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Righteousness in Governance

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Chapter Sixteen

Righteousness in Governance[1]

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 and determined as its mandate in the decree '*Gaudium et Spes*' to:

> *Consider the signs of the times of the Gospel and translate them in the light of the Gospel.*[2]

In this new approach, scripture passages long neglected make new sense. We are also enabled to interpret the Gospel message within the context of experience of those who are victims and members of a hostile and ungodly society; those who have been denied the development and legitimate enjoyment of the fruits of human and material resources; those who have been stripped of their humanity and reduced to the level of chattels, the prisoners of human-inflicted pervasive society, the marginalized. How can the Nigerian Church and Christian respond to the massive injustices prevalent in our modern society, on national and global scales?

Unlike previous theological approaches which drew us to the scriptures and traditions only as exclusive sources for guidance in knowing God's will, the Vatican Council pointed to a further source found in social theology which recognizes events, situations and aspirations of people. People cannot be separated from the situation in which they live.

This paper derives its urgency, therefore, from a fundamental concern with the present state of affairs in our dear country- politically, socially, economically and religious and culturally. It seeks to ask questions about meaning and orientation in a situation of helplessness, where many have accepted apathy, distrust, mischief and bad governance. Can we afford to continue this rudderless travel on a ship, which has lost direction? There is need for people with conscience, committed Christians and enlightened

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[1] Ike, O.F.; Paper delivered at an International Symposium organized by The Redeemed Evangelical Mission (TREM), Nigeria.

[2] Gaudium et Spes, no. 2.

citizens to speak out and act with good example. There is need for the prophetic voice of the church in our time and era. Here is the place. For not to act is the evil. "The man dies that keeps silence in the face of tyranny."

The Challenge

The topic *Righteousness in Governance* is aimed to bring to the fore, the role of the citizen who is a believer, a Christian and an adherent of a religious faith to participate at efforts which lead to nation building. It seeks also to challenge the church in Nigeria to assume its rightful position of leadership and relevance in our great nation by playing its God-determined roles of teacher, reconciler, social transformer and prophet. This is a challenge, which finds experience in the fulfilment of the scriptural injunction: *"Righteousness exalts a nation"*.

A truly Christian challenge and a fundamental option in a corrupt society like ours to respond to the *signs of the times* imposed by the demands of the modern society by following in the footsteps of the teacher and master himself, Jesus Christ of Nazareth who urged his followers "to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth" *(Matthew chapter 5*). Do we have other viable alternatives? And could we afford the option of lethargy and apathy at this time? At what costs would these be for us and for human heritage?

Pope John XXIII far back in 1963 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 them 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]

Like John the Baptist in the desert, repeating the citation of Isaiah, there is a call for the committed and convinced Christian and citizen of our time, country and era. We are challenged to be:

The voice of one crying in the wilderness,
Prepare ye the ways of the Lord, make his path straight.
(Matthew 3:3; Isaiah 40:3)

[3] Mater et Magistra, no.3

The world in which we live in, is experiencing a number of conflicts some of which seem to have assumed a new and agonizing dimension. There are conflicts and contradictions between governments and the peace movements, the rulers and the ruled, trade unions and employers, the rich and the poor, ethnic groups and races and more currently, within Nigeria, between religious groups especially the Muslims and the Christians. In many cases, human lives have been lost and war was threatened. No wonder, the document of the Synod of Bishops in 1971 on the theme *Justice in the World* states that;

> *Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as 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 every oppression situation.*[4]

Situations of Conflict and Crisis

We live in an interdependent world where crisis and other happenings in one region affect the others. The continent of Africa has had its fair share of crisis and conflicts. Since 1970, over fifty wars have been fought in our continent and indeed, in all the regions of the continent, giving Africa the image of the continent with the largest number of displaced persons and refugees. United Nations Development programme (UNDP) Human Development Index Report for year 2000 shows that most African countries are in the list of the least developed countries of the world.

We have the least Gross National Product and Income Per capita, the largest stretch of poverty, unemployment, educational possibilities, medical care, necessary utilities such as water, electricity and rural and urban infrastructure; without access to capital, information technology and modern means of mass communication. The digital divide has continued at the expense of Africa. Globalization has continued but most of our people are not on the train.

From the horn of African to Central Africa, from Southern Africa to the great lakes region and down to West Africa, we are all caught up in a collective convulsion of war and violence. Some of these fratricidal wars have subsided, but their traumatic and tragic effects are still with the people. Think

[4] Synod of Bishops On 'Justice in the World' 1971.

about the child soldiers and the maimed in Sierra Leone and Liberia of recent.

It is sad to observe that despite all appeals in the past for the respect of the dignity of the human person, the violation of human rights, civil rights, political and social rights, cultural and economic rights continue unabated not only in our country Nigeria, but indeed elsewhere on the globe and even in the entire sub region of West Africa. Although democratically elected governments have been installed in all the seventeen countries of our sub regions at the level of Economic Community of West Africa (ECOWAS), the first time in history, we do know that the leaders and the led are still learning to operate the system. They are on transition towards democracy, to say it mildly. What we have may be near to civilian government, but a democratic culture is yet to emerge.

Our country Nigeria and indeed much of Africa is blessed by the benevolent Creator with abundant human and mineral resources and with rich varieties and diversities in situations of both Church and society. Yet we are aware of the abject poverty and general misery presently facing our people, traceable to human factors such as colonial and neo–colonial structures, oppressive structures of injustice and of sin. These include myriad of vices, uncountable to mention such as bad governance which has been teleguided and promoted by successive military dictatorships and bad civilian governments; exploitation and degradation of the environment as we have never known it before.

We observe with horror, the desertification of large areas of our country, the expansion southwards of the arid and Sahel zones, the deforestation of the mangrove forests, the oil spillages and destruction of the Niger delta and other solid mineral areas of Nigeria, sometimes, without social or corporate responsibility by businesses over the earth; the mismanagement of scarce resources; endemic and all pervasive corruption in high and low places and in all forms, including bribery and the cult of mediocrity; ethnic bigotry; religious fanaticism and burdens resulting from international debts and unjust economic world order. Child-soldiers abound in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and other countries of our sub region. They have been abused and traumatized and there is hardly any rehabilitation going on for them. There are no skill centres for their retraining and crime thus abounds. With guns and no breads, what else could they make out of the meaning of life?

Other forms of child abuse persist alongside with trafficking on women. The local, national and international prostitution of women as good business by

middle persons and consumers remains a scourge, which the intelligent mind still fails to fathom. The disregard and marginalisation of women is an issue of general concern; they are sometimes not given equal opportunities with men because of their gender both in public and private sectors and even are sexually assaulted or harassed.

The results of all these stare us in the face: inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts; inter-religious squabbles and suspicion; widespread unemployment of youths, many of whom have not seen their first jobs while their parents and sponsors have lost their last jobs; hunger exists in the land added to the current spread of such diseases like malaria, HIV/AIDS which leads to painful and excruciating death. Current costs of living have soared, making conditions of living and the quality of life cheapen in many cases. We are aware that the poor are increasing in their millions whilst the rich are becoming more exclusive.

Called to Minister and to Reconcile

It is this state of affairs, characterized by strife, lack of orientation and meaning, conflict and human misery that the Church is called upon to carry out her evangelizing mission. Of course, at the roof of all these divisions and tensions is the human heart wounded by sin. Sin, which causes death, has made the ministry of religion, of the Church and of reconciliation an urgent task in our land. In the words of the Apostle Paul:

> *God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men's fault against them We are ambassadors for Christ, it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ's name is, be reconciled to God (*2 Corinthians 5:19 – 20).

John the Baptist appealed for social morality, not just for a change of ritual purity or petty details of Sabbath observance. He challenged the people including the mighty Herod for immorality and injustice. He lost his life for daring to speak out but his message spread. Jesus may not have agreed with John in every detail, but he used John as his own point of departure, calling people to repentance and change of heart and lifestyle.

> *The time is fulfilled and the kingdom of God is close at hand Repent and believe the Good News* (Mark: 1 :15).

Jesus read the signs of the time and gave his message. He made himself relevant and made sure that in fulfilment of the Will of the father, he was faithful to the end, even to the excruciating passion and shameful death on the Cross. Those who followed him and his message have seen his power, capable of changing entire human history. Those who neglect him and his message have done this but not without some repercussions on their worldview, general happiness and lifestyle.

Criticism of the Role of Religion and the Church in Our Society

It is no longer unusual to read open criticism of religion in our local newspapers. Religion and the Churches are blamed for sowing discord in the country through the denominational schools, even held responsible for the so called educational imbalance between one part of the country and the other. They are accused of dogmatic indoctrination, of intolerance and bigotry. On another level, the Christian religion is labelled as foreign and condemned as the colonial remnant responsible for the cultural alienation of the African and the banishment of its gods.

Thickly veiled or even overt anti-religion or anti-clericalism has not been unknown in the pronouncements and administrative policies of some of our leaders. In general, there is a tendency to make religion a scapegoat for a myriad of our societal ills and the impression is given that society would certainly be better off without religion. Even beyond our national frontiers, the criticism of religion and its role in society has even gained in intensity. It is taunted that religion has not succeeded in making the world better; that in fact, on the contrary, it has made it worse. Left wing critics and rationalists, even atheists point out that religion as institutionalised belief, has become an ideology in the service of the bourgeoisie with whose worldview and life style it is identified. It has, therefore, become an instrument for the maintenance of a conservative *status quo,* that is to say, an instrument of oppression.

The substance of religious beliefs, namely the idea and belief in God's promises and God's will have gradually exposed the anthropomorphic dimensions of the concept of divinity. No wonder, the great philosophers of religion like Rudolf Otto speak of religion as "*Mysterium Tremendum et Fascinendum*". Karl Marx calls religion an "*opium of the people",* a world of fantastic unreality, made by man for his own illusion. For him, therefore, the abolition of religion as the illusory happiness of the people is the necessary condition for their real happiness (Cf. Marx Engels *Studienausgabe Band, Philosohie Fischer Fischer Bucherei,* p.17-18). Marx is, however, now dead since

1881. He did spread the idea of communism which we all have witnessed its ideology crumbling like empty paper in the early 1990's from country to country, starting from Russia to Angola and beyond.

Friedrich Nietzsche who lived before Marx, a philosopher of 'nihilism' (nothingness) announced to the world *"God is dead"*. For him, religion, particularly Christianity is a demoralizing and emasculating force for it teaches humility and robs men of their pride and ego. It takes side with the weak, the lowly, and the failures, and has even ruined the understanding of the intellectually strong natures by teaching people to regard the highest intellectual values as sinful, misleading, nay, as temptations. Religion must disappear so that the super man may emerge, with all his instincts, without any inhibitions and with no pretentious morality (The Will to Power; Anti-Christ; Beyond Good and Evil). Nietzsche died of syphilis and went mad towards the end of his life. It was Machiavelli who castigated Christianity for inducing meekness and the patient acceptance of injuries and because as he put it: "It causes us to attach less value to the honours and the good things of this world". His belief in absolute power however made him see religion as a tool for social mobilization, for keeping the people submissive, loyal and obedient and for making children fear reprisals.

Ludwig Feuerbach in his book: 'The Essence of Christianity', published in 1841 affirms that:

the foundation of true philosophy is not to posit the finite in the infinite, but the infinite in the finite. We should capitalize not on the idea that God created man but on the idea that man created God…

Feuerbach ended his religious critique by insisting that;

> *All theology is real anthropology. God is simply a creation of man for having many wishes, which he desires to have fulfilled, persuades himself that a god exists who can fulfil them. Therefore, religion merely represents an unconscious attempt on the part of man to defy objectively his own essential nature.*

Further critique of religion even within our own Nigerian States gives an impression that religion has lost its initial evangelical impulse which was essentially humanitarian and pure in its holiest sense. It is said that they have now degenerated into a system of cold dogmas, empty ritual, intellectual mystification, false prophesies of doom, fake pastors, prophets and dupes

who are charlatans, *wolves in sheep clothing* misleading the ignorant, the naïve and the helpless. The search for money has turned many churches and religious centres into places of trade, and it is no longer seldom to hear criticisms labelled against some churches, religious leaders and religious centres, likening them to the chastisement Jesus once gave to the traders whom he chased out of the Temple in Jerusalem: "my house is a place of prayer, but you have turned it into a den of thieves".

These and many more, besides daily scandals and inappropriate teachings, appear as the human predicament associated with religions and religious phenomena. It indeed does appear that there are some abuses with religion and even some aspects, which can be socially dysfunctional if not detrimental. It becomes evidently clear and an imperative, therefore, that people who dare to preach to others about God, religion, truth, equity, justice and peace must first of all purify themselves and try to be both just and far in search of peace in their own lives.

Religion as a Social Factor for Value Orientation

Reverend Theophilius Okere, in his book: *Religion in Public Life, 1974,* aptly established the two functions of religion in society, namely:

1. Religions as a factor of reaction, functionalist priestly view
2. Religions as a factor of revolution, prophetic view

These two functions, though seemingly opposed to each other are indispensable to the society. A society without stable values, institutions and traditions would be no less inhuman than where progress is totally arrested and change impossible. From one point of view, religion can be seen as a stabilizing factor, from another as a factor of disintegration, and a catalyst in society.

Religion though a response to the problems of the individual in the face of the human condition has very distinct functions for the society at large; it is both an intimately private affair and also an eminently public affair. Religion, on account of its transcendental dimension, at any rate in the functionalist view, sacralises the norms and values of the established order, maintaining the dominance of group goals over individual wishes and of group disciplines over individual impulses. It is, therefore, a means of social control and a stabilizing factor. It imposes a framework of ultimate reference, that is, it determines the value system of society.

In the functionalist view, all elements of a society perform a positive function which is necessary and sufficient to maintain the social equilibrium. By conferring finality to established values, religion becomes a powerful means to social control and, therefore, of maintaining the established order, whatever this may be. This is the reason why Machiavelli whose interest is in the ruler recommends the use or rather the abuse of religion as an effective means of repression, while Karl Marx whose sympathies are populist recommends its abrogation. Religion in this view is conservative, reactionary and opposed to salutary change. Some biblical passages quoted in support of this view of religion are duly famous. The *locus classicus* is the following;

> *For the sake of the Lord, accept the authority of every social institution (1 Peter 2:3).*
>
> *Remind them that it is their duty to be obedient to the officials and representatives of the government (Titus 3:1).*
>
> *You must all obey the governing authorities. Since all government comes from God, the civil authorities were appointed by God, and so anyone who resists authority is rebelling against God's decision, and such an act is bound to be punished (Romans 13:1 – 7).*

There are of course problems raised by this passage, and people of the 21st Century may be even embarrassed by it. Is a government through a bloody *coup d' etat* to be respected as from God? Is apartheid regime God ordained? Are protests against dictatorship, genocide and even taking up arms as guerrilla against a regime of organized injustice or legalized brigandage an offence against God? Happily, this is not the only role of religion in society. In fact, the functional explanation is only a partial aspect.

There is another function of religion, a dynamic one also namely, the *prophetic revolutionary aspect.* The case of King David as a sinner and the appearance of Nathan the prophet who rebuked the royalty and brought him to repentance, is a case in point. Likewise, is Saul in the bible an incident for study. Religion makes pale the cheeks of rulers by its frozen admonition. In the first place, religion has a transcendental reference. It has a system of values, and values are ideals rather than facts; they say how men and women should live rather than how they actually live. Now, this concentration on what should be rather than on what actually is the case, gives religion a great moral advantage, and a moral superiority over the goings-on in society.

Through it, men are in possession of a higher court of appeal standing above the established institutions of the society. The individual is enabled to challenge and criticize policies, personalities and events by comparing them with ideals, ideals provided by religion, ideals to which they are necessarily inferior.

The prophetic function of religion enables us, if need be, to say no to the given, to escape from the tyranny of the facts and from the tyranny of public opinion. That the individual can, as it were, appeal to Caesar, that he has direct access to the transcendent, that is to say, to God, or to his conscience, enhances his dignity and emphasizes his autonomy. To that extent, he is independent of the society and can not only take his distance from it and criticize it, but also assert his rights *vis-à-vis* its demands. What we are saying is that religion makes room for protests, for non-conformity, for rebellion. Through its prophetic role, religion encourages revolt in certain circumstances.

If the facts of society compare too unfavourably with the ideals on which religion focuses our critical view, then we should improve them, which always means change them. The revolutionary character of religion is too obvious to need further commentary. The prophetic function is, therefore, both vital for the survival of freedom and the individual in society and, through constant criticism, instrumental to the raising of standards in society itself.

Application of Principles of Righteousness in Governance

From the foregoing, Catholic social thought teaches that certain permanent principles are derivable and are to be considered as necessary ingredients for the establishment of a just and egalitarian society where human beings live in dignity and have their basic rights guaranteed. These are applicable to Nigeria as foundations for good governance, righteousness and justice, which are the foundation for peace.

The Meaning of the State

- The State is not the 'presence of God'
- The ideology of power leads to the degeneration of the State.
- The individualistic enlightenment interpretation of the State is to be rejected.

- According to the Christian understanding, the State stands in the service of order. It is the supreme guarantor of the 'common good' founded on might and right and power.

The Governmental Authority

- God himself from whom all power stem, is the ultimate author of governmental authority.
- Since the State is the supreme guardian of 'the common good', its power must be uniform, comprehensive, sovereign and coercive.
- The original bearer of governmental authority is the nation as a whole, that is, the politically unified national group.
- The tasks of governmental authority, which are legislative, executive power, and administration of justice arise from the end of the State. These tasks are fulfilled when citizens enjoy the protection and fostering of the moral order; provision of the welfare state; guarantee of internal security and guarantee of external security in the community of nations.

It seems daring but would be appropriate to draw up a 'Politicians Code of Character' for bearers of governmental authority and these include: strength of character; profession of fundamental moral values; a gift for creative combinations; objectivity, soberness, equanimity; willingness to serve; courage to make unpopular decisions and willingness to cooperate.

The Rights and Duties of Citizens

Since people are the original bearers of governmental authority, crucial rights are due to the citizens, all citizens are entitled to contribute to the 'Common Good' of the State, all citizens have a legal claim to equality before the law, citizens have a right to resistance and may use them against oppression and injustice, the fulfilment of the laws of the State is a moral duty. Others are love of one's fatherland as an obligation, there must be willingness to sacrifice on the part of citizens, the common good precedes the private good.

The Relation between Church and State

- The mission of the Church is to proclaim the salvation given to us in Christ, which does not exclude but fully includes service in the social realm,
- The proclamation of salvation and preaching the Gospel is a must.

- Advocacy of the rights and dignity of man is a mandate.
- It is the task of the Church to proclaim the fundamental moral values in pluralistic society whether convenient or inconvenient to *status quo.*
- The Church cannot take a stance on those economic and political questions on which Christians and believers, without prejudice to their faith, can be of differing opinions.
- The competence of individual believers or groups of beliefs is to be distinguished from the responsibility of the magisterial office in the governmental and social realms.
- The Christian is able to be present and effective in the modern religious and ideological pluralism only in so far as "the witness of Christians" allows.

Although State and Church are distinct in their origin, end, and constitution, and in their proper spheres are mutually independent and self-governing, they are nevertheless related to one another in many ways and obligated to collaborate for the good of mankind.

Conclusion

We have come to the conclusion of this reflection on righteousness, which is justice in governance. We assert that here on earth, it is possible for the leader and the ruler to be just and fair in his dealings with fellow human beings. Power is not absolute, even if some officials of government think that it is eternal. Power is transient, although very tempting and perhaps also dangerous to use. One must therefore lead with prayer and fear of the Lord.

> *Unless the lord builds the house they labour in vain who build it. Unless the Lord watch over the city, the watchman watches in vain (Psalm 127).*

- The righteous in governance shall protect the dignity and worth of every individual person since all are equal before God, created in his own image and likeness.

- Option for the poor is a good measure for righteous leadership, for God is always on the side of the oppressed and of the poor.

- Love and justice are linked

- The promotion of the common good is a high ethical criterion in good governance.

- Democratic principles of participation and avoidance of autocracy and dictatorship are sure paths to greatness. History does not forget easily and may make or mar one perpetually.

- Economic justice is the basis of all equity and the measure of impact of good governance. In all things the question may be: "how does it benefit the poor?"

- Stewardship remains a fundamental goal for all shall render account both here and hereafter of their good and bad deeds and there is payment or punishment for good or evil done.

- The promotion of peace remains the highest good and the hallmark of a true and righteous leader.