chapter Six

The Jubilee, the Church and Social Transformation in Nigeria¹

Jubilee

This is a topic of very vast significance. For jubilee as we know is a subject that goes into antiquity and continues into our own time. Jubilee signifies freedom, debt remission, reconciliation, and renewal of life, forgiveness, the promotion of justice and peace and the ushering of a new dawn. Jubilee is time to start life anew. It is a year of grace and favour, accepted to the Lord. It is one of those words in the vocabulary, which remains fresh and admired by all.

According to the Jewish Law (Leviticus 25), a Jubilee Year occurred every fifty years when Jewish slaves regained their freedom. During this period also, land reverted to its former owners. In the Roman Catholic Church, Jubilee, also called a Holy Year was a year during which the Pope grants a special *Indulgence*, to all who visit Rome on certain conditions. Pope Boniface VIII, who meant it to be celebrated every 100 years, instituted it in 1300. The interval was settled at 25 years in 1870.²

One of the ceremonies is the opening of the Holy Door by the Pope before the first Vesper of Christmas and its walling-up a year later. A Holy Year was celebrated last in 1975. The Year 2000 is considered a Great Jubilee Year, not only within the Catholic Church but also within the wider world of politics, economy, social life, art, culture, religion and indeed internationally.

The Church

Talking about the Church, someone has said that:

“The Church was conceived, brought to fruition, and nurtured by the missionary activity of the very first followers of Jesus Christ. That the Church was and is

¹ IKE, O. F.; paper presented in Bonn, Germany at the Theological Faculty organized by Prof. Lothar Roos for a collection of Essays on the Jubilee Year 2000.

² Livingstone, E.A., (Ed); The Concise Dictionary of the Christian.

*committed to preaching, teaching, and forming communities of faith has been, and continues to be well documented”.*³

Concerning the history of the universal Church, no other Institution is left standing since 2000 years ago which carries the mind back to the time when smokes of sacrifice rose from the Pantheon in ancient Rome, and when Leopards and Tigers bounded in the Flavian amphitheatre to amuse the pagan audience and devour the lives of believing Christians through torturous Martyrdom and death for the sake of the Gospel. Nero, Decius, Diocletian, Semperus and Julius Caesar are but a few names in the long list of Roman Emperors who propelled the demise of several citizens because of their faith in the Church of Christ. And today, the Church and her members continue to soar in numbers. The history of the Church exposed the fact that the proudest royal houses are but of yesterday when compared to the long line of the Supreme Pontiffs. That line we trace back in an unbroken series from the Pope who crowned Napoleon in the 18th Century to the Pope who crowned Pepin in the 8th Century, and far beyond the time of Pepin through three black Popes until St. Peter into the time of Christ himself. As we usher in the new millennium, the papacy remains and grows, not in decay, nor a mere antique like the Republic of Venice, Antioch, Babylon, Persia, ancient Greece, Egypt, Sudan, but ever full of youthful life and vigour.

Social Transformation

Discussing the topic of Church and Social Transformation is therefore a joyous excursion into ancient, medieval and modern history spanning over 2000 years of human history. The Church saw the commencement of virtually all the governments and the ecclesiastical establishments that now exist in the world. She was great and respected before the Saxon set foot in Britain, before the Franks passed the Rhine River, when Grecian eloquence still flourished in Antioch, when idols were worshiped in the Temple of Mecca, (600 years before Prophet Mohammed was born and Islam established) a time when much of black African was revealed in undiluted tradition and cultural seclusion.

The Church gave birth to and nurtured the great innovators of the ages of discovery, the renaissance, the middle ages, the enlightenment, the modern times and children of the post-modern era of history. It was the Church's contribution to history which led to the major discoveries of all times such as the printing press, electricity, steam engine, the voyage of discovery, the

³ Church, Oxford Univ. Press, Oxford, 1977, p. 245 and 281.

architectures of the divine and human milieu as we observe their ruins all over the great cities of human achievement. One would rightly point out that civilization is a product of the Church, which empowered her children to initiate and to achieve creative greatness.

Which great name and achiever in the long history of 2000 years of Christianity was not a son or daughter of the Church? St. Paul, St. Peter, the long list of the saints and martyrs, confessors and doctors of the Church, including the achievers who might have been grossly misunderstood during their own time such as Galileo, Copernicus, James Watt, Scott, Florence Nightingale, Shakespeare, Mozart, Martin Luther, Henry VIII, Prince Henry the Navigator, Christopher Columbus, Vasco da Gama, William Wilberforce, Martin Luther King Junior, Karl Max, Engels, Freud, Einstein, and an endless list of names until our day.

With these vast names of the sons and daughters of the Church much of whom enjoyed the education and moral influence which religion bestows, the Church showered humanity with its every present glow through humans in all societies and at all time, all products of the Church's evangelizing mission in the world. One could even conclude that the Church exists to transform human societies into a civilization of love, knowledge and progress; to use the caption of the much quoted Pope John Paul II. Through Jesus Christ and the Church's missionary activities over the centuries, globalization had already started. "*Go into the whole world proclaim the Good News of salvation*" (Matthew 25:19).

The history of the Church therefore, for which we celebrate the Jubilee year 2000 is one which saw the conception, initiation and execution of immediate and remote social, political, economic, religious, cultural, institutional, ideological, revolutionary, and technological transformations worldwide. The tendency has not stopped but has continued today on a more intensive level as the Church has ventured into the remotest parts of the world in Asia, in Africa, in Latin America, in the distant Islands and cultures everywhere in the human universe. The Catholic Church is still sending forth to the farthest ends of the world, missionaries as zealous as those who landed in 400 AD in Kent with St. Augustine or those who landed in 1884 with Father Lutz, C.S.Sp in the Onitsha riverside of South Eastern Nigeria.

These missionaries still confront hostile kings with the same spirit with which the Church confronted Attila and the Huns or the traditional priests and medicine men of ancient Bini and Igala kingdoms to mention but a few. The

enthusiasm does not seem to dampen but has continued on a worldwide scale. “He is alive, Jesus is alive Amen” seem to be popular songs among the youth and elders of virtually every nation and tribe and people who profess the Christian religion and inhabit the world today. The Catholic Church still has a growing member of children, greater than in any former age. Her acquisitions in the new world had more than compensated for what she lost in the old. Her spiritual ascendancy extends over the vast countries where humanity is found, and her populations are certainly not fewer than a billion people. It would be difficult to show that all other separated Christian brethren united amount to a half of its population, nor we see any sign which indicates that terms of her long dominion is approaching.

The Church in Nigeria

It is the Church, which has now set foot on Nigerian soil, which attracts our focus in this reflection. The question is to ascertain how the Church in Nigeria can assist the process of a positive social transformation for the benefit of the people of this great country and indeed of the whole world. Nigerian sons and daughters now adorn the Church from the College of Cardinals, through the Archbishops, Bishops, Priests and the large number of Christian faithful. Blessed Michael Iwene Tansi, among many other million unknown ancestors, has joined the long list to assume his position among the blessed in paradise. Some even assert that the Ireland of the 19th Century has been transformed into the Nigeria of the 21st Century, especially in Igboland.

We are the witnesses, the agents, the beneficiaries and the heritage. It is this dynamism that we see as we reflect on the mystery of the Church founded by Christ, on the Rock called Peter, a Church that the founder of Christianity called mustard seed, the smallest of all the seeds but which in our own eyes has grown to become the tallest of all trees. With more than 250 ethnic groups, about 400 languages, with a vast cultural and heterogeneous plurality, Nigeria has become and represents in the language of various disciplines, “the best, the worst and the ugly”. It is a country rich in human and material resources and contains the greatest blessings which heaven could ever grant to one nation or territory.

Nigeria harbours large quantities of water, food, natural resources, land mass, human potential, plants and animals, and the specie of virtually all known and unknown creatures of an almighty and all merciful God who loves mankind abundantly. Whichever way we speculate, the nationalities that make up the Nigerian state contain the seeds of unlimited progress but also of destruction; there is potential greatness threatened by the risk of fall and

failure; This is the dialectic of the Nigerian context on three colonial fronts, namely: Western colonialism, Arabic colonialism and the internal neo-colonialism of Nigeria's own, their sons and daughters who prefer the ignoble way of betrayals instead of nobility. This is the dilemma. But it is also the context into which this paper concerning Jubilee, The Church and Social Transformation would apply and be applicable.

The Context of Jubilee and Transformation in Nigeria:

I desire to subdivide the topic into three subsections to cover the theme, namely:

1. The Jubilee and Social Transformation
2. The Church and Social Transformation
3. The Challenges of Social Transformation in Nigeria

The Jubilee and Social Transformation

In a country like Nigeria where poverty and man-made deprivations cover the lands, the laws of the Jubilee year offer a blueprint for bridging the gap between the haves and the have-nots within the country but even beyond to the committee of nations. Poverty is a scourge, which the Jubilee agenda can assist in ameliorating. No wonder these days, it is common to discuss the topic of poverty alleviation and even its eradication. Leviticus 25 verses 23-24, states the basic postulates of the Jubilee, thus:

“Furthermore, the land must not be sold beyond reclaim, for the land is mine; you are but resident aliens under my authority. Therefore, throughout the land you hold, you must provide redemption for the land.”

“Land” here in Canaan, is the Promised Land and “you” refers to the Israelites. The Israelites are to remember that God is the Landlord and they are tenants ordered not to sell the land “beyond reclaim”. Each Israelite clan's assigned plot of land must always remain in its possession. Even if it is sold, it can always be reclaimed, a process called redemption, and every fiftieth year, Jubilee Year, it must be restored to its original owner. Cancellation of debts and return of forfeited land was also known in the ancient near east. It usually occurs when a king ascended to the throne. Its purpose was to “prevent the collapse of the economy under too great a weight of private indebtedness. However, it was generally limited to the king's retainers and subject to his whim.

The Jubilee has become the rallying cry for the oppressed people of today, as the Exodus theme was for their counterparts in previous decades. This time, however, they are not enslaved politically (except where colonial rulers have been replaced by their own oppressive governments) but shackled economically. The global market economy has generated unprecedented growth and prosperity but not to them. Moreover, “three quarters of countries in sub-Sahara Africa have suffered declining per capita income and in Latin America the declines were at least as bad. The impoverishment of the third world has brought attendant injustices relevant to the Jubilee theme.

Global pollution, such as the depletion of Costa Rica’s rain forests in the interest of the timber and mining industries, have caused irremediable losses, especially in third world nations. As a result, debtor nations have issued the following demands to creditor nation (who operate through the International Monetary Fund (IMF) and similar agencies:

- Cancellation of debts;
- Restitution of land and resources of their original owners;
- Cessation from pilfering natural resources and from pollution. In Genesis 2:15 -God leased us the earth “to work it and tend it” but not to despoil it); and
- Termination of economic) slavery (as in the atrocious example of democratic India) by universally raising wages to a subsistence level.

The four demands correspond to the jubilee remission of debts, restoration of land, Sabbath rest for land and person, and release from economic servitude. Obviously, large-scale resistance met their implementation. Some demands would have to be modified. For example: wouldn’t the simultaneous remission of debts inhibit creditors from lending at all as understood in a modern society with banks and financial institutions? Indeed, this very problem faced Hillel, the spiritual authority of the first century. He found that loans were not being made because of their automatic cancellation at the Sabbatical year (Deuteronomy 15:1-2). As a solution, he issued an edict of Probul, a Greek legal term meaning “before an assembly”. It empowered the court, in place of the creditor, to collect a debt from the real property of a debtor if the bonds were delivered to it in advance of the sabbatical year.

Nonetheless, some countries employing Jubilee provisions have experienced spectacular economic growth. For example, in just two years, from 1952 to

1954, the percentage of South Korean farmers owning their land instead of working as tenants jumped from 50 to 94%. Something similar happened in Taiwan. Thus the Jubilee laws, *Mutatis mutandis*, offer a realistic blueprint for bridging the economic gap between the haves and the have-not nations, which otherwise portends political uprisings that can engulf the entire world.

The Church and Social Transformation

Jesus Christ the word made flesh is the greatest social transformer of all times. “Through him, with him, and in him” the entire universe since creation till the end of time experienced an unrepeatably incarnation, the mystery of the God head taking on human nature, born of a woman, in the power of the Holy Spirit for the salvation of mankind. This is the mystery of which the ancients and the mystics tell us transcends all human comprehension. Jesus according to the authors of the New Testament stated that his agenda was to give life, protect life, enhance life and save life. In his own words. “*I have come that they many have life and have it in full*” (John 10:10).

Whatever and whoever therefore promotes life, protects life, enhances life and saves life acts in the spirit of Jesus, the greatest social transformer of all times. This phenomenon of the Jesus’ event transformed and still transforms everything that lives in time and space from the beginning of creation even into our own times as the testimonies of our individual lives portrays. He remains both the paradigm and the measure of any worthwhile societal and individual progress. With a peculiar and unique but very simple authority, Jesus transformed the concept of time, he transformed the understanding of gender, he transformed the meaning of a Sabbath, he transformed the tradition of the ancients, he transformed the meaning of the temple; he transformed the understanding of sickness, the devil, of pain, of suffering and of death. Jesus transformed the meaning of love and marriage, of friendship and of solidarity. He transformed the law and the understanding of the prophets. He transformed the understanding of religiosity and piety.

Jesus radicalized the categories of class, race and prejudices inherent among human beings. He transformed the political economy of his time and regulated that Caesars coin be given to Caesar but that himself is given to God who is in charge of all that is created. Jesus transformed the meaning of wealth, poverty, mercy, justice, compassion, peace, faith and all the values which society during his time turned upside down. Jesus translated the meaninglessness of life and gave direction to the causes of events making it clear that; “*The Son of Man is Lord even of the Sabbath.*”

In transforming the world and its content, Jesus particularly liberated human beings from sin, from wickedness, from aberration and error, stating clearly as John records that Jesus is;

“The way, the truth and the life, the door, the good shepherd; the resurrection and the life; the Light of the world; the True Vine; the Bread of Life.”

At his ascension Jesus commanded his disciples to; *“Go out to the whole world and proclaim the good news of salvation”* (Matt. 28:20).

He sent them his spirit to accompany them on his mission: *“I am with you all days even to the end of time.”* It is this spirit of Jesus Christ working within and through the Church that has continued to transform entire societies and re-evaluated history. No other institution, religious or power had ever had an influence on the cause of events like the Catholic Church. In following Jesus Christ, the Church becomes the greatest social transformer in thought and deeds of all times. When Christianity arrived into Nigeria in the later part of the 19th Century, a multi-cultural and dynamic society like Nigeria could only explain the consequence of the Gospel, which is capable of changing anything with the power of God. Although British colonialism had replaced slavery with a market capita economy, the vestiges of injustice were still prevalent under the yoke of British imperialism. Everywhere, there still remained on the land the cry of bondage, injustice, ignorance, inhumanity, superstition and division.

It was missionaries, not the colonizers, who brought the people of Nigeria a message, capable of giving them solace, meaning, comfort, future, foundation, trust, reconciliation and Truth, which alone was able to make people Free. Talking therefore of the Church and Social Transformation, it was the Church that first brought education, emancipation, leadership, knowledge, hope, love, tolerance, openness and the liberating message of the Gospel to Nigeria and Nigerians. The Church was in the forefront of anti-colonialism and anti-human practices, whether found in tradition and culture or in the introduced Euro-Asian Arabic and American worldviews competing for the African soul. The products of the mission schools of the 19th Century challenged colonialism and led to its abolition. Example abound in such great Nigerian sons and daughters such as Nnamdi Azikiwe, Awolowo, Mbonu Ejiike, Herbert Macaulay, Akanu Ibiam, Francis Akintola, Joseph Tarka, to mention but a few out of a host of others. The result of this encounter is manifold. Political Independence was assured and freedom from colonial

bondage followed. Racial equality replaced the white man's superiority complex in the colonial context.

- The quality of the live of the people was enhanced
- Liberation of slaves was enforced;
- Slave trade; human sacrifice, cannibalism, superstitious practices ceased;
- Liberation from ignorance, education work, skill centres, and empowerment interest;
- Health work care and cure for the sickness; the orphan, women etc, was carried out.

Other activities were carried out some of which include:

- Gender promotion and equality;
- Conflict resolution among intertribal warring factions;
- Establishment of administrative structures;
- Training of local personnel in a leadership cadre;
- Establishment of community development projects;
- Basic Christian community was formed;
- Youth education and character formation;
- Employment opportunities created; and of course the
- Care for the environment, planting of trees, building of social centres, houses, and many more tangible and intangible.

The Biafran-Nigerian war of 1970 opened up a new era for Nigeria and dramatically changed the geographical and political landscape which the colonial British left behind.

The Challenge of Social Transformation in Nigeria

What are the lessons to learn for the Nigerian Church and its people from the challenges, which the Jubilee 2000 poses for us as a people and as a nation? During his visit to Nigeria on the eve of this great event, the Holy Father Pope John Paul II challenged all Nigerians to a new reconciliation.

“Like the various voices in a choir, these differences in Nigeria can exist in harmony provided there is a real desire to respect one another. This reconciliation is not weakness or cowardice. On the contrary, it demands courage and sometimes-even heroism. It is a

victory over self rather than over others. It should never be seen as dishonour. For in reality, it is a patient and wise art of peace”⁴

The Nigerian context needs to undergo the influence of the Jubilee, and in the spirit of the Jubilee Passover, the agony and suffering which any nation must endure, a new beginning and a new dawn, characterized by the Jubilee of the Pentecost, which is the fruit of the resurrection. Jesus Christ is now our Jubilee. Like Pope John Paul II wrote in his speech at Oba near Onitsha in Nigeria;

“Christ is thus a part of the history of nations. He is part of the history of your own nation on this continent of Africa”.

Thus, in the various remote and immediate documents of the Jubilee celebrations and in the event itself as we celebrate over 25 Jubilee items in the Year of the Lord, 2000, series of document are presented to the Church and all men and women of goodwill to reflect on. These include the pontifical writings of John Paul II;

1. Tertio Millenio Aveniente
2. Ut Unum Sint
3. Incarnationis Mysterium

With the African synod of 1994, a new agenda was set up by the Bishops of Africa to prepare for and usher in a new millennium and the Jubilee year. Taking the Church as family, the Bishops of Africa determined in a five-pronged programme to evangelize the continent and continue the work of making Africa free and self-governing. The Bishops confirmed their belief in the five major agenda, the fruits of the synod of Africa that are: ³

- a. Proclamation of Jesus Christ as the Gospel in Africa
- b. Enculturation of the Gospel in our local cultures
- c. Dialogue with entire creation
- d. Justice, peace and Integral development
- e. The promotion of the means of modern communication.

The Bishops as pastors and leaders united with all people of goodwill everywhere, under the Holy Father Pope John Paul II handed over this

⁴ Arthur J. Dyck, Human Rights and the Global Mission of the Church; Bostoniv Theology Institute Annual Series Vol. 1, 1805, p.1.

document to the African Church in the form of an apostolic exhortation in the new famous document “*Ecclesia in Africa*”. This in our own opinion remains the challenges to a truly understood agenda for the Jubilee in Nigeria in the context of Church and social transformation.

Conclusion

From all that have been said so far, one can conclude that the Jubilee is indeed a time for social transformation for the Nigerian people. This could be achieved in the public sector through;

- Creating a framework for improved protection of Human Life and human rights.
- The promotion of legal certainty and the rule of law.
- The promotion of participatory and decentralized structures in the public sector.
- The knowledge, spread and practice of Christian social principles.
- The rejection of apathy and the renewal of our common faith and determination in what is good and noble for Nigerian humanity.

Exactly in this moment of implementation do we have reason to resort to the large body of materials, teaching and social principles, which Christianity has continued to unfold in her long history of 2000 years. Catholic Social Teaching and doctrine appears therefore the guiding document for social transformation in Nigeria. These documents are systematic and contain reference formula that shows unity and continuity.

In the words of Pope John XXIII in the famous document *Mater et Magistra*:

*“The Church has formulated over the past 100 years, and through the efforts of very well-informed body of priests and laymen, a social doctrine which points out with clarity the sure path to social reconstruction. The principles she gives are of universal application, for they take human nature into account and the varying conditions in which man’s life is involved. They also take into account the principal characteristics of contemporary society and are acceptable to all.”*⁵

⁵ John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, 15 May 1961, AAS 53, (1961), no. 220.

There is a common anthropological, ethical, theological and contextual view of man and history. Whether the topic of the social question be on the family, property, economics, politics, culture, ecology, technology, genetics, capital, labour, armament, justice, women, international trade, aid, development, poverty, war, health, globalization, finance, communication, art, and other pertinent issues, Catholic Social Teaching sets out to offer an adaptable, relevant and truthful response and guide for practical action.

*“This teaching rests on one basic principle, individual human beings are the foundation, the cause and the end of every social institution. That is necessarily so for men are by nature social beings. This fact must be recognized, as also the fact that they are raised in the plan of providence to an order of reality which is above nature”.*⁶

⁶ John XXIII, *Mater et Magistra*, no. 219.