

Challenges of Catholic Men in the Church and the World

Anthony B. C. Chiegboka

Abstract

The laity in the Church is composed of men, women and youths. Each contributes their own quota in both the Church and the world. The Catholic men, who are the focus of this paper seemed to be difficult to be organized. Their activities however are felt in various sectors of the Church as husbands, fathers, knights and officials of the church and also in the world as leading members of the decision making bodies of our traditional and civil institutions like the kindred, town union, Igwe-in-Council and government sectors. It is our concern to present the identity and rights of this group of the laity, the theatre for their operations and the challenges before them.

Introduction

The Catholic Men are Christians and adult male members of the Catholic Church. They belong to the Lay members of the Christ's Faithful people. They acquire their identity through Baptism (John Paul II, 1983, cann 96, 204; also Ngwoke, 1987). Born into the Church not by natural generation, by status or desire but by the only divinely established means of this spiritual birth namely baptism (c.96). It is that sacrament that confers on the baptized his ecclesiastical personality, a subject of ecclesial rights and duties Possession of these rights and duties is however in degrees.

The Catholic Men are by this fact identified as physical persons in the Church and are by this fact persons (can 96), members of the people of God (can 204), subjects of rights and duties, and are fundamentally equal with others in the Church (can 208) and in Marriage (can 1135).

In fulfillment of one the rights of Christ's Faithful People which is forming Association (c. 275), the Diocesan Catholic Men have gathered themselves into an umbrella union called "CATHOLIC MEN'S ORGANISATION" (CMO) operating along that of their wives called "Catholic Women's Organization" (CWO). The title of their association is for some areas/dioceses designated as Christian Fathers Association. But the former is preferable in consonance to the practice approved by the Bishops of Nigeria. This is why we have the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Catholic Laity Council of Nigeria, Catholic Biblical Instructors Union, Catholic Charismatic Renewal, Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria, CWO and then CMO.

The Catholic Men are found in various sectors of Life both in the Church and in the Society.

- In the Church they are found to be not only members of the church but also members of the Church Councils and Committees; Vice Chairmen and Secretaries of Parish Councils and many committees and pious societies in the church (even where women are greater in number in such societies), Catechists, Knights of the Church etc
- In the Society they are the family heads and most often the breadwinners. They are the decision makers in Igbo cultural societies. They operate in Kindred, Village, town Unions, Age grades, Igwe-in-Councils, Clubs and Business set ups. You get them in Government circles as leading members of the Government in all sectors both as chief Executive, Assembly men, Party officials, Government workers, leaders of the various labor Unions etc.

These two sectors create a dual identity to the person of the catholic men as members of the laity. They are called to operate both in the Church and in the society. The Fathers of Second Vatican Council said “The lay apostolate, in all its many aspects is exercised both in the Church and in the World” (Vatican II, AA No 9). These two sectors make the catholic men and indeed all the members of the Laity to be citizens of the Church and the State (AG 21). These as it were are the enabling environment for the operations of the CMO.

2. Church and World as Enabling Environment for the CMO Operations.

The Church

The understanding of the Church was the preoccupation of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council in the document “Dogmatic Constitution on the Church- *Lumen gentium*”. They gave various biblical images of the Church which include:

- Church as sheepfold of Christ with Christ as the single entrance (John 10:1-10).
- Church as the flock and God and Christ as shepherd (Ez 34:1ff; John 10:11; 1Pet 5:4)
- Church as God’s Field (1 Cor 3:9; Rom 11:16-22)
- Church as God’s Building with Christ as the Foundation and Corner stone
- Church as god’s Household and dwelling among men(1 Tim 3:15; Apoc 21:3)
- Church is temple built like living stones(1 Pet 2:5)
- Church as People of God (LG 9) and Universal sacrament of Salvation (LG 48). These last two for Congar (1977) are “the most precious ideas of the Conciliar ecclesiology”. (p 26).

The idea of the Church as People of God should now render obsolete the still operating understanding of the Church among the laity as “Fathers Church” (*Uka fada*). These understanding render them obsolete and remove commitments in them. It is on this note that our presentation becomes necessary for you all in this third millennium. But Fathers of the Second Vatican Council were explicit in these words: “Indeed, the Church can never be without the lay apostolate; it is something that derives from the layman’s very vocation as a Christian.” (AA 1). Continuing the Fathers of the Council decreed: “The Church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ unless there is a genuine laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy. For the gospel cannot become deeply rooted in the mentality, life and work of a people without the active presence of lay people. Therefore form the foundation of the Church very special care must be taken to form a mature Christian Laity. The lay faithful belong fully both to the people of god and civil society.” (AG 21).

The Catholic men cannot consider themselves visitors to the Church. They should be involved in all aspects of the life of the Church within the limit of their state and vocation in the Church. In the Church (Ojo & Dodo, 1986), the Parish assumes the status of the “primary and basic unit of the lay apostolate”(p. 30); it is the Church of God (LG 26); a group of faithful in the local Church (SC 42); the cell of the Diocese (AA 10, John Paul II, CFL 26) and a fraternal community (John Paul II, 1982). With this knowledge of the Parish, the Catholic men should be part of the parish lives and activities and have a

zeal for the Diocese to which the parish is a sector. This was the opinion of the Fathers' of Second Vatican Council:

The laity will continuously cultivate the “feeling for the diocese,” of which the parish is a kind of cell; they will be always ready on the invitation of their bishop to make their own contribution to diocesan undertakings. Indeed, they will not confine their cooperation within the limits of the parish or diocese, but will endeavor, in response to the needs of the towns and rural districts, to extend it to interparochial, interdiocesan, national and international spheres....The laity will therefore have concerns for the needs of the People of God scattered throughout the world. Especially will they make missionary works their own by providing them with material means and even with personal service. It is for Christians a duty and an honor to give God back a portion of the goods they have received from him. (AA 10).

The World

This is the theatre of the lay apostolate. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council truly observed in these words: “All sons of the church should have a lively awareness of their responsibility to the world.” (AG 36); “The laity are to make the church present in those places and circumstances where it is only through them that the church can be the salt of the earth.” (AA 31). In fact, the “apostolate of the lay person is that of the social milieu or temporal sphere” (AA 7) and all parts of the earth (LG 33).

This is the position of the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, the New Code of Canon Law and the articulated exhortation to the Catholic Laity of Nigeria by the Holy Father, Pope John II (1982):

Having been called by Christ Himself, you are his chosen partners in evangelization. As lay people you know that your special apostolate is to bring Christian principles to bear upon the temporal order, that is to bring the spirit of Christ into such spheres of life as marriage and family, trade and commerce, the arts and the professions, politics and government, culture and national and international spheres. In all these areas, lay people must play their distinctive roles. In the society, you are called to be the leaven for Christ, to witness to Christ in the school, in the government office, in

the town development union, in age grade meetings, in the university, in the market, in the trade union and in politics. In all these secular states, you will promote justice, unity, honesty and public spiritedness. Together you seek gospel-inspired and concrete answers to problems of bribery and corruption, lack of discipline and enthusiasm and other such ills. (p. 7).

They laity are neither visitors to the Church, nor should they succumb to position of by-standers or indifferent to the social situation of our country, especially the political sector and state machinery. Hence added Arinze (1990), "Party politics is his closer area of Apostolate. The Catholic layman may, and should engage in party politics otherwise he could become irrelevant in society, or an apostolic balloon. Indeed, it is largely through the political activity of the layman that the Church can be made present in the world of today" (p. 66). The inactivity and complacency of the Catholic men is also witnessed in these very important environment to which the mandate of Christ to preach the Gospel is directed (Matt 28:18-20; Mark 16:15; Acts 1:8).

Having identified the enabling environment for our operation, let us now consider briefly the Challenges of Catholic Men.

1. The Challenges of Catholic Men.

Getting Better Organized

The Diocesan Bishop (in Chiegboka, 1997) rightly observed,

It is well known fact that our Christian Fathers have not been able to form a united front like the CWO's, Mary League Girls and Catholic Youths. I therefore, invite you in this message to come together for the services in the Church. We are aware that men come together in kindred, village and town union activities but they find it difficult to come together in an organized form in the Church. We are also appreciative that as individuals you Christian fathers are the source of the progress of many projects, Churches, Father's Houses, Halls etc that exist in your various parishes. We know your full support in all the activities and projects undertaken by your wives in the Catholic Women Organization. We know of the pain in getting uniform for them and in allowing them attend their annual or bi-annual August meetings. But why can't the men come together? (p. 94).

We commend the contributions of all in seeing to the better organization of CMO at all levels. We know that a lot more need to be done, but we are encouraged by the witnessed growth in purchases of uniform, the enthusiasm, the many projects uniquely undertaken by CMO which were not there before. We are also aware that age constraints and differentials, interest of very few elderly members of the parish who are the remnants of the parish, economic empowerment of some men who may not be humble enough, time factor and communication provisions appears to be the constraining variables for a full functioning CMO. However we should endeavor to know how better to get the CMO especially through operation in Zones which are mostly structured either in kindreds or

villages and also through age grades, knights, Catechists etc The effort to have an organized Laity Council should equally help in this regard. Properly focused meeting, selection of good leaders with good reputation, proper accountability and personal contacts with repeated appeals are other ways to help the progress of CMO at all levels are highly recommended.

We know that CMO members operate in a hierarchical Church but they have charisms for the growth of this Church which they are called as we have indicated earlier to bring out. In the Church there is no sitting on the fence. All hands must be on deck for the overall development of the Church in all ramifications.

Agents of Reconciliation

*The word conflict comes from Latin word **confligo, configere, conflexi conflectum**- to strike, to throw together, to collide, to clash. Conflict therefore is always a struggle between two opposing principles, aims, feelings, interests or perceptions. It is a social condition where often people pursue mutually exclusive or incompatible goal. In (Okure, 2002)*

Conflict describes and characterizes situations marked by the absence of peace.... Conflict can exist at any number of levels, personal, inter-personal, communal and inter-communal. It can take any number of forms: political, religious, economic. It can be rooted in race, class or gender. Whatever its form, the underlying issue in conflict is a lack of justice (not simply retributive or social justice) , but justice which is “truth in relationships”, the truth about self, about self in relation to others, to nature and to God. (p. 2).

St James placed the origin of conflict inside the human person in these words.

Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts.... You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you got on your pleasures (James 4:1-3).

In the Church we have experienced conflicts ad extra and ad intra but they are all part of the nature of the Church as in Nwagwu's (2002),

In its own right the Church is not only a community of the faith but also a society sui generis, made up of members who are both saints and sinners. The implicit and accepted diversities in the interests of the members and the double realities in the nature of the Church explain why there can even be disputes, disagreements and dissensions among the rank and file of the faithful. (p. 1).

The Catholic Bishop of Awka (in Chiegboka, 1997) observed very truly:

We witnessed this year an unprecedented demonstration of crisis in many families, kindred, villages, towns and parishes. The Nigerian socio-political

situation is equally bereft of peace, hence the intensive call for prayer for Nigeria in Distress. The crisis showed itself:

- a. in the desire of married couples with children to discontinue their union;
- b. in ostracism to some members of the family because of their refusal to bend to 'neo-paganism' or impositions against their faith and sense of justice;
- c. in divisions in towns because of who should become the Chief/Igwe of the town;
- d. in the desire of the people of God to expel or deny their parish priest because of his presenting and insisting on some authentic dogma of the Church;
- e. in the desire for leadership and honor within the Church and especially in the CWO and in towns with multi parishes;
- f. in the error of denominational identity which makes ecumenism impossible to be realized in our part of the world some thirty years after Second Vatican Council and John Paul' II documents.

There is need that all parties to the above conflicts should open their hearts to allow the reign of peace of Christ. (pp. 23-24, also p. 99).

All these statements challenge the Catholic Men in this third Millennium to help Igbo Cultural Communities and Church from falling into abyss because of crisis. On this note, therefore and drawing attention to the status of CMO as heads of families; members of towns various groupings; elders and titled men; members of the Knights of the Church and finally as members of CMO the Bishop continued:

While I offer my appreciation to some of you who have aided in bringing peace in our communities, may I invite you as:

- i. Leaders of the Families: To help bring peace in your immediate families. It may require sometimes sacrifice of conveniences, dignity and even rights to live at peace with your wife, children and other immediate members of your family. Always see yourself as the good shepherd that will take care of the flock-your family entrusted to you and see that peace reign in your families.
- ii. Members of Town's Carious Groups: since you are members of the major groupings in the town, Igwe-in-Council, Town Unions, Village Unions, Kindreds, Age Grades etc, you are directly obliged to give peace a chance through these bodies by your outstanding noble contribution. You are to stand out to witness to the gospel of truth, love, peace and concord in all levels of community lives. This is your challenge as Christian Fathers and /or Catholic Men.
- iii. Elders and Tilted Men: In your midst, we have elders who are at the same time titled men. With these positions, I invite you to help bring peace to the communities. None should sit on the fence as many of you do. Do not take sides. Be involved in speaking the truth which is the mark of Igbo titled men and elders. Always make effort to use this noble treasure as elders and titled men to mediate sincerely in all community crises.
- iv. Members of Catholic Knight: One of the stable bodies in the Catholic Community is the members of the Catholic Knight. In some cases some of their members are directly involved in the crises. I therefore invite all various sub-

councils and commanderies in the Diocese to evaluate and assess all crises situation to see the extent of the participation of their members. The members should challenge them to help solve their community crises. Where it is not possible, the members should plan to have a committee that will go to various places to contact the principal actors in the crises. We expect that the Knights apostolate will extend to this disturbing area of our apostolate.

- v. Members of Catholic Men Organization: I believe that the tremendous growth of your organization can still achieve a lot in the area of /crises Management especially in our parishes. I commend the recently initiated effort of your diocesan officials but still invite you all to intensify your commitment to the Catholic Faith and practice. (pp. 100-101).

The Catholic Men with a view to present their opinions to established ecclesiastical authorities should study the crisis, which concerns our traditional culture. Often times Catholic Men have taken sides in protecting well known obsolete culture practices against their faith and consequently against Church positions and teachings. This is not eloquent for the men.

Socio-Political Mobilization:

In the above section on the world as the enabling environment and theatre of the lay apostolate, we drew your attention to the need and challenge to renew the temporal arena including the political structures and positions. The Catholic men and the entire Catholics suffer because we are late starters and did not make this sphere essential in our ministry to the world. The Catholic Men who are politicians to the core are rarely seen in many of your activities. Their thought pattern and way of orientation are not the same. The circle of their operations is mixed and unique. This creates the setback in Catholic presence in the political arena.

The lay person can accomplish this task, only in communion with God and the Church (can 209) shown in sound moral principles. They cannot transform the ills of the society or be truly the salt of the earth and the light of the world, if they are found wanting in moral authority. Hence CBCN (1993) exhorted, “In this critical period of our history, we exhort all our followers to rededicate themselves to the principles of our Catholic faith and morals. We must all take on the challenge of personal holiness, which must show itself in positive active involvement in the world around us. Jesus calls each of us to be a light in the darkness, salt of the earth and a leaven of goodness in our corrupt society” (p. 2).

We have in many states a neo-dictatorship entrenched by the civilian government. Most of them have failed the country in many aspects of leadership. The brand of their leadership is extortion and siphoning of the government treasury for their private pockets and for their few friends and relations in the name of contracts. The life they live while in office is a contradiction of their manifestos during election campaigns. There are stories of institutionalized violence and thuggery. As a way to sanitize this unfortunate situation, the Bishops of Owerri Ecclesiastical Province (2002) added their exhortation to the electorate and our laity in these words:

In our present civil dispensation, we admonish the masses to be always conscious of the fact that sovereignty lies with the people. It is their right to choose or change their leaders in a free and fair election, which is the benchmark of a true democracy. We need to stress that Christians cannot afford to be indifferent to their civic responsibility of voting at political elections in a responsible manner. To do otherwise would mean giving approval to the prevailing political situation, no matter how bad or allowing corrupt, incompetent or inept politicians to be elected into power. Following the dictates of conscience, Christians are to vote for the right persons without being swayed by corrupt politicians through intimidation, bribes or promises of gratification. We appeal specially to the young not to allow unscrupulous politicians to use them as political thugs to intimidate their opponents or serve as corrupt agent who buy off ballot papers from the poor and the ignorant (p. 5).

But how can we accomplish this if our laity are not involved and committed to their unique dignity and duty to transform the socio-political situation of our country.

The Christian laity should rise now to these challenges of social transformation, that is, giving birth genuine leaders with proven integrity, informed conscience and uprightness (Kii 1998; Chiegboka, 2009). This is your hour to change the society for better and for the future of our children. There is no sitting on the fence or allowing oneself to be locked up in a conspiracy of silence. All hands should be on deck. There should be solidarity with all God fearing persons for the renewal of our nation.

The other factor of fear of disunity and anti-clericalism in the midst of partisan nature of our political structure and the hierarchical control are setbacks in our forward movement. We are aware that the politics of School Take-over created far reaching problems for the Catholics and many Catholics men who are teachers have sabotaged the desire of the Church to have their property back, Why? This should be studied by the Catholic Men especially in the decision of some governments to hand over schools to their primary owners.

The Sharia Controversy and Neo-paganism onslaught are factors contrary to the constitutional and inalienable right of religious freedom. How do we (as men) stand by the side of the Church? The corruption in Government circles and offices; among teachers and businessmen etc. are problems before us all. How do we reflect the prayer of Nigeria in Distress and that Against Bribery and Corruption in our concrete lives?

We are also challenged to realize that without coming into the policy making bodies in our societies the lives of the citizens cannot be leavened by the gospel of truth, peace and progress. We are therefore called upon to get yourselves through your numerical strength to leadership and policy-making bodies in our sick society.

2. Conclusion

The third millennium is already at hand. There is no sitting on the fence or be counted among the bystanders. All should put hands on deck for the fruitful and positive contribution of all and sundry especially the brigade of lay men to the Church and the Society. When we decide to be involved and committed in living the gospel values, the transformation of the society for God and the future of our children will be realized.

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