

The Dynamics of the Church and Politics in Nigeria: Towards a Theology of Church-Politics Relations

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Abstract

The dictum that “The Church should not interfere in politics” is easy and quite misleading. Politics is bound up with human acts, with which the Church is very much concerned. Little wonder Aristotle says that “man is a political animal”. The diverging motives in the institution of the Church and the state and the social context within which both institutions exist have created atmospheres both of conflict and cooperation. This piece makes an enquiry into the indices of autonomy between the church and politics without neglecting the ambivalent relationship between them. From the findings of this enquiry, this work envisions a theology of church-politics relations.

INTRODUCTION

The relationship between the Church and politics has from inception oscillated between mutual suspicion and conflict at one time; and complementarities and cooperation at another. The

diverging motives in their origin and existence have accounted for their disagreements, while the social context of their interactions has accounted for their compatibility. In contemporary society, especially in Africa, where the merging states have come to be confronted by the Church in their developmental policies and endeavours (Nyama, 2008), situations have arisen where it has become imperative to once again examine this ambivalent relationship between the Church and the sphere of politics. The burden of this paper is to show the points of convergence and autonomy between the two spheres, and to develop from this knowledge a theology of church-politics relations.

THE CHURCH

The Church has had a dynamic image. In Latin, the early Fathers of the Church referred to it as the *Ecclesia*- 'the called out ones'. From this perspective it is understood why the Church is spoken of as 'the elect', 'the saints' and why Jesus asked Peter to 'build my Church' (Mt 16:18). In the wake of Greek neo-Platonism, the Church was seen as the school of truth and the fellowship of adepts (Kung, 1981). To Roman Stoicism, the Church is principally seen as a well ordered community governed by laws. In the early Church, they were referred to as 'the people of God' or 'the Church of God'. The Second Vatican Council speaks of

the Church variously, as ‘the people of God’ (Gaudium et Spes, 1965), “Bearer of the message of salvation” (Ibid. 1), “Mystical Body of Christ” (Indulgentiarum Doctrina, 1967). The Church is also understood as the whole body of Christian believers or any division of this body in professing the same creed and acknowledging the same ecclesiastical authority (Njoku, 2008). For the purpose of this study, the Church is understood as the people of God.

POLITICS

Politics ultimately comes from the Greek word *polis* meaning state or city. The Greek word *Politikos* describes anything concerning the state or city affairs. In Latin, it is *politicus* and in French *politique*. Both have the same meaning with the Greek. Thus it became politics in the English language. Politics is also defined as the process by which groups of people make decisions (Eso, 2003). The term is generally applied to behaviour within civil governments, but politics have been observed in all human group interaction, including corporate, academic and religious institutions. It consists of social relations involving authority and power, and refers to the regulation of a political unit and the methods and tactics used to formulate and apply policy. It involves the art or science of government or governing, especially the governing of a political entity, such as a nation,

and the administration and control of its internal and external affairs.

What consists in good politics has been the concern of philosopher's right from the time of Plato to the present. Plato's *Republic*, Aristotle's *Politics*, St Augustine's *City of God and City of Man*, Cicero's *Republic* and *The Laws*, Aquinas' subordination of human laws to divine laws which logically places the Church above the state; Machiavelli's *The Prince* which reverses Aquinas' political theory by placing the state above the Church, Thomas Hobbes and John Locke's *Social Contract*, Montesquieu's perception of *Liberty* as the end of Government, J. J Rousseau's *General Will*, Jeremy Bentham's *Principle of utility*, and many others is an indication that politics is a perennial concern for human beings. From the above definitions of politics and Church, it is obvious that they are two different and autonomous institutions.

THE HISTORICAL EVOLUTION OF THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHURCH AND POLITICS

The early Church very soon identified flight from politics as a component of holiness, and while rejecting heresies that saw the material world as evil, it was nevertheless tainted with their

views. The condemnation of Galileo in 1633 seemed to typify the Church's suspicion of the world after the Johannine Jesus (Jn 8:23;12:31;14:30;17:9;18:36). Otherworldliness was seen as potential holiness, whereas this worldliness was not. Monasticism in practice was considered better than secular involvement, poverty better than responsible use of wealth, chastity better than conjugal life. Secular values had no real worth except that which religion gave them. Popes Innocent III and Boniface VIII proclaimed absolute sovereignty over the world (cited in Leonard, 2003).

With the emergence of the Second Vatican Council, new ways of understanding the relationship between the Church and politics emerged. The Council teaches that the Church serves the world by witnessing to eternal values, making God's love present, healing and proclaiming human dignity. The Church helps people in their effort to better the world by opening to them the meaning of their existence and dignity. By promoting family unity, consolidating human unity and injecting faith and charity in daily life, the society is helped. By trying to bring faith into a beautiful synthesis with action, the Church also better the civil society (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965). The Church's relationship with the world is positive and mature, avoiding the extremes of neglect and patronage. The world is seen as part of the Father's

plan (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964), and the Christian faith helps believers to appreciate their mandate to develop the world (*Apostolican Actuositatem*, 1965). It is the Church's task to explain God's will for the world's development (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1965). To achieve this, Christians are to safeguard the world against misuse (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964); give the world a new soul and spirit by fulfilling their responsibilities in the world (*Apostolican Actuositatem*, 1965). Vatican II began a new era in the Church's relationship to politics; from opposition and neglect to a spirituality of involvement. Major Church documents now focus on work, the family, the economy, social justice, women issues, peace etc., while spiritual writers stress the need for holistic living. The trends of liberation theology, incarnational theology and inculturation are indices of this development (Leonard, 2003).

THE COMMON GROUND FOR CHURCH AND POLITICS

The dictum that "The Church should not interfere in politics" is easy and quite misleading. Politics is bound up with human acts, with which the Church is very much concerned. The Church as a universal institution with its member in every country, even though it be pagan must come into agreement with political

institutions to guarantee the good of its members. Even though the Church is a spiritual body, she works for her salvation on earth; it is therefore not surprising that the Catholic Church as an institution arranges concordats, receives diplomatic representatives from various countries, and sends legates and nuncios to various countries to deal with foreign governments on her behalf. While the Church can interfere in politics, not politically but morally, its individual members are free to choose any political party whose tenets and activities are not contrary to their beliefs as Christians (Attwater, 1997). When people see the Church and politics as incompatible, it is because they understand politics as a dirty game: a corrupt system of rigging, thuggery and fraud instead of the art of managing the fruits of God's gift to humanity (Kukah, 2008). Many religious duties are political actions. For instance, feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, visiting those in prison, giving a drink to the thirsty are both religious duties and at the same time political responsibilities. Politics and religion have a common ground.

THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA AND THE POLITICS OF SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY

Development has several dimensions. It can be physical, social, cultural, mental, political, behavioural and attitudinal. There are indeed no limits to the very many ways in which the Church can

and has contributed to development. However, only a few will be discussed.

The Church, Social Justice and Humanitarian Service

Social justice and human equality are necessary ingredients for any meaningful development. The Church as an agent of progress has issued so many documents to guide world leaders towards the promotion of social justice. As an expert in humanity, the Church offers by her social doctrine, a set of principles for reflection, criteria for judgment, and directives for action. In all Catholic dioceses in Nigeria, there is the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), tasked with the responsibility of promoting justice and peace. At the 2007 elections, the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) printed and circulated banners and stickers encouraging Nigerians to vote and shun violence and all nefarious activities that jeopardize peace. In places ravaged by war, hunger, disease and famine, the Church is seen giving a helping hand to victims. There are millions of Church-owned orphanages, rehabilitation homes, youth centres and old people's homes (Onwuliri, 2008). In the promotion of social justice and human dignity, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria issued the following documents: *The Church and Human Rights*, February 1972, *Dignity of the Human Person*, February 1972, *Violation of*

Human Rights and Dignity, September 1984, *Government Must Respect the Rule of Law*, September 1994, *Inalienable Rights-Food, Health, Education, ETC*, September 1985, *Church's Stance in Defence of Life*, November 1995, *Make Public the Oputa Panel Report*, March 2001 etc.

The Church as Prophet

The Church by its mission and role has a prophetic responsibility in every society. The prophets in the Old Testament spoke in the name of God and denounced people's actions when they go contrary to the will of God; this is evident in their activities: Nathan reprimanded King David for his murderous action against Uriah (II Sam 12:13), Elijah confronted King Ahab and his wife Jezebel over Naboth's vineyard (I Kgs 21:20-24) (Uwalaka, 2008).

Prophetic mission involves direct confrontation with the causes of social and political oppression, aiming at a historical change of the situation. This would involve the denunciation of real persons, social, economic and political institutions in so far as any of them violates justice. It involves the pursuit of justice for the poor and the oppressed. The basis for this focus is that injustice constitutes a serious violation of the express will of God. To achieve this, Christians are to participate in political

action (Nebuchukwu, 1992). In the exercise of its prophetic role in the society the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria Issued the following documents: *Increase in crime Wave*, September 1998, *The Menace of Cult in our Institutions*, September 1997, *Government Exists for the People*, October 1960, *Effects of Greed*, February 1983, *Lavish Lifestyle of Officials*, March 1990, *Greed- The Root Cause of our Problems*, March 1995, *The Root Cause of our Wounds*, February 2002 etc.

The Church and Peace

The word peace remains a recurring decimal in the Church. Soon after the resurrection, the first blessing that Christ gave his Church was that of peace: “Peace be with you”. The Church has in consonance with this event, preached and sought peace all over the world, and especially in the family which is the basis of national and world peace, in the community, in the country and the world. In its involvement in the search for peace for the nation, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria issued the following documents: *Breakdown of Law- Violence*, November 1996, *Violence Begets Violence*, November 1995, *Violence in the Name of Religion*, February 2000, *Dialogue Rather than Violence*, September 2001 etc.

The Church and Morality

The Church is the bearer of the moral conscience of the society. It is the bearer of moral vision and moral force by bringing into the public arena the revealed truth of Christ (Uwalaka, 2008). It sets standards and preaches the essence of sound morality; through the light which comes to her from the gospel she continues to provide the principles for the correct organization of social life. The virtues of honesty, integrity, hard work, modesty, humility are all beacons of morality preached by the Church. If the Church is able to mould the character of the society, then a good society will emerge which is significant for achieving genuine development. To achieve this, the members of the Church must distance themselves from characters and behaviours that are scandalous and embarrassing (Jude, 2008). In fulfilling its role as the moral conscience of the society, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria issued the following documents: *No Artificial Population Control*, February 1986, *Contraceptives and Abortion Never Acceptable*, October 1987, *New Wave of Prostitution*, February 1996, *Women Trafficking*, February 2002 etc.

The Church and Education

The Church has made great contributions in the area of education. There are many mission schools, nursery, primary,

secondary and tertiary institutions that produce quality graduates to serve the nation. This is about the greatest contribution of the Church to development, because the greatest engine to growth and development of any economy is human capital development. The reduced activity of the Church in the area of ownership and management of schools has impacted negatively on the quality of graduates available to serve national development (Jude, 2008). Examples of these schools are: Veritas University (Vena) Patrick's College, Calabar, Tansian University, Awka, Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu, The Catholic Institute of West Africa (CIWA) etc. In the promotion of education, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria issued the following documents: *Education in an Independent Nigeria*, October 1960, *Educated Catholic Laity*, October 1960, *Catholic Contribution to Education*, February 1972, *Struggle against Illiteracy- Adult Education*, February 1972, *Education for All*, February 1983, *The Crisis of the University System*, September 1996 etc.

The Church and Economic Development

In the area of economic development, the Church in many parts of Nigeria has established human development centres and programmes for the acquisition of skills for poverty eradication in the society. Some dioceses like Nnewi and Enugu have established micro-finance outfits. These banks grant loans, give

professional advice on business and serve as a means of employment for the teeming population of the unemployed in the society (Onwuliri, 2008). In its concern for economic development, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria issued the following documents: *Towards a Just Economy*, October 1960, *Economics at the Service of Humanity*, February 1989, *Privatization and Public Institutions*, March 1990, *Gap between the Rich and the Poor Grows*, February 2002.

The Church as the conscience of the Nation

Mzee Jomo Kenyatta, the founder of the Kenyan Nation once said to the Catholic Archbishops of Eastern Africa, “The Church is the conscience of the Society, and today a society needs a conscience. Do not be afraid to speak. If we go wrong and you keep quiet, one day you will answer for our mistakes” (Kanu, 2008). The Church is the community of faith called into being by the saving action of Christ, the way, the truth and the life (Uwalaka, 2008). The Church as the conscience of the nation can be captured under the various images of the role of the conscience. The Church as a vigilant watchman to sound alarm against the forces of evil; the Church in the image of a gadfly awakening people from their moral complacency; the Church in the image of guide giving direction because of her privileged position as custodian of the divine mysteries; the Church as the

image of moderation and restraint. As a conscience it has to avoid the excesses of laxism and intolerance and rigidity in handling the affairs of people.

SACRED MINISTERS AND THE WORLD OF POLITICS

Sacred ministers are first of all citizens before becoming a sacred minister. Even though he or she now has a special mission, he or she cannot deny that what happens in the state positively or negatively does not affect him or her. They are not to remain behind the altars while things are going bad. They have a role to play. Christ evangelized not only with words but also with actions. He fed the crowd (Mt 14:14-31), he raised the dead (Jn 11), he healed the sick (Mk 7:37). In the same line, Jesus tells the disciples of John to go and tell the latter what they heard and saw; for the blind regained their sight and the lame walked (Mk 11:4-5) just to mention a few (Esua, 2008).

Although the sacred ministers have an affiliation to the society where they are called to exercise their ministries, that is, the social life which cannot be anything other than politics, in participating in politics, they are to do so morally and not politically. They are not to participate in partisan politics. They are supposed to be spiritual fathers to all. Being a member of one party or the other could divide this significant interest. The full

participation into politics is the prerogative of the lay faithful. The sacred minister as a prophet rolls the ball in the court of Christians, denounces bad policies by pointing out the gospel truth (Esua, 2008). The lay faithful whose prerogative is the secular world bring the gospel message to bear on their endeavours. As such, the sacred ministers and the lay faithful work together in transforming the society.

TOWARDS A THEOLOGY OF CHURCH-POLITICS RELATIONS

Latin American theology introduced a new age in the theological enterprise. They tried to interpret the Christian faith to be in tune with the circumstances of the prevailing moment. They took a radical departure from the traditional approach upheld by Aquinas and Augustine which saw faith as an ascent to revealed truth (Esua, 2008). This method of doing theology put intellectual conviction and personal trust before praxis, which of course will give birth to an armchair theology. However, the Latin American method of doing theology aimed at rallying theologians into a formidable theological solidarity to conscientize the people and thus creates a movement of liberation; this system of theologizing maintained the Holy Spirit as its guide (Leonardo and Clodovis, 1987) and also allowed for the free interplay of the fundamental sources of theology. It

sought and found fortification in critical thinking, creative thinking, caring thinking, lateral thinking, higher order thinking, systemic thinking and synergetic thinking (Kanu, 2008). The signs of the time formed the human *locus* or *locale* where the word of God was heard (Segundo, 1980) and the cry of its citizens was its most powerful source (Walligo, 2000). It is a theology which emerges from the people's struggle rejects an abstract conceptualization of God made outside the historical practice of liberation (Odey, 1985).

CONCLUSION

It is from this perspective about rethinking a new way of doing theology that Christians should rethink their approach to politics. Christians must not live a schizophrenic kind of life, with their feet on earth and their heads in heaven. The Church is made of people; they are the citizens of a political entity called nation or state. Within that entity they are subjects of some defined rights and privileges. The Church cannot but be concerned with her people's welfare. It is also plausible to assert that the formation of sacred ministers should be directed towards giving them a firm and extraordinary background to face all the various societal ills, both physical and spiritual. Many clergy men and women have done a lot to fight the rights of citizens. Many have lost their lives and are still ready to do the same for the sake of the continuing humanization of people. The battle continuous until

the world is transformed into the kingdom of God, though eschatological, however, foretasted in process and in time.

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