

Michael's Death: A Call for Theological Response to Human Dignity Abuse in Nigeria

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Abstract

This paper argues that the death of Elder Citizen Michael Igiebor Okhokpa represents a manifestation of human dignity abuse in Nigeria. It calls for a theological response against the dehumanizing circumstances and contexts surrounding his death. Humiliating and maltreating persons created in the image of God, people who expended a better part of their gifts of life serving God through serving humanity, is unacceptable. The circumstances leading to Michael's death are summarized, while its theological implications are outlined as: public theological response; public theology as prophetic discourse; advocacy as a theological response; conscientization as a theological summon to public opinion (re)formation; and *status confessionis* as good news to the wounded hearts.

Two South African theologians, Frits de Lange and Nico Koopman (2007: 160) said concerning the notion for human dignity: 'The notion of human dignity is inextricably linked to European history and culture. However discourses on human dignity, albeit not always termed as such, have been continuing in South Africa since the days of the struggles against colonialism and apartheid up to current efforts towards building a human rights culture in the country and the reconstruction of the African continent. The existence of human dignity discourses in

both so-called First and Third World contexts becomes even more necessary given the process of building an increasingly globalised world, but one with a human face.’ The question of human dignity is yet to receive the needed attention of the church in particular, the academia and the civil societies in Africa, with the exception of South Africa where it has almost become an indispensable subject for current research enterprises.

Varied attempts made to protest against inhuman treatment of persons by such governments as the Robert Mugabe led Zimbabwe, Quattara led Cote D’Ivoire, Al Bashir led Sudan, Sani Abacha and Ibrahim Babangida led Nigeria, etc, often ends as a reflexive of prophet Jeremiaiah’s lamentation in the Bible. That is, the harvest is past and the summer is ended yet we are not saved. As the late Kwame Bediako (2003: 65) has argued on the Osama Bin Laden led September 11, 2001 terrorist attack on America; ‘I must confess with unease that this impact appears to be making us think of the world in less theological terms. It is clear that in the mode of international reporting and commentary on this new turn of events, geopolitical, economic and now military considerations have come to dominate.’ While it can be said that as the civil society and the academic try to discuss the burning issue of human dignity abuse from the anthropological, socio-political and economic perspectives, theologians whose prophetic critiques ought to cause such governments many sleepless nights can be said to have rather taken over the bed and pillows. The case of non-theological response to the inhuman circumstances which led to the death of Elder Citizen Michael

Igiebor Okhokpa on his way to receive his pension in Abuja Nigeria is a case in point among others in Africa.

Inhuman Circumstances Surrounding Michael's Death: This can be understood from an extract taken from the Guardian Newspaper report of November 11, 2008 captioned *The Plight of Pensioners* which Adeola Aderounmu (2008) recaptured as follows under the titled *How to Kill a Pensioner in Nigeria*: 'The plight of Nigerian pensioners again came to the fore recently when a senior citizen who had worked with the National Youth Service Corps (NYSC) died on his way to Abuja to receive his pension. Elder Citizen Michael Igiebor Okhokpa had been ill and could not present himself at the Pensions Office in Abuja from his base in Benin, Edo State. His son, whom he had sent with a letter of authority to receive the money on his behalf, was ignored by the officials in charge. He had to return to Benin to fetch his aged and sick father.

Sadly, the old man gave up the ghost on the way, in Kubwa, inside the vehicle conveying him to Abuja. In frustration, the son took the father's corpse to the paying officers. There was pandemonium when they arrived, as angry onlookers including other pensioners nearly caused a riot. The hitherto recalcitrant officers promptly paid the dead man's pension. Certainly, this is unbecoming of state officials. It shows how callous and insensitive the Nigerian system can be. Getting gratuity and pensions in Nigeria has become a nightmare for senior citizens. Often these men and women who spent their youth serving the country are compelled to make long journeys to Lagos or Abuja, or State

headquarters for some officials to ascertain their continued existence. In some cases the pensioners who enjoy good health, do not have enough funds to make the trip. In other cases, they simply arrive the city centre, build a tent and remain there for months on end while the verification exercise lasts.’

To the best of my knowledge as a Public Theologian who is very concerned with developments within the Nigerian political economy, there is no theological response to Michael’s death till date. This calls for a public theological critique that is very concerned with advocacy, public opinion (re)formation, *status confessionis* in its theologically informed quest for the celebration of human dignity. That Michael died such a dehumanizing death calls for a public theological response as the next paragraph presents it.

Public Theological Response: From a Christian perspective, public theology describes the Church’s sustained attempt to address the question of the public implication of the calling and being of the people of God within a concrete larger society. Public theology addresses issues that affect society as a whole. It does so in significant ways that are also accessible to every one in the public sphere. Public theology read, interpreted and pursued from this perspective does not necessarily seek to favour Christianity, but to challenge believers to witness to values which they hold as being of great importance for the common good.

In an earlier work, the author (Ndukwe 2011a: 148-149) underscored that approached from this vintage point, public theology transcends the traditional Christian preoccupation with the preservation of the integrity of the faith and to serve as an apologetic for the truth claimed by Christianity. It represents a renewed kind of language in the Church's critical engagement with the challenges of the larger society and Church traditions. In this sense, public theology describes the ways in which truth claims believers in Jesus Christ function in a particular faith community's attempt to address issues that affect the larger society without compromising the historicity and the identity/spirituality of the faith in the process.

John de Gruchy (2007: 40) describes public theology as a Christian witness 'that is not simply about the church making public statements or engaging in social actions; it is rather a mode of doing theology that is intended to address matters of public importance.' This makes it obvious that Michael's dehumanizing death makes a public theological response from the Church *qua* church indispensable. The Church's calling, identity and being is under mandate to embody God's appreciative YES! to justice and the divine loathsome NO! to injustice as true Gospel proclamation. That is, proclaiming to the powers that be, and to the public that Michael's dehumanizing death is summarily a summon on the people of God to engage in substantive public theological reflections and practices.

Public theology arises out of theological reflections and as such expresses convictions and commitments that are grounded in reformable Christian traditions. As Dirkie Smit (2007: vii) has pointed out, in its attempts to contribute to public opinion and to respond to the challenges and concerns of the particular moment, public theology is always occasional, contextual and historical. It witnesses to what it believes, as a theology of grace, which demands its believers to demonstrate grace as deeply and generously as we have received. Public theology is about a witness of faith which seeks to raise royal priests in the various sectors of a given political economy. Being a Christian witness, public theology is also a type of prophetic discourse that is accessible within the public sphere.

Public Theology as a Prophetic Discourse: Public theology is also a sort of discourse that can take a prophetic form in its multifaceted *modus operandi* to speak truth to authorities, drawing its inspiration from the prophetic visions in the Scripture. Prophetic public theological discourse also gives significant respect to a Christcentred vision for the preferential option for the poor, ie the epistemological privilege of the underdog, or solidarity with the less privilege. In its quest to restore justice and wholeness to the society, public theology as a prophetic discourse sides with the powerless against the powerful. It has to do with speaking, doing and reflecting the mind of God in a given circumstance. Our Sovereign God commends the good and condemns the wrong.

As a prophetic theological voice, Public Theology should in this

particular challenge stir up discourses whose concern is to engage the issues occasioned by Michael's death in conversation. For instance, being loud in commending the visionary and courageous efforts of the pension administrators, such a prophetic discourse will at the same time condemn their officers' rigidity in Michael's case. Prophetic theological discourse will in this matter strive to engage the human heart and mind in a dialogue on what God's mind is in Michael's pathetic circumstance and the pension administrators' efforts to rid the Nigerian Civil Service of the menace of fraudsters. It speaks about a renewed kind of language in critical theological engagement with the challenges of the larger society and faith traditions. Prophetic theological discourse often strives to motivate the God's people to take up issues that have much to do with social transformation and development. It is very much concerned with the honour and dignity of the human person.

Koopman (2007b: 180) has said that the inherent dignity, value and worth of human beings challenge us to create humane conditions that have theological (especially, Trinitarian) basis. Human beings have dignity because we are created in God's image, we have dignity because God became human in Jesus Christ and redeemed us; we have dignity because the Holy Spirit as God at work in the world is actualizing in and through humans Michael inclusive, a new humanity which is a reality in Jesus Christ.

Prophetic theological discourse also seeks to repackage these issues and to guide them towards some effective modes of discourse and practical

actions without drifting into the errors of inordinate social relevance or unhealthy withdrawal from social affairs. It points to the root of moral problems which affects the larger society without compromising the historicity and the identity/spirituality of the faith in the process. Prophetic theological discourse seeks to evoke a hopeful vision, which proclaims an ideal state of affairs in the future and motivates people towards its realization. The Church must wake up to this challenge in the case of Michael's dehumanizing death.

As Ignatius Swart's (2010b: 217) has said, the Church is also saddled with the responsibility of being ' a facilitator, enabler and catalyst of others' agenda, a servant of the people's or social movements, the movements of the poor, who are the authentic agents of development. In so far as theology and churches are expected to make a value and spiritual contribution in this sphere and to challenge narrow-minded conceptions of development, this ought to be done on the basis of experience, discourse and praxis of these movements.'

In addition, such theological discourse can also engage and checkmate the distressing worship of economics and its *pseudo*-ethical priesthood through its prophetic criticisms. In contemporary Africa, economics is often worshipped as religion in some quarters. Corrupt military personnel and militarized politicians constituted the majority of its priesthood. The consumerist *pseudo*- ideological rhythm, *get all you can, can all you can get, can the can and sit on the can*, as the author (Ndukwe 2011e: 411-412) have shown tends to be their

reigning philosophy. Such economic priests have no significant respect for the human dignity of the less privileged members of the society. Economics is their god while privation and privatization of the common good is their salvation. And as we can attest the circumstances which were catalytic and surrounded Michael's dehumanizing death revolves around economics.

Evidently such a prophetic theological discourse calls for advocacy as a theological response of faith practitioners especially, the Church. That Michael died such a dehumanizing death also calls for advocacy in the form of public theological response.

Advocacy as a Theological Response: Describing Michael's death as dehumanizing is not an attempt to question the sovereignty of God. It arises from a theological conviction. While it must be acknowledged that death is a reality which every human being must embrace at its *kairos* moment or moment of truth (decisive moment), dying well must be a great concern of the Church.

Allan Verhey (2002: 146) has shown that death and its associate pains and suffering are not ultimate evils. They need not be seen as potentially fearful. Death and its associate pains and suffering are not as strong as the promise of God. What one needs to do is to act with a great sense of integrity in the face of death and its associated challenges. The right to life and its flourishing are to be recognized and celebrated as good. They belong to the creative and redemptive cause

of God.

Thus, a necessary concern of our theological discourse should also be to speak out in order to persuade people to confess and to seek to, as Stephen Long (2001: 223-225) said, live their lives in ways that resist and possibly wipe out violent lifestyles from the society. While the Christian community should be a place that welcomes life and does not fatalistically embrace death, it must also be a place where we learn how to die well. Living a good life includes learning to die well. Thus Michael's death as we saw earlier triggers of serious public theological questions bordering on the identity and mission of the Church as the light of the world, the salt of the earth, a city on a hill; and as the voice of the voiceless. In other words, Michael's death calls for advocacy as a theological response.

Advocacy as I pointed out in an earlier work (Ndukwe 2011d: 136-138) is a political process by an individual or a group which normally aims to influence public opinion, policy or action. This political process also seeks to coax resource allocation and decisions within political, economic, religious and social systems and institutions. It can be motivated by moral, ethical or faith-based principles or simply embarked upon to protect an asset or interest. Advocacy speaks about the skill of using available pieces of information to persuade (especially government) officials and the general public thereby influencing policy decisions. It can include many activities that a person or organization undertakes through the media, campaigns, public speaking,

commissioning and publishing research or poll. Advocacy in this sense, seeks to arouse government, public and private interests on public issues, which yearn for attention in a given environment. Advocacy ‘speaks up for,’ or ‘acts on behalf of’ oneself or another person. And such is what theology demands from its practitioners especially the Church, in Michael’s case. God created Michael just as others and God also breathed into him the divine breath of life which bequeaths humanity with the *imago Dei*.

This image of God in Michael which also gives him innate (alien) dignity, and the acquired dignity (well being) as a patriotic citizen; were both abused by the Pension Administrators. Of a truth, the Pension Administrators were working hard to flush out ghost pensioners from the system and save money for the nation. Sadly they got enmeshed in the same challenging the state of affairs, which ended the life of Michael. What they eventually demonstrated was more of a rigidity that is akin to the rigidity of the railtrack. Hence, Elder Citizen Michael’s dehumanizing death also calls for a substantive advocacy as a theological response of the Church.

From Koopman (2007b: 180-185), we learn that the inherent dignity, value and worth of human beings challenge us to create humane living conditions which have a theological basis. Human beings have dignity as an imputed dignity. It is an alien dignity which comes from God. And because it comes from God it is inalienable. The notion of alien dignity implies that all humans are so to say, equal; that they are to be

treated with justice. Human beings have freedom, which must be expressed more in cases involving the most vulnerable members of the society. This inherent dignity, value and worth of human beings must be spoken for and sided with. The Church cannot shy away from such a proclamation.

Given Koopman's view, it becomes obvious that advocacy an indispensable task of the Church in Nigeria. A Church, which refuses to allow its vision and practice of public theology to also define or refine its role in socio-political and economic terms, stands a chance of being irrelevant in Africa today. It also makes it clearer that the Church's approach to advocacy cannot claim or feign ignorance towards the dehumanizing circumstances, which led to the death of Michael, among other suffering victims of society.

By victims of society, we mean people who are suffering from the stereotypes of society, or those whom the structures of society questions and demeans their human dignity inordinately. The victims of society include people who bear the brunt of the associated pains of science and scientific reflections and dispositions as well as technology and technocracy which reduces them to objects of pity and exploitation.

These suffering victims of society as Professor E . M. Uka (2002: 98) has shown includes those who are destitute of wealth, material goods; the weak whose prosperity and social status are lowest (Ex. 23: 2, 30: 15; Lev 14: 21; Prov 22: 16). These vulnerable ones includes those who

are impaired physically and psychologically and so utterly helpless (Job 24:28, Psl 82: 13, Jerr 40: 7). These suffering victims of society also include the humble workwomen/men from the lowest economic class (2 Cor 9:9, Psl 112: 9), and the pensioners. And the Church as a vanguard and an agent of change in the social order as well as in social relations must describe and engage such unhealthy state of affairs which Michael was also a victim of, as a vexation.

In its theological sense, advocacy also describes the Church's sustained attempt to address issues that affect society as a whole in significant ways that makes them meaningful to the victims of society. Such 'speaking up' or 'acting for' transcends the traditional Christian preoccupation with the preservation of the integrity of the faith: it does not simply serve as an apologetic for the truth claims of Christianity. It represents a renewed kind of language in critical theological engagement with the challenges of the larger society, Church traditions inclusive. In this sense, the dehumanizing circumstances which led to the death of Michael, who is one among many African victims of society calls for advocacy that is theologically rooted.

Today, many pensioners are often tempted to curse themselves for obeying the divine summon to serve God through their services to the nation. That a person who spent about 35years in the service of the nation can be reduced to a beggar that is subjected to such a ridiculing and dehumanizing death as that of Michael speaks volume: it is unacceptable. Above all, many more pensioners are facing the same

herculean challenges today. It makes the need for a theologically informed advocacy to address this dehumanizing state of affairs more obvious. Advocacy that is rooted in theology a serious challenge which also beckons on the Church to embody conscientization as a theological approach towards public opinion (re)formation.

Conscientization as a Theological Summon to Public Opinion (Re) formation: Conscientization is an indispensable component of the process of changing a given society or social order. It describes the process by which a person moves from *magic thinking* towards *critical consciousness*. Breaking down imposed mythologies in order to reach new levels of awareness through dialogue with the human heart and psyche is constitutive of its central concern. Conscientization also refers to a type of learning which is focused on perceiving and exposing social and political contradictions.

Conscientization also takes action against the oppressive elements in one's life in the process of that learning. Through conscientization, individual consciousness helps to end the culture of silence in which the socially dispossessed internalize the negative images of themselves. Often these negative images of one's self are created and propagated by the oppressor in especially, situations of extreme poverty. Hence, liberating learners from this mimicry of the powerful is a major goal of conscientization.⁹

⁹ See <http://islandsinstitute.pbworks.com/w/page/20166535/Conscientization>

It is therefore obvious that conscientization is critical in the Church's calling and mandate to participate actively and responsibly in nation building, social transformation and development. Conscientization spells out that an explicit and distinctive role of the Church in nation building, social transformation and development is the creation of an alternative (or restorative) consciousness at large. As a result, it can play a significant role in persuading the heart and mind of the rigid Pension Administrators to feel and reflect on the Michael's dehumanizing death as an abuse of human dignity on one hand. On the other hand, conscientization can also play a central role in forming and reforming public opinion towards a weighty stance to the patriotic acts of the Pension Administrators which sadly led to Michael's dehumanizing death that points toward an abuse of his human dignity. As Professor Anya O. Anya (2008: 19) has underscored, in the effort to rebuild the ethical superstructure of a new Nigeria, the primary aim must be to restore dignity to each individual so that he/she can exercise his/her rights in freedom and with confidence in the justice of our social system.

Conscientization also involves a double entry point in which the rich and powerful are brought to a consciousness that is most determined by the interest and view point of the poor. This recognition calls for an approach towards spiritual renewal and conversion that confronts and identifies the outer expression of inner corruption and self-centredness. It is crucial in Michael's

dehumanizing death saga. Conscientization insists that the powers of corruption, of moral disintegration, of undisguised evil, have to be overcome if we are to begin to see in our institutions and systems the possibility of covenant quality relationships. Conscientization places significant emphasis on continuing critique of the demonic structural arrangement of the power factors within a given environment. It is therefore a necessary theological mandate and practice, which summons the Church to embark on *status confessionis* as Good News to these wounded hearts.

Status Confessionis as Good News to the Wounded Hearts:

Status confessionis can be described as an embodied demonstration of faith based confession as a protest against a prevailing ungodly state of affairs in a given context. It arises from a realization that the Church's *raison d'être* is under weighty pressure from the prevailing states of affairs, to declare that a *kairos* moment for an embodied witness against such ungodly happenings have come. *Ab ignition*, the people of God in times of crisis, always have a way of confessing to the world that because of our faith, this is who we are, what we believe, and what we intend to do. The Church strives to discern and embody the *voluntas revelata Dei* (revealed Will of God) as faith seeking to understand and live out what it believes in more substantive ways. In other words, *status confessionis* represents a discernment and embodiment of the truth as the *voluntas revelata Dei* in ethos, in structures and in fact every sphere of human life, as an embodied approach to faith seeking understanding.

From his apartheid experience, a South African Christian theologian Ernst Conrade (2010: 53-54) describes status *confessionist* as that faith confession which represents the Church's realization of significant truth about its *raison d'être* in a crisis-ridden scenario. That is, that truth which issues from our realization that a prevailing state of affairs puts a heavy pressure on God's people to declare that the *kairos* moment to state its position against ungodly state of affairs has arrived. It is a moment where nothing less than the confession of the Gospel in words and deeds is the spirituality and identity of the Church. In many cases, the ungodly states of affairs may transcend injustice and idolatry within the faith communities (Church) and the larger society, which would normally require a prophetic witness stressing a call to conversion in the faith communities. Status *confessionis* as an embodied confession of faith is proclaimed against false doctrines as well as ideological distortions which threaten the Gospel itself within the community of faith, and the larger society. In such ungodly environments, the integrity of the Gospel and its witness are at stake.

Allan Boesak also drew from the decision of the 22nd General Assembly (Seoul 1989) of the World Alliance of the Reformed Churches to comment in a symbiotic view. In his perspective, declaration of the status *confessionis* is based on the conviction that the integrity of the Gospel is at stake. It is a call from error to truth, which demands of the Church a clear and unambiguous decision on the truth of the Gospel and to identify an opposing view to this doctrine and conduct of life as heretical. The declaring of the status *confessionis* is

related to the practice of the Church as well as to her teaching. The practice of the church must conform to her doctrine that demands the declaration of status *confessionis*. The declaration of status *confessionis* is often directed at a specific situation. Historical examples of such confession of faith exists in the Belhar Confession, which has its roots in the struggle against apartheid in Southern Africa as an "outcry of faith" and "call for faithfulness and repentance" that was first drafted in 1982 by the Dutch Reformed Mission Church (DRMC) under the leadership of Allan Boesak and formally adopted 1986. It is now one of the "standards of unity" of the new Uniting Reformed Church in Southern Africa (URCSA). The DRMC took the lead in declaring that apartheid constituted a status *confessionis* in which the truth of the Gospel was at stake. Belhar's theological confrontation of the sin of racism has made possible reconciliation among Reformed churches in Southern Africa and has aided the process of reconciliation within the nation of South Africa.

Secondly we also have among other important status *confessionis*, The Barmen Declaration or The Theological Declaration of Barmen 1934 (*Die Barmer Theologische Erklärung*) is a statement of the Confessing Church opposing the Nazi-supported "German Christians" movement known for its anti-Semitism and extreme nationalism. More specifically, The Barmen Declaration rejects the subordination of the Church to the state and the subordination of the Word and Spirit to the Church. The Declaration proclaims that the Church "is solely Christ's property, and that it lives and wants to live solely from his comfort and

from his direction in the expectation of his appearance." Rejecting domestication of the Word in the Church, The Declaration points to the inalienable lordship of Jesus Christ by the Spirit and to the external character of church unity which "can come only from the Word of God in faith through the Holy Spirit.

Status confessionis draws errors that threaten a particular church to light. The underlying danger of this error endangers the integrity of the preaching of all churches. And this is what the dehumanizing circumstances that led to Michael's perplexing death demands from the Church as the voice of the voiceless, the light of the world, the salt of the earth and a city set on a hill. *Status confessionis* is that faith proclamation which puts a weighty pressure on a community of faith to embody its confession of faith as a lived, living and liveable reality. It is demonstrated as theological prophetic witness against a prevailing and distressing manifestation of utter ungodliness in a given moment. *Status confessionis* is a theological declaration that is often best celebrated than explained or translated from one context to another without meaningful critiques. As mentioned above, it represents a discernment and an embodiment of the truth as a witness of the *voluntas revelata Dei* against utter ungodliness in ethos, in structures and in fact every sphere of human endeavour, and as an embodied approach to faith seeking understanding.

Given the foregoing, it becomes evident that for the Church in Nigeria to embody its confession of faith as a lived, living and liveable reality,

it cannot shy away from this crusade against such dehumanizing death, which Michael died: it serves as Good news to the victims of society. It means that prevailing ungodly state of affairs has proved that the people of God are alive to our responsibility in the process of recognition, education, confession and action against injustice in the social order. To confess and to embody is to confess in word and deed, to embody in ethos and structures, and in every sphere of life wholeness and fullness – albeit in imperfect, preliminary and penultimate forms. True knowledge of the Will of God also involves readiness to face in every situation the need to discern and engage in something do-able that conforms and constitutes a confession of faith to the claims of Jesus Christ.

To conclude, a theological response to the burning question of human dignity abuse as it is evident in circumstances surrounding the dehumanizing death of Elder Citizen Michael is a wake up call. It is a wake up call to an embodied *status confessionis* that is rooted in theology. Such a theological response represents a progressive attempt to discern and substantiate the Will of God in (partial) fulfillment of the promise of divine reign to the victims of society. To the eyes of faith, the world is encompassed by the mystery of the grace of God which we are called to celebrate.

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