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Chapter Nine

The Challenges of New Evangelization in Nigeria

The Nigeria Situation

After forty years of independence, the facts on ground are that Nigeria is yet incapable of creating a virile atmosphere for conducive living of her citizenry. The Nigeria national image within and abroad has become a cause of concern for many. The attendant problems are multi-faceted. In the area of New Evangelization, it is the fact that Nigeria is currently facing "*both external problems and internal discrimination among the denominations... The most serious error in it as it is practiced in this country consists in the inheritance of the imported enmity from Europe, mutual suspicion and distrust of one another, the segmentation of faith and the inability to reunion. This internal disunity creates the problem which makes it difficult for the various denominations in the faith to stand together and deal boldly with any external enemy of the faith*." (E. Asuquo Akpan: p 102).

Owing to this absurd situation, the Christian faith often falls victim of external aggressions and thereby loses the prestige that it deserves. "*Recent developments on the national level calls for a re-examination of the compatibility of Nigeria's two major religions with the national aspiration of peace, concord and progress for the citizenry.*" (Mbefo; L p.111). The Moslems and Christians now forget that there has to be a nation, a country, a Nigeria.

The early missionaries to Nigeria brought with them a handful of changes in the lives of the populace. It became a new form of evangelization that had an admixture of religion with other social factors. It was better known to have the attributes of civilization, industrialization, and the evolution of a monetary economy; while the pastoral functions came to be exercised under the patronage of the military arm of the British administration.

Due to the rivalry and stiff competition among different Christian denominations then for supremacy, the Christian evangelizers left too many loopholes that are today causing a lot of rift in the lives of Nigerians. For Asuquo Akpan:

"The current weakness of Christianity and the superficiality in the practice of it in the country together with the multiplicity of Independent African sects which broke

away from the mission churches are the direct result of the reactions here under considered." (Op. cit).

It is from here that other intractable problems of Nigeria emanated from. Today, it is no longer the case of rivalry and unhealthy competition but the monster of religious indifferentism that is plaguing the entire nation. John Paul II sounded this note of warning when he said; "*How can one not notice the ever-growing existence of religious indifference and atheism in this more varied forms particularly in its perhaps most widespread form of secularism?"* [1]

While the foregoing events were taking place in different churches, the general life outlook of Nigerians continued to slide down the precipice. A lot of ideological currents started to find its relevance in the people, the religious life kept depreciating, as secularism and materialism now become the life principles of most Nigerians. There is a replacement of religious ideologies with personality intentions. What matters most for Nigerians of today is simply the person and not so much his relationship with God. Though the churches are filled to capacity every Sunday; what then is the impact of the Good News of Jesus Christ; "to a people who have lost almost completely their national pride" (*Ehusani G. O: p.250*). Because of the ignorance of the majority of our countrymen and women, in the sense of the high level of illiteracy, the small group of the educated tends to take advantage of the ignorant.

> *"What is wrong today is not only the manifestation of gross social inequalities, but the fact that dubious values now form the predominant aspiration of people in the society* (Ibid. p. 12)."

Evidently, this degradation of the *homo religious* is being well projected by the distressed situation in the country's educational sector. In the word of Mbefo Luke;

> "*The school system that should be used to educate future citizens to the demands of making Nigeria great has been in shambles. Academicians themselves who should know better have succumbed to the epidemic called materialism. The usual justification for dishonesty is that everybody does it: this is Nigeria"* (op. cit. p. xii).

[1] Christi fidelis Laici n.4.

The worst is that, God and religion have been totally deleted from our educational system. The situation according to John Paul II:

> *Adversely affected by the impressive triumphs of continuing scientific and technological development and above all, fascinated by a very old and yet new temptation, namely, that of wishing to become like God (cf. Gen. 3:5) through the use of a liberty without bounds, individuals forget the religious roots that are in their hearts; they forget God or simply retain him without meaning in their lives, or out rightly reject him and begin to adore various "idols" of the contemporary world.*[2]

Politically, the country has not fared any better. Let us all consider this fact: that one of the bewildering things about the state of religion in the final quarter of the twentieth century is its impact upon politics. In the 1970s we were made to believe that religion was losing its stronghold and that secularism would be the prevailing world-view within a couple of generations.

This prediction seems to have come to the limelight with the prevalent political situation in Nigeria. Fr. Ehusani compares the situation thus: "*The multiple problems of the masses of Nigeria have no doubt been compounded by long standing military rule and command culture in the country." (op. cit. p.13)*.

Statistics show that we have been under this forced rule for a better part of the country's independence. What then can be said of the politicians who always burgle the mandate entrusted to them by the nation? They have simply gone out to exhibit a show of shame. Most of their records are not worth keeping for posterity. Majority of them lack in essence the Christian values of honesty and hard work embedded in our traditional moral code. At this juncture we have to ask this imperative but also pertinent question:

> "*Is there a place for the Christian in political debate? What happens to a person's soul when one can honestly no longer take sides in most political debates because one feels the force of both sides of the argument?* [3]

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[2] Christi fidelis Laici op. cit.

[3] Richard Holoway p. 8.

The economic sector has some corollary with the debased political situation. The favoured politicians have utilized the economy of the nation for their personal aggrandizement. Within the social structure, the economy has been designed by the *nouvouriche* to satisfy their idiosyncrasies. Ehusani puts it in this form:

> "*Millions of the unjustly acquired Naira are squandered daily in a life of vanity and debauchery by our military dictators, political chieftains and economic fraudsters.*" [4]

The ignorant and the poor are so disadvantaged that they usually tend to forget the dignity that belongs to them as humans. They are accustomed to acclaiming as "benevolent" somebody who throws at them a few coins to buy food. "*That is why many of them crumble before the powerful, and are ready to grease the machinery of their own oppression in the hope that it would keep them and their families alive for one more day."* (*Op. cit. p.13).*

Cut out in these mind-boggling words, the Vicar of Christ has this to say;

> *"When the individual is not recognized and loved in the person's dignity as the living image of God* (cf. Fgen. 1:26), *the human being is exposed to more humiliating and degrading forms of "manipulation," that most assuredly reduce the individual to a slavery to those who are strong. Those who are stronger can take a variety of names: an ideology, economic power, political and inhumane systems, scientific technocracy or the intrusiveness of the mass media."* (*Op. cit.* n. 5).

Pope John Paul II Call to the Nigeria Hierarchy

When we take up such issues like the *'New Evangelization'*; the deplorable nature of our society today, it will not be because theorists have discovered some fine new principles of salvation. On the other hand, it will not be because they are pointing angry fingers at this problem or the other. Neither is it because we are excited and have demanded that something must be done. But that the Church must come out openly to fight "*all those institutions and power groups, which contribute to the existence and maintenance of the physical and spiritual slums."* (Nyerere J. p.1).

[4] Op. cit. p. 12.

His Holiness further elaborated on the issue thus:

> *"The present-day phenomenon of secularism is truly serious not simply as regards the individual, but in some ways as regards whole communities. At other times, I myself have recalled the phenomenon of de-Christianization which strikes long standing Christian people and which continually calls for a re-evangelization." (CL op. cit).*

How? His Holiness John Paul II pointed the way for the Nigerian hierarchy during his Papal visit in 1982. He proffered an *Instrumentum Laboris* for Nigerians in his address, when he said: "*... Your people are enthusiastic, hospitable, and full of faith."* [5]

He finally declared a new lease of religious life for all Nigerians with the proclamation of "*New Era of Evangelization."* He further enjoined the Bishops to undertake the task of evangelizing the nation with these exhorting words:

> "*... Christ has sent me and Christ has sent you. And together with the rest of the College of Bishops throughout the world we are sent to announce Christ, to proclaim Christ to communicate Christ and his Gospel to the world. In this pastoral visit I expressed the hope that it would initiate a 'new era of evangelization.' This is my earnest prayer; that zeal for evangelization will envelope the church in Nigeria."* [6]

What then happens if these Christian listeners or even preachers in another pulpit disagree with themselves? Are they disagreeing with God, or are they opposing the mind of Christ? What are going to be the criteria for deciding when a statement is a genuine declaration of the Good News, and when it is just the passionately held opinion of another human being, who happens to wear a *'collar'*? How do we know when a preacher is preaching not himself, but Jesus Christ as Lord?

The fact is that preaching Jesus Christ, expounding the mind of Christ and not just some human opinion, presents us with what the theologians would call a *heuristic problem*. Then, where do we find this Jesus Christ, how do we

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[5] Address to Bishops at the Nunciature in Lagos, 15th February, 1982.
[6] op. cit.

discover his mind? The exhorting words of Christ in Acts 1:8, which was reiterated by Pope Paul VI in the *'Magna Charta'* on Evangelization "*Evangeli Nuntiandi*" says:

> *"a new stimulus which would introduce the Church, now more thoroughly imbued with the strength and power of Pentecost, into a new and more fruitful era of evangelization."* [7]

Finally, the words of St. Paul serve as a panacea for the foregoing questions. *"Adapt yourselves no longer to the pattern of this present world, but let your minds be remade and your whole nature thus transformed. Then you will be able to discern the will of God."* (Roms. 12:2).

Pastors should therefore bear in mind that the heart of evangelization is to proclaim, and bear witness, in the power of the Holy Spirit, (cf. Acts 1:8), to the Incarnate, Crucified, Resurrected and Living Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 2:32), as the only Saviour and Divine Lord of all mankind and of the whole person and to contribute to building the church as God's kingdom of love, justice, and peace, by making Jesus Christ known, loved and followed, to the ends of the earth.[8] The end result of evangelization is that the person who has been evangelized goes on to evangelize to others (EN.24).

Catholic Bishops Conference Response

Unless Nigerian Christians (*Catholics*) have some pride in the legacy of their early missionaries and unless they take appropriate means to develop and to foster this legacy (*Evangelization*), they will continue to be vagabonds and labourers in their own land. As long as they fail to stand their ground on the basis of their inheritance, (*The Good News of Jesus Christ*), so long will they be despised and used by a more aggressive religious sect.

It is glaring that times and situations have tremendously changed in the Nigerian society. What is abundantly clear to the hierarchy in Nigeria today is the obvious fact that Catholic Church is losing members in droves to other religious groups, and must do something expedient to win them back to the fold. There are too many frontal challenges suffocating the progress of the Church, the African Christian Churches, the non-Christian believers and Islam. The worst is the attack it gets from the Moslem nationals.

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[7] *Evangeli Nuntiandi*" No. 2.

[8] Ibid E N Nos. 22 – 27, 32

> "*It is now very clear that the struggle to win Nigeria to Islam is real, well planned and is being pursued effectively and vigorously* (sic). *The Muslims aim at both political, economic and religious domination."* (Emmaus p.150).

They have cleverly executed their mission by the secularization of schools, through masterminding the government takeover of mission schools. Thus making sure that the Christian values are completely scraped from the school system; thereby leaving a generation of Nigerians without a proper knowledge of God. It is equally no gain saying the fact that the Muslims now dominate the political and economic scene in the country. The Bishops believe strongly that the evaluation strongly shows the lop-sidedness of Catholic Church in Nigeria today. What then is the cause of this lukewarmness and faint spiritedness amongst Catholics in Nigeria, even the Pope acknowledged the fact that; *your people are enthusiastic, hospitable, full of faith. Your seminaries are full, your religious congregations have a steady flow of candidates, and your lay apostolate organisations are dynamic. You promote orthodox doctrine and approved liturgical practices, and you encourage priestly discipline..."* (*Nunciature 1982*).

Have Catholics gone back to the Upper Room (Acts 1:13) for fear the Moslems may attack them? Are they still expecting the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:8), or awaiting a renewal or reawakening of the outpoured Spirit of God on Pentecost? (Acts 2:1 – 4). In response the Bishops affirm that:

> *The Church sees all these factors as challenges to be met with the saving message of Christ. Although many of these developments have created problems in the past for the mission of the Church, the council insists on the need to re-adjust our methods and attitudes so that the message of Christ may reach a world that is so much in need of it. This readjustment is what Pope John XXIII called aggiornamento bringing up today.*[9]

Simply put; a new era of evangelization is opined for because of readjustments in many aspects of the life of the Church. The method is to retain in concrete terms the content of the faith, which is proclaimed, but revised its formulation and expression in other to keep abreast with the changes of time. From the forgoing we can reform our strategy for the New Evangelization, to incorporate the lay people, "*often known as the sleeping*

[9] Era of Evangelization, p. 44 – 45.

giants in our Church, and mobilize them for evangelization." (Rome ACCSE/2000 p.1). The words of the parable, "*you go into my vineyard too...*" (Mt. 20:1 – 16), connotes a mandate for all Christians, both men and women, young and old to go and work in this vineyard.

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