



E-ISSN: 2664-603X
P-ISSN: 2664-6021
IJPSG 2023; 5(1): 118-126
www.journalofpoliticalscience.com
Received: 19-12-2022
Accepted: 22-01-2023

Iheanyi Enwerem
Ph.D., Department of Political
Science, Spiritan University
Nneochi (SUN), Abia State,
Nigeria

Marginalization of Ndigbo in Nigerian politics: The role of IGBO Christian witnessing

Iheanyi Enwerem

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.33545/26646021.2023.v5.i1b.212>

Abstract

The term “marginalization” entered into Nigerian political lexicon immediately after the Nigerian-Biafra war (1967-70). It all started with the victorious Federal Government unleashing a number of policies which were deliberately targeted on *Ndigbo* (the *Igbos*). Of note, at the Federal level, were the Federal Character, the Quota System and the Twenty-Pounds policies, and, in Rivers State, the Port-Harcourt Abandoned Property policy, to name a few of such anti-*Igbo* policies. Thus, it was the *Igbos* who, as the defeated party in that war, popularized the use of the term in the Nigerian political discourse following their sense of exclusion from the country’s socio-political and economic scheme of things. Faced with a largely anti-*Igbo* post-war environment in the country, the *Igbos* had to swim through the hostile tide, so to speak, struggling for their survival. Therefore, this paper aims at critically examining the role the Christian Churches in Igboland, especially the more predominant Catholic Church, has or has not been playing in *Igbo* politics of survival in Igboland and beyond. If *Ndigbo* are still marginalized, could it be because the Christian Churches by way of the socio-political and economic activities of their adherents, especially their leaders, have failed to do the needful – the practical witnessing to Christianity’s emancipatory message and character? The import of, and response to, this question vis-à-vis the needed survival of *Ndigbo* are pertinent and, indeed, long overdue for a corrective attention; this is especially when one considers the fact that Igboland is not only the ‘home’ of Christianity in Nigeria but also its most Christian part. Hence, for its conclusion, the paper will proffer a way forward!

Keywords: Nigerian politics, role, IGBO Christian

Introduction

Igboland, as we know it, is not only the home of Christianity in Nigeria but also the one single geopolitical zone out of the six in the country that enjoys a near total predominance of Christian religionists. Not even the two ethnic archrivals of the *Igbos*, the *Yoruba* in the West and the *Hausa/Fulani* in the North of the country enjoy this unique record. While the *Yorubas* share a fifty-fifty population ratio of Christians and Muslims, the *Hausa/Fulanis* have a very significant population of Muslims. Given the emancipatory role religion can play and has actually played in the struggle for sociopolitical freedom in some countries in the world, one would wonder why Christianity has not played a similar role in Igboland.

For some time now, the *Igbos* have been busy complaining about their marginalization in the country, especially since the end of the Nigerian-Biafra civil war in which the *Igbos* lost their bid for the sovereign state of Biafra. While we grant the veracity of *Igbo* marginalization, we cannot help but ask: could the *Igbos* themselves be exonerated from contributing to their marginalization? To be more specific: if *Ndigbo* are being marginalized, could it be because the Christian Churches, by way of the socio-political and economic activities of their adherents, especially their leaders, have failed to do the needful, the practical witnessing to Christianity’s emancipatory message and character? In other words, is the poverty of political consciousness and activism noticeable in the membership of this numerically strong Christian Church in Igboland merely a reflection, if not a product, of similar but much more serious poverty, namely, the poverty of good leadership on the part of the generality of the *Igbo* clergy and their political counterpart?

We ask these questions on the basis of our belief that the Church is what some in the Durkheim school of thought would describe as the provider of “pivotal nexus between

Corresponding Author:
Iheanyi Enwerem
Ph.D., Department of Political
Science, Spiritan University
Nneochi (SUN), Abia State,
Nigeria

religion and its environment” or, better, of “the womb in which [people’s] culture ... is conceived and readied for birth.”^[1] In short, the Church is a moral community within which individuals are unified into a collective way of action or practice which, in turn, expresses what the people/individuals hold to be dear to them in society^[2]. These remarks are instructive for *Ndigbo*. Thus, considering the numerical dominance Christianity holds in Igboland, as noted above, one would expect the generality of its adherents to be so politically conscious and active that they would not only be dictating the tempo of sociopolitical activism at least in Igboland but also make *Ndigbo* become the envy of their neighbours with regards to the pursuit for, and commitment to, good governance and genuine democratic culture. This expected activism, however, is not the case, probably because the people’s role models, the clergy, are collectively suffering from the poverty of political consciousness and activism.

The preceding remarks bring us to the aim and objective of this paper. It is to address the issue of the poverty of socio-political activism in Igboland by way of critically examining the expected role of the Christian Churches in Igboland. Informing this objective is the following argument and thesis for the paper, namely: short of the realization of a restructured Nigeria that could potentially minimize the marginalization of *Ndigbo*, the most urgent need in Igboland today is how to raise a politically conscientized and activist *Igbo* citizenry in general and *Igbo* Christians in particular. The goal is towards liberating *Ndigbo* from the clutches and stranglehold of corrupt, exploitative, selfish and kleptomaniac political leadership of the great majority of the membership of the *Igbo* political class.

In pursuit of the preceding objectives, the paper will be written under the following headings. First, it will present the context that informed the topic or the title of the paper; that is the situation of *Ndigbo* within the post-independent Nigerian polity. Second, it will attempt a historical excursus into how and why *Ndigbo* got into the situation in the first place. The lessons and challenges drawn from this historical background will then sharpen its thought to address, in the third heading, the imperative for action on the part of Christianity in Igboland. The fourth heading will be the conclusion to the paper.

The Catholic Church will be its major reference point in addressing the topic. This is not to suggest in any way that the other Christian denominations are innocent of the same observations it will raise about Catholicism in Igboland. It chooses the Catholic Church for three reasons. First, it is to avoid undue generalization since it is the denomination with which the author is most familiar than with the other denominations, being its ordained minister. Second, the Catholic Church is unarguably the predominant Christian denomination in Igboland. Third, compared to the other denominations, the Catholic Church stands tallest over the others with its long years of history and the largest corpus of literature on the social and political teachings and struggles of the Christian faith.

The State of *Ndigbo* Within the Nigerian Polity – The Good and The Bad

***Ndigbo*, the Good:** Here, we start from a political

perspective. When compared with other ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, the *Igbo* have produced more nationalists than most of their counterparts in the country. Here, we easily recall great *Igbos* – men and women - like the Michael Okparas, Akan Ibiam, Mbonu Ojike, the Kinsley Mbadiwe, Alvan Ikoku, Nwafor Orizu, Mokwugo Okoye, the Flora Nwapa, the women leaders of the 1929 Aba Women’s Riot and the doyen of them all, Nnamdi Azikiwe. In the days of British colonialism in Nigeria, these *Igbos* were among the members of the vanguard of Nigerian nationalism; with their sweat, blood and brawn, they contributed immensely to the eventual birth of modern Nigeria. And one easily recalls the more recent great *Igbos* like Dora Akunyili, Chinua Achebe, Sam Mbakwe, Alex Ekwueme, among others each of whose exemplary performance in public service remain legendary. This nationalistic spirit of the *Igbo* is such that, socially, there is hardly any part of the country one would not find the *Igbos*. Indeed, compared to the other ethnic nationalities, *Ndigbo* are the most widely spread and located in every nook and cranny of the country. Believing rightly but naively that every part of Nigeria should be a home for every Nigerian, *Ndigbo*, wherever they find themselves, would visibly and enthusiastically make a home as well as readily contribute to the social and economic development of the place.

In the area of religion, *Ndigbo* – Catholics and non-Catholics alike - would wholeheartedly express their affiliation and commitment to the material support of their parish and diocese of residence. The case of the Catholic Church is one good example. Compared to their fellow Catholics from other parts of the country, the *Igbo* Catholics are the most *generous* of their time, resources and talents towards the promotion and development of their respective Churches wherever they find themselves. One can hardly think of any Catholic parish in the country today, especially in the big cities, whose spiritual and material development do not largely depend on the support of the *Igbo* members. The same was said to the author about *Igbos* in the other Christian denominations. To buttress this point, one has only to pick up a copy of the Bulletins or Brochures of any fund-raising related event in any of the Churches to see the ethnic identity of the invitees listed therein as chairmen, chief launchers, mothers, fathers, kings, queens and babies of the day – be it at the parish, diocesan, provincial and national level. That the *Igbos* are in the majority of the invitees to such events is not necessarily because of their numerical strength or any love for them as to their well-known record of being generous donors to, and supporters of, anything to do with the development of the Churches.

One can hardly forget to mention the inaugural fund-raising outing for the then proposed Catholic University of Nigeria, now called Veritas University, in March 2003 in Abuja; at this time, the author was the Director of the Department of Church and Society of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria under whose auspices the fund-raising outing was organized. Among the top Catholic dignitaries invited to the event as Chief-launchers, it was only an *Igbo* son, A.B.C. Orjiakor, that physically honoured the invitation; while the other invitees who sent people to represent them with a paltry sum that doesn’t need our mention here for obvious reasons, it was Orjiakor who went on to commit himself to single-handedly finance the building of the Library of the proposed University, making him the highest individual contributor to the project at that event and time. At one of

¹ Robert Wuthnow, *Christianity in the 21st Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1993), p. 20.

² *Ibid.*

the preparatory meetings for the event a few weeks earlier, another *Igbo* had committed himself to providing the computers for the administrative offices of the proposed University.

The foregoing positive scenario is the same with regards to Church's personnel or pastoral agents. Among the Nigerian indigenous clergy, those of the *Igbo* extraction are second to none in their readiness and willingness to serve outside of their homeland, Igboland. Such is the case that there is hardly any diocese in Nigeria without *Igbo* priests and Nuns (women Religious) working either on loan ('on mission') or as fully incardinated personnel of the diocese just as the *Igbo* form either a sizeable number or the majority of the members of the local Church. Add to this the presence and ministry of *Igbo* Reverend Sisters (Religious Nuns) in almost every diocese in the country. Most of these *Igbo* priests, religious, and laity are pioneer missionaries in their places of pastoral ministry or abode – a point which Rev. Fr. Stan Maduawuchi Ogbonna has succinctly articulated in his seminal work on the subject matter^[3]. To buttress this claim, Rev. Fr. Stan Ilo notes *Ndigbo* "helping to build Catholic Church in many parts of the world from Moscow to Rio de Janeiro" and "*Igbo* sons and daughters [holding] important positions in the Catholic Church today at the Vatican, in important church agencies all over the world."^[4] And to crown it all, the only Nigeria Saint in the Catholic Church's catalogue of saints is an *Igbo*, Blessed Iwene Michael Tansi.

Socio-culturally, *Ndigbo* are well known for their republican, industrious and resilient spirit. It was a combination of these characters that saw to their survival as a defeated people in the Nigeria/Biafra civil war of the late 1960s. *Igbo* republicanism, particularly, brought out and sharpened in *Ndigbo* the positive aspects of individualism⁵ that elevated patriotism over clannishness in community service. Here, one recalls the education of many past and present *Igbo* elites by the communal efforts of their town or village Unions, the provision of public utilities like post offices, hospitals, schools, water and electricity and even commercial banks through the same communal efforts of the people.

One cannot easily forget the well-known ingenuity and ability of *Ndigbo* to survive odds that may be beyond the survival of other race of people. For, *Ndigbo* are arguably the only race that was defeated in war and, barely three decades thereafter, was still able to rise from the aches of defeat to the gold of economic survival, even in the face of the Nigerian context. One would be hard pressed to name any ethnic group that would be where the *Igbos* are today economically if such ethnic group had the experience of losing a war and everything they had following their defeat in that war; the *Igbos*, having surrendered to the military might of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, they were

dispossessed of, and displaced from, their pre-war financial acquisitions and civil service positions respectively.

Ndigbo, The Bad

Notwithstanding the foregoing impressive records of the *Igbos*, there appears what could be considered as an almost pathological hatred of *Ndigbo* by the rest of the country – be it in the secular and/or religious circles. There is still no definitive and clear-cut reason for this and so it remains a subject matter that deserves a separate treatment outside the scope of this paper. Suffice it to say that it is probably because of the ingenuity and ability of *Ndigbo* to survive all odds as we noted above. To make this assertion about hatred of *Ndigbo* is not to suggest they themselves are exonerated from contributing to their plight, their marginalization. For instance, *Ndigbo* is one major ethnic group in Nigeria whose current state of affairs is characterized by centrifugal tendencies in recent time.

Some consequences arise from the preceding observations. To start with, *Ndigbo* can neither speak with one voice nor take a principled stand as a people on any national issue without being correctly predicted by their rival ethnic groups. The long years of quest for *Igbo* Presidency of Nigeria is a case in point. While *Ndigbo* were loudly making this quest in the course of the run-up campaign of 2003 General Elections in the country, one Chief Emmanuel Iwuanyanwu, the Chairman of the then political committee of the apex *Igbo* umbrella organization, the *Ohaneze*, was among the team of Nigerian politicians that went to Ota in Ogun State to plead with Olusegun Obasanjo, a *Yoruba*, to run for a second term as President. Later, at the People Democratic Party (PDP) primary to select its presidential candidate for the April 2003 General Elections, the five *Igbo* Governors were among those who voted against an *Igbo*, Dr. Alex Ekwueme, in preference for Obasanjo who is said to be an "*Igbo* hater."^[6] The action of the *Igbo* Governors was a repeat of what also happened on a similar occasion in 1998 when *Igbo* stalwarts in the PDP like Chief Jim Nwobodo ostensibly voted against the same Alex Ekwueme. In the 2019 Presidential Elections, the *Igbo* Governors under the chairmanship of Chief David Umahi, Governor of Ebonyi State, openly castigated Atiku for choosing Peter Obi, an *Igbo*, as his Vice-President and actually went on to campaign against the Atiku-Peter Obi PDP presidential ticket.

The foregoing scenario about *Ndigbo*, especially the underlying anti-*Igbo* attitude on the part of the other ethnic nationalities in the country and the *Igbo* people's self-inflicted problems is not limited to the secular or political terrain. What obtains in the religious terrain, including even in the Catholic Church in Nigeria, could be worse and therefore more disturbing and painful. The generality of this same *Igbo* clergy, like their kith and kin seem unprepared to redress the situation of *Ndigbo*. On a more serious note, the clergy lack the political awareness and astuteness as well as the political foresight to make crucial decisions in the life of the Church that touch on the socio-political interest of their people. In their effort to avoid being seen or labelled as pro-*Igbo*, following the defeat of the *Igbos* in the Nigeria-Biafra

³ Maduawuchi S. Ogbonna, "The Role of *Igbo* Migrant Traders and Missionaries in the Development of Post-Independent Nigeria" in Apollos O Nwauwa and Chima J. Korie, eds. *Against All Odds: The *Igbo* Experience in Postcolonial Nigeria* (Glassboro, New Jersey: Goldline & Jacobs Publishing, 2011), pp. 365-380.

⁴ Stan Chu Ilo, "The Seven Plagues and Five Wounds of *Igbo* Catholicism: A Holy Week Call for Conversion and Prayers addressed to my fellow *Igbo* religious, clerics, pastoral and lay leader," March 28, 2021.

⁵ See Jude N. Uwalaka, *The Struggle for an Inclusive Nigeria: *Igbos* to be or not to be* (Enugu: SNAAP Press Ltd., 2003), especially pp. 30-35 where this point has been so well and correctly treated that it deserves no further commentary in this paper.

⁶ This common perception of Obasanjo by the masses of *Ndigbo* was confirmed to this author by one George Eguh, the political adviser of Chief Achike Udenwa, the then Governor of Imo State, during the author's discussion with him (Eguh) in his office on October 24th 2003 on the state of OHANEZE.

war, they would prefer to either turn the other cheek or look the other way as their kith and kin are more or less victimized in the Nigerian Church and society – an assertion we have stoutly defended elsewhere as to require further attention here ^[7]. Thus, what we have is an *Igbo* Church and clergy who, like their counterparts in the secular/political world of Nigeria, are in disarray or, at best, are not politically conscientized enough to appreciate the necessity of speaking with one voice to direct *Ndigbo* towards the overall social transformation of Igboland within the larger terrain of the Nigerian polity. This explains why the generality of *Ndigbo* appear helpless and, like we noted already, have become the laughing stock, if not also the punching bag, of the ethnic nationalities, especially the two major rival ethnic groups to *Ndigbo*. It is here the *Igbo* leadership question comes in.

There has emerged since the 1990s a membership of *Igbo* political class whose stock in trade is more on how to win elections rather than service to the people; that is, a self-serving group whose entry into politics has little to do with the interest of the masses of the *Igbos*. We have extensively discussed this point elsewhere that we don't need to detain the reader here with further comments ^[8]. Such is the case that today, *Ndigbo* have become a laughing stock among the generality of other ethnic groups in the country. What is more, it is these ethnic rivals, especially the *Hausa/Fulani* extraction, that now literarily choose leaders for *Ndigbo* ^[9]. Nowhere is this state of affairs better epitomized than in the judiciary manipulation at the Supreme Court level that gave birth to the current Senator Hope Uzodinma Governorship of Imo State,¹⁰ alias “Supreme Court Governor” as many in the State call him.

The preceding kind of leaders have their counterparts within the rank and file of *Igbo* clergy – Catholics and non-Catholic alike; that is, men who entered the priesthood more for their material interest than spiritual ministry to the people. The author ran into some of them before and during the April 2003 General Elections while serving as the National Coordinator of the Churches of those elections; these priests had sold their conscience and the dignity of the priesthood to willing corrupt politicians for whom they became willing agents, carriers of ‘Ghana-must-go’ bags of money, to buy the votes of their fellow clergy and their parishioners.

The foregoing observations are mere tip of the iceberg regarding the role *Igbo* Christian witnessing has been playing in the marginalization of *Ndigbo*. In the last two or three decades, pursuit for money or material possession has for all practical purposes become synonymous with the practice of faith in Nigeria, especially in Igboland. Fundamentally, this development boils down to a monetization of faith or Christian practice, and is actualized in different forms and shapes. In Igboland today, hardly does one receive any Christian service, including even Christian burial, without having to pay mandatory fee to

both the priest and the parish ^[11]. In one diocese, the family of a candidate for priestly ordination must pay, in the guise of “thanks and appreciation” to the bishop, an advance fee of One Hundred Thousand Naira for the candidate to be ordained.

In some dioceses, ‘development’ means building high-profile but unnecessary physical structures and not the spiritual life, talk less of socio-political formation of the people. To finance these building projects, the people are subjected to on-going compulsory monetary taxations, regardless of the people's condition in the hard economic times in the country. In one diocese, three of such ‘development’ structures are simultaneously going on at the same time – a huge Arena, buildings at the permanent site for the Diocese-owned University and a four-storey state-of-the-art Hotel.

One cannot easily forget the penchant for some young priests going into what they call “Healing/Adoration Ministries.” On the surface they are said to have been set up to serve the spiritual needs of the people but, if the truth must be told, these ‘Ministries’ are largely self-serving; in imitating the style and adopting the spirituality of the proliferated Pentecostal Churches, alias ‘Prosperity Religion Churches,’ of our time, these ‘healing/adoration ministries,’ like most of their Pentecostal Church counterparts, are avenues for monetary extortion of the mostly poor, gullible and naïve lay faithful who, in the face of hard economic times, go to such centers hoping to receive some basic social welfare services that bad governments could not provide for the citizenry. Needless to say that there is hardly any accountability on the part of the priests engaged in these “Ministries;” as long as they make generous monetary returns to their bishops and do not publicly criticize the country's bad governments to the point of implicating their bishops, all is well and good. But should the priests speak or act otherwise, then they would incur their bishops' mild and temporary discipline.

Priests and bishops, irrespective of denominational affiliation, have become regular guests of politicians and those within the corridors of power, dining and wining with them. In Nigeria, especially in Igboland, it is no longer news to hear of politicians either making mouth-watering financial donations in support of parish and/or diocesan projects or sometimes even single-handedly building parish churches and rectories with financial resources that are well known to be beyond their yearly salary. In one diocese, for example, it is a regular end-of-the-month-affair, with the celebration of Mass, at the country home of a prominent typical Nigerian politician and staunch financial supporter of the bishop. Normally, each and every priest who participate in the Mass receive a generous monetary appreciation from the politician, thus making the visit attractive to many priests who would rush the Masses in their respective Parishes in order to be on time for the Mass for the politician.

One would not mind if *Igbo* Christian witnessing as exemplified in the foregoing practices were yielding positive results, by way of good politicians and governance in Igboland. Unfortunately, this is not the case. If anything, Christian witnessing in Igboland has turned into what Rev.

⁷ Iheanyi Enwerem, “Solidification of the Catholic Church Among the Igbos: Underlying Issues and Challenges” [A guest Lecture presented at the ANIMAEE JUBILEE & CONGRESS of the *Igbo* Chapter of the Nigerian Catholic Diocesan Priests Association (NCDPA), held at the DRACC, Emene, Enugu, November 6th 2003], pp. 5-6.

⁸ Cf. Iheanyi Enwerem, “Politics or ‘Politricks’: Nigerian Politics of Bribery and Corruption in Igboland” in *International Journal of Political Science and Development*, Vol. 9(1), January 2021, pp. 41-50.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 48.

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, pp. 43-44

¹¹ See Rudolf Okonkwo, “How Anglican, Catholic priests in South-East extort bereaved families before burial,” in *Peoples Gazette*, March 17th 2021.

Fr. Stan Ilo has rightly and lamentably described as “Seven Plagues and Five Wounds of *Igbo* Catholicism.”^[12] In the seventh plague which he captioned, “The corruption of the Clergy and religious through materialism, cronyism, favoritism, clannishness, immorality and the politicization of the Church,” he aptly noted:

We have weakened the prophetic credibility of the Church in Igboland because of the corruption of some of our clergy and religious. This happens not only at home, but abroad. There is no culture of accountability in our churches and this is not good for the next generation. We have scandalized the weak and undermined the credibility of the Church and the mission of the evangelization of our cultures and the transformation of our society through authentic Catholic culture smelted in the finest values and virtues of *Igbo* people – *ofo n’ogu*^[13].

The preceding brand of negatively dominant religiosity is epitomized in the Nigerian Catholic Church by the healing and adoration ministries of the likes of Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Edeh of the Elele-based Prayer Ministry in Port-Harcourt diocese, Rev. Fr. Emmanuel Obimma, alias “*Ebube Muonso*” (Holy Spirit Power) of Onitsha Archdiocese, Rev. Fr. Paul Martin Obayi, alias “*Oku n’erere*” (Consuming Fire) of Nsukka Diocese, Rev. Fr. Magnus Ebere, alias “*E-Dey Work*” (It works), of Cananland Adoration Ministries in Ahiara diocese, and, arguably the doyen of them all, Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka of Adoration Ministry in Emene, Enugu diocese – to name a few of them engaged in this kind of ministry. Mbaka’s several false prophesies on Nigerian politics and politicians not only undermine the credibility and reputation of the Catholic Church in Nigeria but also have become a regular anticipated feature during national and state electoral campaigns in the country. Following his recent war of words with the APC-led Federal Government, Reuben Abati adds his voice to the rightful condemnation of this brand of religiosity which he concretized in the person of Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka in these words:

Mbaka represents an emerging face of the Church, a living embodiment of the rise of utilitarian capitalism in the Church of Christ, and the conflation of priesthood with hedonism.... This new tendency of priests who do not want to suffer, who would rather choose the hedonistic life, explains the new character of the Church. Priests now want to own estates. They drive exotic cars if they can. They want to travel First Class too^[14].

The question at this juncture is this: how did *Ndigbo*, especially the Catholic clergy, find themselves in this situation? Our attempt to respond to this question brings us to the next heading.

Historical background to the current situation of *Ndigbo* and the Catholic Church in Igboland

Like its neighbouring ethnic nationalities, the *Igbo* are victims of the 1914 forced amalgamation of these nationalities by Britain into what is today Nigeria. The British went on to enthrone and promote among them discriminatory policies and divide-and-rule tactics all of which was intended to ensure her domination and control over Nigeria and Nigerians. By so doing, ethnic loyalty

became a virtue to which the ethnic nationalities adapted themselves accordingly. Those nationalities that can play out the ethnic loyalty well had over the years managed to outplay those that cannot.

Brought to bear on the *Igbo*, they have been beaten till date by their two major ethnic rivals, the Hausa/Fulani and the *Yoruba*; these use the *Igbos* to achieve their respective interests. The *Hausa/Fulani* ethnic group have been good, if not legendary at this. For instance, in the more than sixty years of the country’s independence, the group has used its alliance with the *Igbos*, more often than with the other nationalities, to keep itself in power. The *Yoruba* tried their luck on *Ndigbo* and got what they wanted. Here we remember the NADECO struggles during the General Sani Abacha dictatorial years; it was the alliance between the *Yoruba* Human Rights activists with their colleagues of *Igbo* extraction like Olisa Agbakoba, Clement Nwankwo and others that largely spearheaded the struggles which eventually ended military governance in 1998 and saw till date the return of democratic system of governance in the country.

Prior to this time, the *Igbos* had made a bold but futile attempt in the late 1960s to secede from Nigeria; their subsequent defeat in 1970 by the superior military force of the Federal republic of Nigeria made matters worse for them when compared with the other ethnic nationalities, especially their two arch rivals and conquerors, the *Hausa/Fulani* and the *Yoruba*. These, since the 1970s, adopted a Machiavellian approach to power and dominance towards the *Igbos*. This is responsible for the well-orchestrated cry of *Igbo* marginalization, the refusal of the rest of Nigeria to permit *Ndigbo* from assuming any strategic position of influence in the Nigerian polity and, worse, for throwing up on *Ndigbo* leaders who see leadership as a moneymaking business than as service to the people. So far, what we have noted is the secular dimension of the historical cause of the present predicament of *Ndigbo*; there is a religious or a Catholic Church historical dimension to the predicament.

It is about the mid-1850s that the Catholic Church as we know it today reached Igboland – thanks to the missionary enterprise of the Irish Holy Ghost Missionaries (Spiritans), especially their leader and most renowned of them all of that generation, Rev. Fr (later) Bishop Joseph Shanahan. He made secular education the chief strategic tool for his missionary work. In a twinkle of an eye, so to speak, the Spiritans flooded the whole of Igboland with schools. It was a massive and grassroots project as practically every village had a school. As a first step, he concentrated on having primary and gradually went into secondary schools. By the time the Protestants and even the British colonial masters knew it, Igboland had been swept into the Catholic faith, thus making Igboland the most Catholic part of the country or, as people say, the home of Catholicism in Nigeria and indeed in West Africa.

We find the Shanahan strategy very interesting and instructive. What is principally noteworthy of Shanahan is his creativity in thought and attentiveness to the grassroots; that is, his appreciation of the fact that any effort for genuine and meaningful social transformation in society must be largely located within and targeted, first and foremost, at the rank and file of the people at the grassroots level and not at those at the upper ranks of society. In other words, real, sustainable and lasting social transformation

¹² Stan Chu Ilo, “The Seven Plagues and Five Wounds of *Igbo* Catholicism: A Holy Week Call for Conversion and Prayers addressed to my fellow *Igbo* religious, Clerics, pastoral and lay leaders,” March 28, 2021.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Reuben Abati, “Father Mbaka’s Sin” in Premium Times, May 4th 2021.

must be approached from bottom-up and not from top-down.

To say this is not to suggest that Shanahan's education-strategy was faultless. This is because, it is one thing to give education; the kind or quality of education is another matter. It is here we begin to locate the problem with regards to the root cause of the poverty of political consciousness and activism between the rank and file of Catholics and, by extension, *Igbo* people. To understand this state of affairs, one must pay attention to the religious politics of the time. The Christian missionaries that came to Nigeria, Catholics and non-Catholics alike, were children of a post-reformation era. For the Catholics, for example, the spirituality of the time was tailored towards a particular mentality. Essentially, it was a spirituality that was more attentive to the vertical (spiritual) dimension than on the horizontal (material/physical) dimension of faith and life; that is to say, it was not a spirituality that did not recognize the interconnectedness between the vertical and the horizontal interests and concerns of the human person. Thus, the Shanahan education strategy was attentive to the horizontal only to the extent that such an education was devoid of the inculcation of political interest and engagement in the thoughts of the recipients, the Catholic faithful. At best it was essentially aimed at giving the recipients the opportunity to simply look after their socioeconomic welfare; but even at that, it was devoid of political interest and activism. There is a possible explanation for this. It is principally located at the quality of formation that was given to the would-be local clergy and the religious, the elite class whose membership would be the educators and, therefore, role models for the local converts.

Formal seminary formation in Nigeria began in 1924. By this time, Nigeria was barely one decade old and under the firm control of a non-Catholic colonial power, the British colonial government. Coincidentally, this same period saw the rise of the spirit of nationalism in Nigeria as the few educated Nigerians at the time began to form themselves into pressure groups aimed at political agitation for freedom from the British. Finding itself under this political context, especially seeing the Catholics as underdogs of sorts, Shanahan could not afford to produce converts who would be at political loggerhead with the British colonial government. This was so as not to incur the anger of the British colonial masters and thus give the Catholic Church the room and peace it needed to win converts and therefore register a firm presence in Igboland in particular and Nigeria in general.

Besides, about the same period, the 1920s, there was a cut-throat fight between the Protestants and Catholics, ultimately aimed at winning of converts. The fight was a carry-over of the counter-reformation era in Europe from where both groups of Christians came to Nigeria. Thus, the programme of Catholic seminary formation that came to Nigeria was borne out of a counter-reformation theology that tended to be defensive or apologetic and firmly committed to maintaining post-tridentine positions that were non-ecumenical and antagonistic toward Protestant theology and positions^[15]. This programme of formation produced a spirituality that was more sensitive and attentive to other-worldly interests and concerns than in those of the here-and-

now. Accordingly, the programme "reflected the mainstream of Catholic thought: fairly traditional, scholastic, apprehensive of current movements in the wider world. Modernism and the severe reaction of Rome to it did not create a seminary system that was open to creativity."

^[16] This remained the state of affairs until the emergence of the Second Vatican Council (VAT. II) in the mid-1960s. The Council, it is worth noting, reviewed the ecclesiological basis of all church ministry – be it at the episcopal, priestly, diaconal, religious and laity level – to now comprise of a threefold mission and ministry of Jesus as teacher, sanctifier, and leader^[17]. For instance, the idea of Church as an institution and one centered on its ministry is now conceived and presented from the perspective of a living organism, so to speak, and one centered on and in relation with a person's life, namely, the person of Jesus Christ.

It is not quite clear to what extent the clergy and, by extension, the laity in Igboland imbibed this VAT II teaching and understanding of authentic Christian spirituality and witnessing. There is a possible reasonable excuse for this. Just about the time the outcome of VAT II was becoming available to the world, Nigeria was embroiled in a civil war. Igboland which has the concentration of Catholics was at the heart of this war. While the rest of the world were dealing with the directives resulting from VAT II, the Catholic Church in Nigeria and particularly in Igboland was understandably preoccupied with a war of survival than with the niceties of the Second Vatican Council. By 1970 when the war came to an end, the rest of the Catholic world had gone far in imbibing and implementing the directives of the Council. The Catholic Church in Igboland, on its part, was more concerned with post-war survival, especially as its missionaries who, by that time, formed the majority of priests, were expelled from the country by the victorious Nigerian Federal Government. *Ndigbo* Catholics themselves were faced with economic hardship as they were definitively deprived of their pre-war Bank savings and confiscation of their Real Estate investments in some parts of the country. In the face of these and other deprivations, the Catholic Church in Igboland preoccupied itself with producing Church personnel to fill up the yawning pastoral vacuum created by the sudden and unexpected expulsion of the missionaries than in paying attention to the more fundamental theological niceties of the Second Vatican Council. The political and religious dimensions of the foregoing scenario throw up serious challenge to *Ndigbo*, especially their clergy.

Challenges Before the Clergy in Igboland: The Imperative for Action

Recall the political context in which, as we just noted above, *Ndigbo* found themselves. When one combines this context with a Catholicism which, as we also noted, has schooled its members, clergy and laity alike, into a disinterestedness in socio-political activism and a spirituality that pays little or no attention to the necessary linkage between people's spiritual and material concerns, then, one begins to appreciate the seriousness of the predicament *Ndigbo* have found themselves. As would be expected, it is the products of this kind of formation, especially of the clergy and religious, that would pass on the same orientation, with its

¹⁵ Kenan B. Osborne, *Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church* (New York: Paulist Press, 1988), pp. 280-281.

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 290.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 318-324, esp. pp. 318-319.

attendant spirituality, to the rank and file of Catholic adherents in the country. In this regard, the quality of people's spirituality or idea of holiness - be they priests, religious and lay faithful of the Church - was measured on the basis of their attentiveness to prayer and docility, dedication to the celebration and reception of the sacraments. Thus, we herein locate a dominant context that effectively contributed to the state of poverty of political consciousness and activism among Catholics, especially in Igboland. And among them are the clergy who largely lived "in compartmentalized world, a world without windows on the real life of the people."^[18]

But the foregoing is the distance we can go with excusing the leadership of the Catholic Church in Igboland for its poverty of political consciousness and activism. Surprisingly, by the 1980s, twenty-five years after VAT II and ten years after the civil war, the Catholic Church in Igboland had significantly overcome the odds which confronted it at the end of that war. But for the Federal Government's take-over of Church schools - the Church's major tool for evangelization - Churches or places of worship in Igboland were left untouched and the *Igbos* were left free to practice their faith. It was not long before the Church in Igboland trained enough priests to fill up the vacuum created by the expulsion of the missionary priests and religious even to the point of now sending priests to needy dioceses across the length and breadth of Nigeria. As a matter of fact, going by "the official Nigeria Catholic Directory, by 1987 there were *Igbo* Catholic priests (diocesan or religious order) serving in every diocese in Northern Nigeria;" this was on and above the success of *Igbo* Spiritan priests elsewhere in the country by the late 1970s^[19].

Thus, given the preceding observations, we believe that by the 1980s, the Catholic Church in Igboland was in the position to choose what direction, what quality of Christian witnessing, Catholicism should adopt in response to the post-war marginalization of *Ndigbo* in Nigeria, especially in Igboland. The *Igbo clergy*, specifically the bishops, made a choice for *Ndigbo*: it was a non-commitment to sociopolitical liberative brand of Christian witnessing. Consequently, *Ndigbo* found themselves in a situation where both the leaders and the led were each on their own with little or no attention to the griefs and anxiety of their kith and kin. For, as Pope John XXIII put it in his Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World:

The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of men [and women] of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted, these too are the joys and hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the followers of Christ. Indeed, nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community composed of [human beings]^[20]

The Pope went further to say that "to carry out such task ... [Christians] must therefore recognize and understand the world in which we live, its expectations, its longings, and its often-dramatic characteristics."^[21]

One might argue that the passages just cited are directed to

every Christian, priests and laity alike, and therefore neither to the clergy nor to their kind of leadership. Good. But given the position the clergy occupy as role models in society and particularly the high regards and reverence in which they are held in the Catholic Church's tradition, it is only to be expected that they should identify themselves intimately with "the joys and the hopes, the griefs and anxieties" of the people around them. On this basis, therefore, and when brought to bear on Igboland where the great majority of the populace are Christians, it was a poverty, if not a betrayal, of authentic pastoral care when the *Igbo* clergy lack the political knowledge of, or the sensitivity to, their people's predicament and the necessary political activism to lead them out of it. In effect, we are saying that any pastoral ministry that does not go hand-in-hand with ensuring to the socio-political empowerment and transformation of the people is nothing but a sham, a misdirected and disjointed ministry. We would even dare to say that such a ministry is un-catholic, if one were to borrow a leaf from the example of Pope John-Paul II. His combination of pastoral ministry with attentiveness to the state of affairs in his home country, Poland, contributed immensely to the positive social transformation of Poland and the eventual collapse of communism in Eastern Europe. By so doing the Pope exemplified most vividly the gains from linking up religiosity or pastoral ministry with socio-political activism. And still the *Igbo* clergy, specifically the bishops, were unmoved in the brand of Catholicism they chose for Igboland, refusing even to borrow a leaf from the Pope's example.

In the preceding remarks lies the challenge before the clergy of Igboland and to which they must respond; that is, the imperative for them to reverse themselves from their current Christian witnessing to raise in Igboland a socio-politically conscientized and activist *Igbo* citizenry whose ultimate political goal must be a perpetual ensurance of the enthronement into power or governance a people-oriented political class of leaders in Igboland and beyond. Based on the understanding that healers must first heal themselves, the clergy in Igboland must necessarily begin the anticipated conscientization with themselves, individually and collectively, drawing their inspiration from some basic liberative principles that are enunciated in the Church's Social Teachings. Without pretending to be exhaustive of an area of studies that is beyond the scope of this paper, three of such liberative principles are worthy of our attention, namely: the principles of Common Good, Solidarity and Subsidiarity.

Common Good: This is understood to embrace "the sum total of those conditions of social living whereby [people] are enabled to achieve their own integral perfection more fully and more easily."^[22] The common good is concerned with the life of everyone as well as the ordered wellbeing of everything in society. In other words, it is about ensuring for the enabling environment for everyone and everything to be the best they could possibly be in whatever context or society they find themselves. As such, it calls on everyone and, more so, on those in position of power and authority in society to respect the fundamental and inalienable rights of peoples without which they would not lead a truly human life and, thus, making the stability and security in society

¹⁸ Kenan B. Osborne, Op.cit, p. 292.

¹⁹ See, Maduawuchi S. Ogbonna, op. cit., p. 371 for details on this.

²⁰ Cf. David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, (eds.), Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage (New York: Orbis Press, 1992), p. 166.

²¹ Ibid., p. 167.

²² David J. O'Brien and Thomas A. Shannon, (eds.), op.cit., p. 140.

elusive or, at best, an unrealizable dream.

Solidarity: Arising from the obvious spirit of interdependence discernable from the virtue of common good is the principle or virtue of solidarity. This is not just mere feeling of compassion or shallow distress at the misfortunes of others but rather an unbending and enduring determination to commit oneself “to the good of all and each of each individual, because we are really responsible for all.”^[23] Here, people are called to first recognize and then treat one another as persons, no matter people’s different social, political and economic status or background. For, the rich and the poor alike mutually need one another. This recognition and attendant treatment of people as persons need not obliterate the imperative for people’s mutual respect of the interests of one another or be turned into opportunity to exploit others and thus destroy the social cohesion that must reign in society.

Subsidiarity: The imperative for solidarity as we have just noted does not mean that people are the same. On the contrary, people are different in various ways just as individuals have their areas of strength, capabilities and competence. The recognition of this and the creation of the necessary environment for people to live out their competences is what the virtue of subsidiarity is all about. In other words, people must be given the chance to do what they know best, meaning that both the strong and the weak should mutually respect each other’s area of competence and not try to usurp the role and competence of the other.

Interestingly, the Christian principles or virtues discussed above find resonance in the traditional *Igbo* socio-cultural thoughts as we noted to some degree earlier in the paper. We briefly recall them here for reason of emphasis, especially by way of deciphering them from *Igbo* sayings and proverbs. Here one recalls proverbs like *anya bewe, imi ebewe* (when the eye cries, the nose also cries) which brings out the value of common good; *onye aghala nwanne ya* (let no one abandon one’s brother) or *igwe bu ike* (togetherness is strength) both of which ring the bell of solidarity or the saying *biri ka mu biri* (live and let live) or *egbe bere, ugo bere, nke si ibeya ebele, nku kwaa ya* (let the kite and eagle perch together and may its wings be broken the ones that denies the other the right to perch) both of which remind us of the virtue of subsidiarity. These are necessary virtues for progressive societal living which *Ndigbo* of the past imbibed and made their own in the course of their interaction with one another. It is the spirit of these virtues that informed the formation of the *Igbo* Unions of old whose mere shadow are located in the present-day Town Unions that are scattered across the length and breadth of *Igboland* and beyond.

There is an attempt in recent times, by some *Igbo* citizens to see how the Town Unions could be galvanized and directed into becoming a veritable and respected nationwide umbrella organizations to salvage *Ndigbo* from their present-day plight and thus give them the necessary start not only to regain their past pride of place but also to reposition them on a strong footing for the politics of the twenty-first century within the Nigerian polity. Since what happens in the political (secular) and the religious (spiritual) terrain mutually affect each other, it is only to be expected that the

Church cannot stand aloof to this attempt to revive *Ndigbo* or stand on the fence with its other worldly spirituality while “others entitled to the same interests [*Ndigbo*] are pursuing can only be too happy to pick” a marginalized *Ndigbo* to pieces like picking broomsticks^[24].

Conclusion

What has clearly emerged in the course of this paper is the existence in *Igboland* today of a social vacuum, a collective marginalized life of misery which expresses itself as injustice. This state of affairs, which is partly caused by a socio-politically naïve clergy, is concretized by a dearth of public utilities, corrupt and inept leaders over a largely numbed and politically apathetic *Igbo* citizenry who has surrendered to fate, luck and despondency.

Seen from another perspective, we noticed the reality of two dominant forces that control things today in *Igboland*; they are the *neuveux-riche Igbo* political class and its religious counterpart, the *Igbo* Christian ‘Prosperity religionists.’ While the former is characterized by what the author had described elsewhere as their practice of ‘politricks,’ the latter is best represented, in its Catholic mold, by the likes of Rev. Fr. Ejike Mbaka. It is clearly evident that these two forces are two sides of the same coin, so to speak. This is in the sense that they share a common interest and exhibit the same attitude and orientation towards the masses both of whose political and religious naivety they exploit.

It has now become an urgent imperative that a ‘Third Force’ be formed to counter the interests of these two but interrelated dominant forces. This ‘Third Force,’ must be drawn principally from the masses of the people who must now be socio-politically mobilized towards the realization of their civic rights and responsibilities as well as to commit themselves to the struggle on how to realize these rights. We believe that once the masses of the people become politically conscientized, they will not allow the politicians to take them for a ride or get away with the kind of corrupt and exploitative governance.

When the preceding remarks are brought to bear on our topic for this paper, it is gratifying to note that the Catholic Church appears to be the most veritable institution that has the means and the stature to effect societal change in the *Igboland* of today. This is because, compared to the other denominations, it is more cohesively organized, has a better and more well-educated clergy, more universally applicable social teachings and commands the largest numerical strength in *Igboland*. It is regrettable that these resources have not been put into use over the years by the *Igbo* clergy for a more meaningful socio-political transformation of *Igboland*, apparently because the clergy themselves are either unaware of the potentials within their commands or, for reasons of comfortability, are unwilling to become the veritable agents, the vanguard, for the urgently needed social transformation of *Igboland*. Thus, to the extent that *Igbo* clergy, especially the Catholics among them, have not played and appear unwilling to play this role, preferring instead a religiosity, a Christian witnessing, that is more hedonistic than socio-politically activist and emancipatory, then, they stand guilty of contributing to the marginalization of *Ndigbo* in the Nigerian polity in general and *Igboland* in particular.

²³ Ibid., p. 421.

²⁴ See Tony Momoh as cited in Jude N. Uwalaka, op.cit., p. 35.

References

1. Abati R. Father Mbaka's Sin, in Premium Times, May 4th 2021.
2. Eguh G. Discussion with author on the state of OHANEZE, October 24th 2003.
3. Enwerem I. Solidification of the Catholic Church Among the Igbos: Underlying Issues and Challenges, Guest Lecture, Igbo Chapter of the Nigerian Catholic Diocesan Priests Association (NCDPA), held at the DRACC, Emene, Enugu, November 6th 2003.
4. Politics or 'Politricks': Nigerian Politics of Bribery and Corruption in Igboland in International Journal of Political Science and Development, Vol. 9(1), January 2021.
5. Ilo SC. The Seven Plagues and Five Wounds of Igbo Catholicism: A Holy Week Call for Conversion and Prayers addressed to my fellow Igbo religious, Clerics, pastoral and lay leaders, March 28, 2021.
6. Nwauwa AO, Korieh CJ. eds., Against All Odds: The Igbo Experience in Postcolonial Nigeria (Glassboro, New Jersey: Goldline & Jacobs Publishing; c2011).
7. O'Brien DJ. Shannon TA. (eds.), Catholic Social Thought: The Documentary Heritage (New York: Orbis Press); c1992.
8. Ogbonna MS. The Role of Igbo Migrant Traders and Missionaries in the Development of Post-Independent Nigeria in Nwauwa, A.O. and Korieh, C.J., eds. against All Odds: The Igbo Experience in Postcolonial Nigeria (Glassboro, New Jersey: Goldline & Jacobs Publishing); c2011.
9. Okonkwo R. How Anglican, Catholic priests in South-East extort bereaved families before burial, in Peoples Gazette, March 17th 2021.
10. Osborne KB. Priesthood: A History of Ordained Ministry in the Roman Catholic Church (New York: Paulist Press); c1988.
11. Uwalaka JN. The Struggle for an Inclusive Nigeria: Igbos to be or not to be (Enugu: SNAAP Press Ltd.); c2003.
12. Wuthnow R. Christianity in the 21st Century: Reflections on the Challenges Ahead (Oxford: Oxford University Press; c1993).