

AGULERI: FROM A CRADLE OF AFRICAN TRADITIONAL RELIGION TO A CENTRE OF CATHOLIC EVANGELIZATION, 1890-2023

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Abstract

In 1890, when the French Catholic missionaries opened its mission station at Aguleri, most natives saw it as joke since it was believed that their life subsisted in their traditional religion. Gradually, Catholicism and Christianity swept off the very majority of Aguleri indigenes and even spread from there. The faith grew to birth a new Catholic diocese in February 2023. This work tried to review the spread of the mission in order to identify its successes and challenges, as they may be of help to the new diocese. Simple thematic, narrative and critical methods of history were employed in the research, while adopting Pope-Levison's theories of relationships and rootedness in the church to anchor it. The findings revealed that though the Catholic mission in Aguleri could be considered a success, it was, however, challenged by strained relations with neighbours; attachment to traditional cultural practices, and shallowness in doctrinal depth. These may continue to pose great obstacles to the success for the new diocese.

Key words: African Traditional Religion, Aguleri, Catholic, Centre of Evangelization

Introduction

In the morning hours of February 12, 2023, the world, and especially, the people of Aguleri, Nigeria, awoke to the reality of the creation of the diocese of Aguleri, carved out of the Archdiocese of Onitsha by the Catholic Pontiff, Pope Francis. The news of the creation of the diocese had just been announced by the Vatican that Sunday morning. The new diocese of Aguleri was officially erected on March 17, 2023, and its first Bishop, His Excellency, Most Reverend Denis Chidi Isizoh, was equally installed in that one swoop ceremony at the newly elevated St. Joseph Cathedral, Aguleri. What had been a speculation, and what had been a dream in many quarters for many years thus became a concrete reality; a historical fact.

The Catholic Church first came to Aguleri in 1888 with a visit from some missionaries of the Holy Ghost Congregation who finally set up a parish there in 1891. Before the advent of Catholicism, the town was totally and deeply immersed in African Traditional Religion (ATR). The Catholic journey in Aguleri eventually altered this situation predominantly.

Even if its history has been one of ups and downs, yet it remains certainly a progressive one. Over a century and a quarter after its advent, Aguleri has metamorphosed from a Mass centre to a coordinating centre of Catholic evangelization for the entire *Omabala* and *Oyi* areas. In the light of this development, a historical review of the journey of the Catholic Church in Aguleri seems necessary, so as to expose the depth of this Christian presence that upturned a once totally considered African Traditional Religious (pegan) community.

Presented in a genre of church history, this work makes this necessary historical excursion, so as to possibly highlight the progress, the successes, and the difficulties that Catholic evangelism faced in Aguleri, and to identify the prospects, challenges and gains that may arise following the creation of the diocese of Aguleri. The work adopts the general descriptive, narrative, and critical methods of historical research. The contents are laid out in thematic order. The work is further anchored on Pope-Levison's (2020) theories of Relationships and Rootedness in the church. In her book, *Models of Evangelism, examining* eight influential approaches to evangelism, she concludes that five qualities are essential to effective evangelism, including Relationships, and Rootedness in the church. She believes that a friendly relationship between persons can make one remain in the same church. Also, if people are rooted in their faith, they would withstand the wind trying to blow them away from it.

Brief geographical/ historical background and conceptual explanations

Geographically, Aguleri is located centrally in Anambra East Local Government Area of Anambra State, Nigeria, where it situates at the confluence of Omambala (Anambra) and Ezu rivers; and pre-eminently sits astride a good length of the Omambala river. By land or water route, Aguleri is about "28 Kilometres north-east of the commercial city of Onitsha in Anambra State of Nigeria..." (Obadiogwu, 1991, p.5). Its territory extends and shares borders with fifteen towns in three states: Anambra, Enugu, and Kogi. Aguleri is divided into two segments, the riverine and the upland areas (Aguleri-Otu and Aguleri-Uno respectively). These two are further broken into three settlements; the Aguleri Inland (where the original villages of Aguleri situate), Aguleri Urban (Otuocha Aguleri and the Christian village combined), and Aguleri Otu comprising former fishing and farming settlements).

Oral tradition has it that, "a mythical figure came down from God and settled at the confluence of Ezu and Omabala rivers. The being was called Eri." The same God also "provided a woman called Nono (referred to as "nneuwa"- mother of the world) to be Eri's wife" (Okafor, 1995, p.6). These two begot Agulu, who founded Aguleri; Menri -founder of the Nri; Onogu (also called Igbo at times)- founder of Igbariam; Oba- father of the

Nteje, Urada, the Ogodos, etc; Igala; Enuike who founded Amanuke (AmaEnuike the field or square of Enuike); and a daughter, Uluwa, also called Adamgboo (Adam gboogboo - my daughter from the earliest time). The sons are in order of seniority. All the sons according to custom migrated to found new settlements, leaving Agulu, the eldest son, to occupy their father's "Obu" (temple). Some writers and tradition claim that Eri came from Igala. This claim has not been substantiated. Therefore, following more grounded evidence of Aguleri and Nri Traditions among others, as well as available archaeological evidence (Oguagha & Okpoko 1984, p.37), the descent of Igala from Anambra valley is more probable than Eri descent from Igala. Agulu, the first son of Eri, had three sons-Ivite, Ikenga, and Ezi who founded the tripodal structure of Aguleri - Ivite, Igboezunu, and Ugwunadegbe respectively. Ugwunadegbe has two villages built by the two sons of Ezi, Omesi and Iyene. They founded Enugwu and Eziagulu respectively. Thus, it is common to hear of Aguleri four villages - Ivite, Igboezunu, Enugwu, and Eziagulu. Ivite has eight major lineages, Igboezunu has six, Enugwu has five, and Eziagulu has seven. These form the Aguleri inland town.

Religion in pre-Christian Aguleri

Aguleri had a system of belief and worship before the coming of the Europeans and the advent of Christianity. This shall be referred to in this work, as Aguleri Traditional Religion (A. T. R.). The A.T.R. was everybody's religion. It was a "theistic" religion. Elements of Aguleri Traditional Religion included a belief in a "Supreme Being" known and called *Chukwu* (*chi ukwu*) which literally means the "Great Divinity". Nonetheless, traditional Aguleri was not devoid of belief in varied deities. These deities were, however, believed to be "agents" of *Chukwu* and they mediated between *Chukwu* and human beings. The hosts of deities were subordinate to him. The Supreme Being had other names in traditional Aguleri, such as, "*Chineke*" (*Chi na- eke*) - The divinity that creates (Creator) and "*Osebuluwa*" (*Olisabuluuwa*) - the one that carries the universe.

The belief in *Chukwu* was so strong that whatever happened that was beyond the people's comprehension, was attributed or handed over to him. Thus, the genesis of such names as "Chukwuma" (God knows), "Chukwudi" (There is God), "Chukwuebuka" (God is great), "Rapuluchukwu" (Leave it in God's hand), "Chekwubechukwu" (Hope in God), "Chukwubuogum" (God is my medicine), "Chukwunenye" (God gives), and so on. It was on this setting that the 19th century missionaries met Aguleri. Almost parallel to the Christian belief in superhuman beings such as angels and saints who are seen as intermediaries between God and humans, pre-Christian Aguleri believed in, and attended to superhuman beings which included deities, ancestors, and spirits. These were encountered in everyday life. The deities were categorized and had varied powers and

functions attributed to them. Most of these attributes and functions are still retained in Aguleri Traditional Religion today. Among these deities, "Otutunzu" (the fortune deity) was the greatest. "Otutunzu" harbours the "land spirits", "air spirits", and "water spirits", and could be appealed to for any situation. Also great in strength was "Ajani" (the land deity). It protected the land from desecration and demands goodwill among Aguleri people. Serious offences such as murder, incest, and so on, even if it was collaboration in such act, must be confessed to "Ajani" and necessary expiation done; else "Ajani" would visit the offender with sickness or even death. There was also "Udo" (deity of righteousness and truth). A defaulter of the laws of "Udo", it was alleged, had his or her nose chopped off if he or she ventured into the space consecrated to "Udo". There were other deities such as "Akwali" (the child bearing deity), "Arobinagu" (the luck deity), "Ivigioku" (Yam deity), and others. Ameke testified that his father informed him that people came from far and near to consult and make sacrifices at the "Otutunzu", "Aligomu", and other shrines. Ameke himself attested that he equally witnessed such patronage while he was a young man, but that such patronage was strongly dying out (Nnalue Ameke, 85 years, Personal Communication, October 23, 2012).

There were the spirits, domesticated and undomesticated. A popular domesticated spirit was "Agwu" which belongs to one's mother's family. Undomesticated spirits were the spirits of dead evil men, or those who did not join the rank of ancestors. Belief in the powers of ancestors was another strong tenet of the pre-Christian Aguleri society and religion. To be an ancestor, the dead person must have lived a good life and died a worthy death. Family members always kept in touch with their ancestors who never ceased to keep watch over the family they left behind. "IloMuo" festival was held every fifth moon (August) to commemorate these ancestors. There were also individual worships of ancestors. Forms of worship in pre-Christian Aguleri included sacrifices to honour or appease the deities, ancestors or spirits. These were offered by priests of the shrines, diviners, or the individual as the sacrifice might require. There were different forms of sacrifices which involved: Animals such as goats, fowls or cows, which were slaughtered and the blood poured on the shrines. Others involved the collection on non-living things such as kola-nuts, feathers, and so on, which were kept on strategic or specified locations. Wine could also be poured on the ground as sacrifice or, throwing of animals into the river. Human sacrifice was frowned at, though not completely absent. It was used occasionally, when such is demanded for a thing being done for the whole town, and it must be by agreement. (Nnalue Ameke, Personal Communication, October 23, 2012). Such was the Pre-Christian Aguleri which Catholic Missionaries met when they arrived the town at the close of the 19th Century. It was purely, what was regarded in the old parlance, a 'pagan' society.

The Establishment of the Catholic Church in Aguleri

When Father Joseph Lutz and his team of three other missionaries (Fr. John Horne, Brother Hermas Huck and John Jacob of Gotheau) from France arrived at Onitsha on 5 December 1885, to start the first Catholic mission east of the River Niger, the considerations they received from Obi Anazonwu of Onitsha and his chiefs, were encouraging enough that they began, very soon, to desire the expansion of their mission areas. The first offspring of this dream became the Catholic mission in Aguleri. Certain factors facilitated this seemingly quick development. In the first place, the commercial drive of European companies and traders in the late 19th century, in search of the much sought-after tropical products, especially palm produce, pushed them into exploring the Lower Niger hinterlands. The navigable rivers of the time provided the necessary routes for the drive since the alternative routes (foot paths) were dangerous. This made possible, in 1884, the establishment of a trading depot of the National African Company (later Royal Niger Company) on the bank of the Omabala (Anambra) River at Aguleri (Idigo, 1990, p.11). This development equally made possible the visits of Europeans to Aguleri which naturally, attracted the Christian missionaries' visit also. Secondly, Aguleri being comparatively, a very big town among other towns on the bank of the River Niger and adjoining rivers not far from Onitsha, it easily became an attractive town to the missionaries for a possible mission station. Evidently, it was hoped that it would create an inroad to many other towns.

Secondly, this company's trading activity brought some Aguleri people into contact with other Europeans at the Onitsha coast, as well as to new socio-political and economic developments in Onitsha. This contact finally led to the invitation of the Catholic Church to Aguleri. Records have it that in one of such visits to Onitsha, a heroic figure and a war lord (odogwu) in Aguleri history, Ogbuevi Onyekomeli Idigo, met the missionaries at Onitsha in 1887 and persistently invited them to bring their mission to Aguleri (Isichei, 1980, p.4). He was equally said to be at the head of the reception of the National African Company earlier at Aguleri. Whatever was his motive for inviting the missionaries remains, however, speculative. Isichei (1980) suggests two possible reasons for this: that Idigo was probably "seeking allies in his dealings with the Royal Niger Company" and secondly, and more likely, "he was alienated from traditional religion by ... the successive deaths of many of his children." On another note, Obadiegwu (1991) suggests that:

He must have seen the relations between the Obi of Onitsha and the missionaries and would want such for himself, if the missionaries were to come on his invitation.... It seems too that he was the seeker after truth, whom God rewarded with an extra-ordinary Grace. (p.9).

Furthermore, Okafor (2013, p.48), argues that it could also be that Idigo sought European allies against internal rivalries at Aguleri, or against the menace of the Ada (Eddah) invasions of Aguleri and her neighbours during the period. Whatever it was, the missionaries only considered his invitation sometime in 1888, when one of them paid an investigative visit to Aguleri. Encouraged by the visit, the missionaries' opened a non-resident mission station at Umuala Eziagulu, Aguleri in 1890, with a Catechist posted from Onitsha. The progress was consolidated when on May 28, 1890, Father Joseph Lutz made History by celebrating the Holy Mass in the market place, in the midst of a small crowd of Aguleri people (Obi, 1985, p44).

This mission station became a meeting point for the rejected and those who supposedly committed abominations. This and other unwelcome practices strained the relationship between the mission and the host community. Umuala felt their land being "desecrated". It became worse when Idigo turned in the symbols of their gods to the foreigners. Uncomfortable with these, the community ejected the mission. The mission later settled for a site at a place called *Mbito* (where three paths meet). Fathers Joseph Lutz and Joseph Bubendorf approved of the new site and a permanent mission was initiated as Brother Hermas, on August 2, 1890, began building a mission house there (Obi, 1985, p45). The site became known as "Ugwu Nid Uka" or "Nduka" (meaning, the hill where Christians stay [Christian village]). The mission was named Saint Joseph, possibly in honour of the patron saint of Fathers Joseph Lutz and Joseph Bubendorf, two missionaries who were key to its commencement. It became a residential mission when on "23rd October, 1891 ... Father Pawlas arrived to take charge of it. His assistant at this time was Fr. Reling" (Ozigboh, 1988, p.55). Thus, the mission at Aguleri became the next Catholic residential mission east of the Niger River, after the Holy Trinity Onitsha.

Ogbuevi Onyekomeli Idigo the first official convert of the new mission; and a remarkable one indeed. Before then, he was an acclaimed high priest of some deities and the *Odogwu* (warrior) of the town, and so emerged a leader of the people. As stated above, his motive for reneging the traditional religion remains speculative. To fulfill the requirements for becoming a true convert, Idigo discarded his traditional religious tools and symbols, as well as his wives, leaving only one. On December 3, 1891, "he was baptized by Father Lutz at Aguleri along with six of his children.... Then during the midnight mass, December 25, 1891, he received his first Holy communion and confirmation along with one of his sons amidst the solemn ringing of bells and canon shots" (Koren, 1983, p.337). Onyekomeli Idigo turned out to be a very useful instrument for the missionaries, for he was fast in learning the doctrine and he taught others what he had learned. The mission progressed as the number of converts kept increasing. The early converts after Idigo and his family were driven by varied reasons. Some came because of the medical

services the missionaries offered to people; some dejected and rejected of the society sought solace among Christians; Some freeborn came to receive gifts, or were marveled by the cure given for various sicknesses, some others converted for the failure of the gods to punish Idigo, yet some others desired to learn the Whiteman's language and 'wizardry'. Thus, the earliest converts at Christian village included free men and women such as Muokwe, Azodo Manafa, Okonkwo Manafa, Kwazu, Okafor, Nduanya, Orekyeh, Obadiogwu and so on. They were all fit and freeborn (John Muokwe, Aged 91, Personal Communication, October 03, 1994). These settled around the missionaries in the Christian village where they lived under strict observance. They exuded immense zeal for the new religion. They abandoned their families, relations, and friends only to settle with these strangers in a distant thick bush. Interestingly, most of these early converts were influential and titled men of the town.

The Development and Growth of the Catholic Church in Aguleri

The story of the Catholic Church in Aguleri is a tale of many colours. Its progress was never completely straight forward. As a novelty in Aguleri, Catholicism made an impressive growth in its first three decades. By 1900, a record has the number of families in the Christian village as 65 families and it described the village "as the most flourishing of the existing three Christian villages in Eastern Nigeria" (Obadiogwu, 1991, p.14). In 1906, Aguleri Parish had about seven outstations and its Christian village counted about 360 baptised Catholics. The progress often fluctuated following different situations and events in the parish and town.

Some of the things that helped the progress of the mission included Idigo's abandonment of the traditional gods as a traditional priest, and his handing over his traditional effigies and instruments of office to be destroyed by the European missionaries. The fact that these had no identified negative repercussions on Idigo and his household diminished the regards of many for their traditional deities. Another push was generated by the people's longing to learn the "Whiteman's language". These was also, the Onwurume affair. In search of a little oil for his roasted yam, he punctured an oil drum of the R.N.C in 1892, leading to the sack of the town by R.N.C soldiers. People were beaten up, houses burnt down, lives were lost and prominent personalities in Aguleri were taken hostage. The missionaries sympathized with and consoled the people and even gave them some materials for relief and rehabilitation, making the natives view them as friends who should be associated with. Equally was the help the missionaries offered in the face of the Ada (Eddah) invasion of Aguleri. To cap these events, were the gifts and medical services offered by the missionaries. These incidents went a long way to encourage the people to accept the missionaries and their news (Okafor, 1998, pp.20-21).

Gradually, the expansion of the mission spread from Aguleri to other towns. A sub-station was opened at Igbariam in 1898. Igbariam became a parish in 1909, with the First Catholic Teachers' Training College, east of the Niger opened there in 1913, and a Senior Seminary in 1924. These were closed in 1928, making Igbariam an outstation of Aguleri once more until it finally became a parish again in 1981. Catechist stations were opened at Ikem-Nando in 1901 (Ozigboh, 1988, p.55). At Nkwo Nando. At a point also, Aguleri mission extended to Nteje, Nneyi Umuleri, and Nsugbe. A summarized picture of the spread of Aguleri Parish at its height, according to Obadiogwu (1991), has it thus:

At its highest water mark (sic) in mid 1950s, the parish comprised about 60 mission stations including - Nduka, Ameze, Ugwunadegbe, Ivite, Igboezunu, Enugwu-Otu, Isiokwe/Igboezunu Otu, Eziagulu Otu, St. Augustine's Umuoba Anam, Our Lady's Umuleri, Obinetiti, Mgbago, Ogbu, Umudiana, Nneyi, Nkwo, Ikem, Ala/Onugwa, Igbedo, Igbokenyi, Ode, Nzam, Inoma, Mmiata, Iyora, Abegbu, Umueze Anam, Umuem, Umudora, Oroma Etiti, Umuikwu, Onono, Nsugbe, Achalla, Eziora, Oba, Igbariam, Ugbene, Umerum, Amagu, Akiyi, Adaba, Ukpata, Ukpata, Uvuru, Akpakume, Nkume, Nkpologu, Adani, Omasi, Umueje, Ifite-Ogwari, Igbakwu, Omor and Umumbo (pp.33-34).

From 1960s, these stations began to emerge as parishes and some of them have even given birth to more parishes. Today, Aguleri, as a town on its own, has five parishes: St. Joseph Cathedral Parish, *Nduka*; St. Francis Parish at Ivite; St. Mary's Parish, Ugwunadegbe; St. Paul's Parish, Enugwu-Otu; St. Mary's Parish, Eziagulu-Otu, and their allied out-stations. These towns and parishes that were once part of Aguleri Parish are today, located in three dioceses -Aguleri, Awka, and Nsukka.

For the over one hundred and thirty years of Catholic presence in Aguleri, only twenty-five (25) of its indigenes became Catholic priests, including the Blessed Iwene Tansi; twenty (20) were professed Sisters while there are five (5) surviving professed male religious. It is worth mentioning, however, that many indigenes of Aguleri did try to become priests and professed Religious men and women, but could not make the training or the life till the end. Currently, Aguleri has many young men and women aspiring to the priesthood or to Religious life.

Under the late Most Rev. Albert K. Obiefuna as the Archbishop and Metropolitan of Onitsha Archdiocese, Aguleri was in 1995, created an Episcopal Region of the Archdiocese, alongside Onitsha and Nnewi Episcopal Regions. The move was to help facilitate from these Episcopal Regional centres, the evangelizing and pastoral activities of the Archdiocese in the areas that fall within each regional centre. In due course, further missionary and pastoral needs that became much more conspicuous, seemed to have beckoned for a much closer attention of the Church authority to the areas covered

originally by the Aguleri Episcopal Region. In a drive to attend to these needs, the Holy See created the Catholic Diocese of Aguleri on February 12, 2023, which was officially inaugurated on March 17, 2023, with its seat at St. Joseph's Church, Aguleri. This development advanced the over one century religious journey of Aguleri, from being a cradle of African Traditional Religion to an Episcopal (semi-independent) centre of Catholic missionary and evangelizing enterprise.

The Challenges to the Catholic Church in Aguleri

The Catholic evangelizing work in Aguleri was not always a smooth sailing affair. Ozigboh (1988) once observed that:

Perhaps the most unproductive residential stations during 1912-1919 periods were Aguleri and Igbariam. Aguleri in particular, experienced its worst set-back during this period. Its Christian village began to disintegrate very dramatically, strained relations between the Christian villagers (sic) and their priests fueled an exodus from the village. Many converts returned to their natal village of Aguleri Town (p171).

As indicated in the above excerpt, a wave of desertions ensued in the Christian village from the second decade of the 20th century. The sources of these desertions could be traced to the limited freedom and other conditions that the locals were subjected to in the village, and especially, to the attachment of the converts to traditional and cultural practices which welled up a constant yearning and a feeling of lack in these converts with regards to these practices. The desertion relapsed the faith of many to the point that a good number of them ended up as fallen Christians. The desertions from the Christian village continued unabated until the first decade of the 21st century, when new settlements began to develop in the village, albeit undressed of its original Catholic and Christian outlook. Unarguably, the fall of the Christian village affected the progress of Catholic evangelization in Aguleri very seriously.

Other remarkable events that greatly challenged the Catholic presence in Aguleri included the series of interdicts imposed on Aguleri Parish by Onitsha Archdiocesan authority. In 1951, Archbishop Heerey closed the church at Aguleri temporarily for six months, as a punishment for an alleged inability of the people celebrating a traditional marriage somewhere in the town, to observe the Catholic traditional adoration of the Blessed Sacrament when one Fr. Lehane passed the area with it. On another occasion in July 1965, the church was closed down because Fr. Moriarty's car was stolen from the mission. The closure lasted for one year (Okafor, 1998, pp.20-21). Again, an interdict of seven months was imposed on Aguleri Parish in 1986, when some natives locked up the church and sent away the Parish Priest, Rev. Sisters and Brothers working in the parish because Fr. Tansi's

remains were not deposited at Aguleri when they were brought back from England. These three incidents affected the growth of Aguleri church very adversely as many became lapsed and some turned fallen Christians within these periods.

There was equally the impact of the coming of the Pentecostal churches. Dominic Obiorah recalled that *Uka Ekpe Mmanu* (a name given to the Apostolic Faith Church for not taking medications when they are ill) came to Aguleri around 1940 and was followed in 1946 by the "*Uka Alleluia*" brought by an Ogbaru woman and stationed then at Frank Idigo's compound in Amaeze Aguleri. Since then, the influx of new Pentecostal churches has become constant at Aguleri. These denominations are at every corner in Aguleri, even in the Christian village area, and they constitute a great challenge to the Catholic and Anglican Churches in Aguleri. Their styles are especially attractive to the youth. Linus Unah (2017) rightly observed that:

Several factors lead young Nigerian Catholics to explore Pentecostal churches. First, misconceptions about the teachings of the Catholic Church are widespread. It is common to hear non-Catholics say the church engages in idolatry and Mariolatry. Some claim that the church does not believe in the Holy Spirit or use the Bible for its teachings. Catholic students often cannot withstand the challenges thrown at them by student leaders from other churches.

Equally, their adoption of African emotional expressions and rituals in their worship seem to have compelled many hitherto Catholics to abandon their fold, thus generating a numerous band of "former Catholics".

Added to the above challenges is the new wave of what could be termed here as "materialistic religion" which shades of African Traditional Religion seemingly offer faster answers, as many have conceived it. Edoziuno Ivediora and many other youths interviewed incline that "Christianity has nothing to offer as it has failed, from experience, to offer fast and concrete remedies to material and financial problems, security concerns, and so on. The deities we worship do these and do them fast as well (Personal Communication, May, 13, 2023)." This thinking is closely aligned to that of Akin-Otiko and Abbas (2019) that:

With the fading effect of the activities of the missionaries, and the pressure of urbanisation, Western culture, civilisation, science and technology, Africans shift back to ATR to find answers to their existential needs that proved difficult for the new realities. Africans who had been converted to either Christianity or Islam began to return when these new religions did not provide answers to their existential needs and questions. (p. 34).

Evidently, many have grown disillusioned following not only the Catholic ways, but also the general Christian faith. Much of these discontentments were, however, born out of shallow conception of the Catholic or Christian faith.

Aguleri in the scheme of the new Diocese

As already pointed out, by the creation of the Catholic Diocese of Aguleri with its seat at Aguleri, the town has moved from its ancient state as a cradle of African Traditional Religion to an Episcopal (semi-independent) centre of Catholic missionary and evangelizing enterprise. This new status of the Catholic Church in Aguleri has its challenges emanating from the town itself, the history of the Church in Aguleri and environs, its successes and its failures. Being the centre of the Diocese, Aguleri town and its people have a great role to play in guaranteeing the development and success of the Diocese. Recent histories present an Aguleri inundated with threats to its peace. Its immediate neighbours such as Umueri and Anam communities seem to constitute sources of threats to Aguleri peace. The causes of this strained relationship seem to have very long and diverse histories which, nevertheless, are not the concern of this paper. However, it should be pointed out here, that the loss of love resulted to very costly communal wars between Umueri and Aguleri in 1995 and 1999. The strained relationship has, regrettably, spread to some other towns with close affinities to either town. Moreover, indigenes of the two towns are not oblivious of the fact that what they have at the moment is a precarious peace.

Aguleri is not the first centre of a Catholic diocese in its part of the globe that has strained relations with her neighbours. Onitsha for instance, for about a century, has had series of communal clashes with neighbours, especially, Obosi and Nkwelle-Ezunaka, yet the evangelizing work of the Church continued undisturbed. But the animosity evoked by the crises between Aguleri and Umueri, reached such a level that rightly or wrongly, a number of Umueri indigenes and their supporters, would prefer not to associate with the Aguleri diocese, and what is more, are even ready to prevent those they can, from doing so. Shortly after the inauguration of the Diocese in March 2023, the sign-post erected by Our Lady of Victory Parish, Umueri had the "Diocese of Aguleri" that was inscribed on it violently deleted by such persons. Such tendencies are unhealthy for the success of the evangelizing work of the Diocese. It becomes, therefore, a major challenge to the authority of the Diocese of Aguleri to broker a lasting peace between Aguleri and her neighbours. On another level, the missionaries and their successors seemed to have planted a "physical church" that lacked adequate maturity and a good deal of spiritual qualities. The Vatican Council fathers admonished that; "All over the world indigenous particular churches ought to grow from the seed of the word of God, churches which

would be adequately organized and would possess their own proper strength and maturity"(Ad Gentes Divinitus, 1965, no. 6). The 'Aguleri mission' has imposing church buildings with intimidating number of baptized Catholics, yet, in about a hundred and thirty years, it could raise no more than twenty-five clergies (diocesan and religious), that would join in the ministerial function of the universal church. The effect of this is better grasped when it is noted that apart from Awkuzu, the rest of the towns in the diocese are worse-off. This is a challenge that Aguleri needs to be encouraged to take a lead in confronting it.

On another hand, the spiritual formation of the members of the Aguleri Catholic community seems deficient. Granted that Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, is a product of this local church, most Catholics of Aguleri are not fully practicing Christians. Ivenso (Personal Communication, January 30, 1998), did suggest that most Catholic Christians of Aguleri "have not yet been touched by the essence of the cross and the resurrection. They are yet to be fully formed to truly worship in the spirit and in truth." This, no doubt, is the result of the half-baked catechism they received. Lukewarm Catholics who bestride Catholicism and traditionalism are common in Aguleri. It is the same reason for Pentecostalism gaining more grounds among the people. Commitment to faith only manifests when they have problems. If problems persist, denominational crossover becomes the order of events. More needs to be done to facilitate the grounding of the faith among the people of Aguleri in particular and the people of the diocese in general. The Diocesan authority needs to improve its catechetical approach so as to make it much more fruitful. This will go a long way in aiding the struggle against African Traditional Religion and crave for Pentecostalism.

Conclusion

This excursion into the more than one and a quarter of a century long history of the Catholic Church in Aguleri has meaningfully revealed some strengths and weaknesses of Catholic evangelism in the town, and at the same time, has exposed the challenges to Catholicism and her new episcopal seat in Aguleri. In terms of structure and numerical strength, the Catholic presence in Aguleri over these long years could be considered a reasonable success. As a semi urban area, Aguleri has five Catholic parishes. Though it was not possible to get the precise population of Catholics in Aguleri despite all effort, it is a general belief that more than half the population of Aguleri indigenes professes Catholicism. Again, even if twenty-five priests in all are considered few, compared to Onitsha and Asaba which received the Catholic faith before it, Aguleri has given the Church a greater number of clergies for its evangelical works. In fact, Catholic presence in Aguleri can be said to be more successful when compared to these two towns and many

other towns serving as headquarters of Catholic dioceses in this part of the globe. This is because, the successes presumed for these towns are driven by their cosmopolitan nature, whereby non-indigenes have been the backbone of the Catholic Church in such areas, unlike the case of Aguleri and its environs, where non-indigenes do not constitute more than ten percent of the entire population.

The presumed success of the Church at Aguleri accepted, yet the challenges to the progress and success of the new diocese centred at Aguleri remain undeniable. To complement and improve the recorded successes, one can borrow from Pope-Levison's theories of Relationships and Rootedness in the church to suggest that the Church authority at Aguleri Diocese should make extra efforts to: achieve a more lasting peace between Aguleri and her neighbours; deepen the grasp of the faith among the people; and encourage the growth of local ministers, such as priests and the religious.

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