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African Catholicism: Intra-Ecclesial Challenges to Justice

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Review Essay of Iheanyi M. Enwerem, *Crossing the Rubicon: A Socio-Political Analysis of Political Catholicism in Nigeria* (Ibadan, Nigeria: BookBuilders Editions Africa, 2010).

The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation of the 2009 Second African Synod, *Africae Munus*, describes African Catholicism as a spiritual lung for humanity (AM 13). In the light of such a description of African Catholicism, it is important to examine the structure of African Catholicism so as to determine the impact of the massive growth of the Church in the public sphere. Although at face value, African Catholicism appears to be doing well and is commended for standing strong as one of the only hopes for social change in Africa, it still is necessary to inquire beyond appearances to probe the structural foundation. In particular, one should critically examine the power play of the hierarchical structure not only to strengthen the foundation of African Catholicism, but also to encourage its transparency in the light of the Gospel.

And so Iheanyi M. Enwerem’s book is timely and prophetic. *Timely* for providing an in-depth analysis of the organizational structure of an African Church, revealing the dynamics of Nigerian Catholicism vis-à-vis Nigerian social and political history. *Prophetic* for its emphasis on social justice and injustice in Nigerian Catholicism with a view to offering solutions for a stronger, fruitful, more faithful witness of Nigerian Catholicism to the Christian gospel. Thus the book contains a lot of historical detail about Nigeria: the activities of returnee slaves, the impact of British colonialism, Nigeria’s post-independence ethnic politics, and the Nigeria-Biafra civil war of the late 1960s. As befits the title, Enwerem's text offers particular insight into the European missionary enterprises in

western Africa, the indigenization of Nigerian Catholicism, and the subsequent abuse of what the author terms "political Catholicism," the focal point of the book. An underlying theme concerns the impact of social history on the Catholic Church in Nigeria, especially the era of the Biafra civil war and the post-war controversies concerning the Nigerian Federal government's punitive and reconciliatory policies.

Enwerem's highly-informative book chronicles the development of political Catholicism in Nigeria, building from the foundation of the episcopal conference of Nigeria in the 1960s and its general secretariat, the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. His objective analysis of the personnel, especially of the secretary-generals of the Catholic secretariat, delves into the effort at reform of the organizational structure of this institution that connects the Nigerian episcopal conference with the public. What is interesting and admirable is the hiring of an external body, the Kenyan-based Christian Organizations Research Advisory Trust (CORAT-Africa), by the bishops' conference for this purpose of oversight. However, according to the author, CORAT's modus operandi shows it to be less than objective. For Enwerem, CORAT's selective research and interviews of major stakeholders excludes many grassroots centers of justice and peace in important regions of the country. This compromises its report as it appears to be writing the script of the person, the sitting secretary-general who hired them. Furthermore, the exaltation of the status of the secretary-general as ex-officio member of the episcopal conference and his function as the secretary of the bishop's conference is not canonical and therefore is not theological (Enwerem 2010, 127-128). Little wonder, the implementation of the CORAT report by Fr. George Ehusani led to flagrant abuse of power tilting to dictatorial tendencies (Enwerem 2010, 144-147).

Another area of abuse is the Catholic Church's election observation project by the Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC). This project, which grew out of the commitment of one of the religious priests to justice and peace in Ijebu-Ode in western Nigeria, was eventually adopted and practiced under the umbrella of CSN as one of the activities of political Catholicism in Nigeria. A lot of work was involved, but the JDPC Nigeria was equal to the challenges under the chairmanship of Enwerem who served then as the director of the department of Church and Society for the CSN. However, just as the moral integrity of each society is reflected in the quality of the church leadership, the Catholic Church's participation in election monitoring in 2003 and 2007 manifested some serious moral flaws in political Catholicism in Nigeria. Some of the abuses by highly-placed church leaders in financial matters included the activities of a senior priest from Ogun State who fraudulently sourced international donor funds on behalf of some dioceses without referencing the donors. This led to a cover up by the Church hierarchy, showing how difficult it is and will be for the Catholic Church in Nigeria to take the Nigerian leaders to task about corruption and bad leadership.

The author's analysis of the activities of the Canadian Catholic Organization for Development and Peace (CCODP) in conjunction with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in the Nigerian Catholic Church confirms the mixed reactions to the work of international funding agencies in developing countries. This is exemplified in CCODP's disregard of the request of the bishops of the Owerri Ecclesiastical Province for a copy of the proposal and the report of projects presumably executed in their dioceses without their knowledge by the CCODP-CIDA. According to Enwerem, this speaks volumes on the disrespect of international donor agencies to authorities in the developing countries.

The very fact that CCODP-CIDA produced the documents requested by the bishops only after intense pressure shows that concern for social justice should not just be "outside in" but also "inside out," for charity, as the saying goes, begins at home. One should commend the author's quest for truth. Often corruption and fraud have international collaborators who cover their tracks leaving the recipient countries looking bad and corrupt. The author's approach of relentlessly following the truth till the end should be the guide for virtually all inquiries.

The book's analysis of Nigerian political Catholicism is not all negative. For example, Enwerem praises the effort of the Nigerian Catholic Church hierarchy to engage Nigerian society and politics. At the same time it points out areas where political Catholicism is abused as in situations where some church bishops compromised themselves by receiving gifts from corrupt politicians. Such real-life abuses undermine the church's principled arguments against social injustice. Enwerem suggests what this political Catholicism should look like by urging the Church not to shy away from engaging with politicians but to be careful to engage "within the context of an inclusive and accommodating socio-political environment" (Enwerem 2010, 274). The book candidly chronicles the ills of Nigerian Catholicism including 1) financially fraudulent activities and the lack of transparency involving the Church hierarchy, 2) the marginalization of the laity, 3) the bastardization of titles exemplified in the title taking originally aimed at honoring responsible women of virtue in the Church, and 4) the endemic if unaddressed problem of ethnicity/tribalism crippling the Nigerian Church (Enwerem 2010, 259-304).

Iheanyi's vision for a more positive future for Nigerian political Catholicism revolves around the true federalism advocated by the founding fathers of Nigeria and practiced for

only six years before giving way to decades of military rule in the country. Not only should the JDPC be much more autonomous, free from the clutches of the totalizing control of the Secretary-General's office, but Nigeria's Conference of Bishops should be broken down on a regional level not only in the light of true federalism but also in accordance with the principle of subsidiarity. The author offers additional suggestions on measures aimed at financial transparency and accountability, the moral integrity of the hierarchy, the recognition of and practice of the communion ecclesiology of Vatican Council II, and measures towards promoting civic education (Enwerem 2010, 318-334).

While the book is quite informative, revealing the inner workings of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, the attendant power structure, and leaders' manipulations of power, it gives an overwhelmingly negative impression of the Catholic Church in Nigeria. It singles out the Nigerian Church and demonizes its hierarchy and functionaries based on the activities of a few inglorious actors. I am also frustrated that the name of the Ogun-based senior priest is not mentioned in the book while the Nigerian ecclesiastical hierarchy and numerous social activists are mentioned by name. I wonder whether the author is afraid of this senior priest.

The author's concentration on the activities of the Catholic Secretariat and conceptual limiting of political Catholicism to the restructuring and/or failed restructuring of the CSN is equally troubling for me. Political Catholicism in Nigeria goes beyond the CSN and its in-fighting. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria is a highly responsible, dignified body that should not be maligned because they take risks to address political, social, and economic injustices in Nigeria. Of course there are abuses here and there and to the credit of the author, measures must be put in place to avoid their recurrence.

The Catholic social teaching and *Africae Munus*, the post-synodal apostolic exhortation of the Second African Synod, is ambivalent about what form or shape political Catholicism should take. While Pope Benedict XVI in *Africae Munus* insists the Church should not be involved in partisan politics, it emphasises that the church must not ignore the plight of the poor (AM 22). *Africae Munus* also notes the structural sin responsible for unjust structures that keep people socially and materially poor. In particular, the pontiff writes, “On the social plane, human consciences are challenged by the grave injustices existing in our world as a whole and within Africa in particular. The plundering of the goods of the earth by a minority to the detriment of entire peoples is unacceptable, because it is immoral” (AM 24). In this sense, I agree with Enwerem that the church should walk the talk by living above board if it is to retain credibility while speaking out against corruption and bad governance in Nigeria.

However, the author’s personal involvement in the *dramatis personae* of events at CSN as the director of Church and Society of CSN and JDPC makes the book read like a one-sided story of political Catholicism in Nigeria. The fact that the author’s tenure at CSN was not renewed – and that his tenure was later characterized as incompetent (Enwerem 2010, 299) - affects the author’s objectivity. The book is not free from bias, namely the individual bias that generally protects one’s self-interest. In summary, *Crossing the Rubicon* is involved in self-defence and self-exoneration. The author is entitled to it. There is no problem in clearing one’s name. The challenge is whether one is allowed to paint an institution black while doing so. The author may have suffered glaring injustice at the hands of Nigeria's ecclesiastical hierarchy. That is unfortunate. However, political

Catholicism in Nigeria goes beyond CSN, Fr. George Ehusani, Bishop Matthew Kukah, and their ilk.

As a person who has not been exposed to much of the ecclesiastical hierarchical structure of the Nigerian Church, the book is quite revealing to me. However, I await further input concerning the circumstances surrounding the author's removal from the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria and a rebuttal from the officials of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria. Until that is done, this book chronicles an important aspect of political Catholicism in Nigeria but may not be the whole story.

In spite of these shortcomings, this book is a success in concretely chronicling political Catholicism in one of the fastest-growing Catholic nations in the world. Written from the purview of personal experience and with the experimental analysis of a sociologist, *Crossing the Rubicon* is an achievement. Reflecting the rare honest voice of an insider, the Church is presented in its true colors: namely as a divine institution dependent on the grace of God where saints and sinners labor and work out their salvation. How I wish all local churches were subject to the critical scrutiny of scholars like Iheanyi Enwerem! I highly recommend this book.