

THE POLITICAL THEOLOGY OF POPE FRANCIS AND ITS SIGNIFICANCE FOR THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA

BEDE UKWUIJE, *CSSP*

Within a period of four months, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) issued two statements about the sociopolitical situation in the country. In the context of the killing of two priests and their parishioners in Mbalom, Benue State, on 24 April 2018, the Bishops decried the inefficiency of the Government and went to the extent of calling on the President to resign if he could not protect the citizens under his care¹. On August 8, 2018, the CBCN issued a press release to Major Superiors of Institutes of Consecrated Life, Catholic Priests, Consecrated men and women and Catholic Lay Faithful, concerning the role of the faithful in political life. The Bishops declared that the Church is "apolitical."²

Unfortunately, the expression "apolitical" drew too much attention that it distracted people from understanding the clear position of the Bishops. Many thought that the expression "apolitical" could support the thesis of those who want to restrain bishops and priests to the sacristy in order to achieve the modern project of privatization of faith and religion. The fear is understandable because, taken in its original sense, "apolitical" means "having no interest or involvement in political affairs" or having an aversion to politics or political affairs" or again "having no political significance³." Nevertheless, the Bishops meant that the Church should neither be identified with a particular political party nor should liturgical ceremonies be used as opportunity for political campaigns⁴. The whole press release shows that they clearly understand the necessary role the Church is called to play in the political life of a people.

In this article, I will argue that what the Church in Nigeria needs is a well-articulated "political theology" which will underline the political implications of the Christian profession of faith and show the conditions for a healthy Church-politics relationship. I will also show that Pope Francis' Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii*

¹ CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, "When Will This Barbarism End?", April 2018.

² CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, "Press Release", August 8, 2018.

³ *Meriam Webster Dictionary*, <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apolitical>, (Consulted on 25 February, 2019).

⁴ See the judicious clarification of Francis Oborji, "Is the Church Apolitical in Nigeria?", <https://theworldnews.net/ng-news/francis-anekwe-oborji-is-the-church-political-or-apolitical-in-nigeria>, (consulted on 25 February 2019).

Gaudium,⁵ demonstrates an exemplary political theology which could help the Church in Nigeria to define a balanced approach to politics.

First, I will explain the term “political theology.” Second, I will discuss Pope Francis’ approach to Church-politics relationship in *Evangelii Gaudium* (EG). Finally, I will sketch out the significance of this approach for the Church-Politics relationship in Nigeria.

What is Political Theology?

Political theology does not mean an attempt to draw political programs from Christian dogmatic expressions. It is a response to the question of the practical implications of the Christian faith in a particular society.⁶ As clearly explained by Johan Baptist Metz, political theology is a refusal of the privatisation of religion and the Christian faith. It brings theology to understand the Church as “an institution of social critique that is situated neither besides nor above the social reality. Such a Church will avoid the trap of aligning with a particular political ideology. This sets her free for a possible cooperation with the different institutions and groups in the state and society”.⁷

The framework of the relationship between Religion and politics was fixed in the theology of two giants, Augustine of Hippo and Thomas Aquinas. While the first expresses what is commonly called *eschatological reservation*, the second, on the other hand, demonstrates a theologico-political optimism.⁸

The General Framework of Political Theology: Augustine and Aquinas Augustine’s Eschatological Reservation

Augustine of Hippo exposed his political theology in the *City of God* written between 413 and 427. To understand his position, it is important to refer to the context of his ideas. The fusion between the Church and the State under Emperor Constantine gave birth to triumphalism in the Church. In his book, *Ecclesiastical History* (323/4), the fourth-century historian, Eusebius reports that the Emperor

⁵ POPE FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Rome, 24 November 2013.

⁶ Cf. M. KIRWAN, *Political Theology, A New Introduction*, London, Darton-Longman and Todd, 2008; Johan Baptist Metz, “Théologie politique et liberté critico-sociale”, *Concilium*, 36, June, 1968, 9-25; B. UKWUIJE, “Existe-t-il une théologie politique en Afrique ?”, *Laval Théologique et Philosophique*, Vol 63, n°2, June, 2007, 291-303; B. UKWUIJE, “La théologie politique d’*Evangelii Gaudium*”, Joël Molinaro et François Moog (Eds.) *Henri Jérôme Gagey, La théologie et le travail de la foi*, Salvator, Paris, 2015, 65-79.

⁷ J.B. METZ, “Théologie politique et liberté critico-sociale”, 24.

⁸ Cf. M. KIRWAN, *Political Theology*, 55-71.

triumphed at the battle of Milvian Bridge (AD 312) under the sign of the cross, after having been allegedly told by Christ, “*In hoc signo vinces*” (Under this sign you shall conquer). Consequently, people saw in Constantine, the face of God on earth, the reflection of God’s invisible *Logos*, mediator between God and man.⁹ This vision of history, devoid of eschatology was put to question by the destruction of Rome in 410. On one hand, the pagans accused Christians of attracting the anger of the gods on the Roman empire while on the other hand, Christians wondered why such a calamity would befall an empire and her emperor supposedly protected by God.

Borrowing from neo-Platonic concepts, Augustine exposes an agnostic interpretation of history. The Roman empire was neither holy nor diabolical. It was neither God’s instrument nor that of the devil. “Like all human work, its ultimate value is determined by the ultimate allegiances of its creators: their piety or impiety”.¹⁰ Augustine distinguishes between two cities, the *civitas* of God and the *civitas* of the devil, also called the heavenly city and the earthly city. They are not geographical entities but mystical realities. They are created by two kinds of love: “the self-love reaching to the point of contempt for God (earthly city), the heavenly love of God carried as far as contempt for self”.¹¹ The two cities are not externally different. They coexist in the contemporary history, the present time (*saeculum*). They experience the same joys and sorrows, though they do not respond with the same faith, hope and love. They will only be separated at the end of the time.¹²

Consequently, Augustine adopted what we designated as “eschatological reservation”. He refused to sacralize or absolutize the State or even any other human institution. Earthly politics is a lesser evil, a product of the Fall and belongs to the sinful human condition.¹³ The State plays an important role for the fact that it helps to control the human desire for domination and vengeance. No historical condition or process can accomplish or slow down the fulfilment of God’s promise to man revealed in Jesus Christ. This will only be fulfilled in God’s kingdom.

Thomas Aquinas’ Theologico-political Optimism

Thomas Aquinas adopted a position contrary to that of Augustine. Borrowing from Aristotelian concepts, revised and corrected with the reading of the Scripture, Aquinas understands man as a political animal. He does not see any irreconcilable

⁹ Cf. M. KIRWAN, *Political Theology*, 57-58.

¹⁰ M. KIRWAN, *Political Theology*, 59.

¹¹ M. KIRWAN, *Political Theology*, 60.

¹² Cf. AUGUSTINE, *The City of God*, Book 1, 35.

¹³ M. KIRWAN, *Political Theology*, 68.

tension between the pursuit of earthly goods and eternal goods.¹⁴ He expresses confidence in the political society and justice as natural qualities and possibilities. The goal of political activity is not the suppression of rebellion rather it is the quest for virtue and happiness. Referring to Matthew 22, 21 (“Very well, give back to Caesar what belongs to Caesar – and to God what belongs to God”) Aquinas states that, on what concerns the management of civil good, one has to obey the secular power.¹⁵

Modern Political Theologies

Modern essays in political theology evolve between Augustine and Aquinas’ framework. Johan Baptist Metz who popularized the expression “Political theology” sees it as a “correction of the contemporary theology’s tendency to privatize faith”.¹⁶ That is why he assigns an eschatological function to the Church as “an institution of social critique...situated neither besides nor beyond the social reality”.¹⁷ He introduced the concept of “dangerous and subversive memory”, the “*memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*” which must serve as the dynamic for the defense of those on the defeated side of history, “*les vaincus de l’histoire*”.¹⁸ He defines religion as interruption. The first categories of interruption are love and solidarity which help to remember not only successes but also what was destroyed and what was lost. By so doing, Christianity represents human freedom as the dangerous memory of the death and resurrection of Christ, through which history is lived as history of the dead and those who suffer.

However, Metz notes that the Church should not limit herself to the function of social critique. She must collaborate with other institutions and non-Christian groups in the construction of the political society. In the light of Augustine, Metz opts for eschatological reservation. He avoids the politicization of religion and the sacralization of a particular political system. He shows that there is a permanent critical and dialectical relationship between the Christian faith and the historical present. In other words, one must maintain the distance between the achievements of the present and the kingdom of God.

Other political theologies also developed within the framework fixed by Augustine and Aquinas. For example, Neo-Augustinians, like the Radical Orthodoxy

¹⁴ T. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* 1a 96 :4.

¹⁵ T. AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae* 28, 1a, 2ae, 90-99.

¹⁶ J.-B. METZ, «Théologie politique et liberté critico-sociale», in *Concilium*, 36 (Juin 1968), 9-25.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ J.-B. Metz, *La foi dans l’histoire et dans la société, essai de théologie fondamentale pratique*, Paris, Cerf, Coll. Cogitatio Fidei 99, 1979, 109.

of John Milbank¹⁹ and William Cavanaugh²⁰ see the Church as an alternative society. Instead of trying to save the secularized society, the Church should propose a “counter-politics” from her own resources based on the Scripture and the Patristic tradition in order to resist it.

On the other hand, the liberal approach of Public theology, especially that of Reinhold Niebuhr and John Courtney Murray, in the light of Aquinas, thinks that the Church has responsibility for the world to which it belongs. She is neither outside nor beyond the world. She should take part in the public debate knowing that theology has become a voice among others in the civil society.²¹

Theological currents like African and Latino-American Liberation theologies belong to political theology. Liberation theology reads the Bible from the point of view of the poor and the oppressed. The CELAM Congress held in Medellin in 1968 officially adopted the preferential option for the poor. Two years later, in 1970, African liberation theology made two major options: the denunciation of anthropological poverty and the quest for economic/political liberation.²² The approach was ratified by the Ecumenical Association of Third-world Theologians held in Dar-Es Salaam, Tanzania in 1976. It also found a positive resonance in the SECAM Assembly in 1984 under the chairmanship of Cardinal Malula.²³ The intuitions of African Liberation theology were later prolonged through the concept of reconstruction proposed by All Africa Conference of Churches and popularized by Kä Mana.²⁴ Reconstruction theology calls on the Church to fight on three fronts:²⁵ ‘Political’ – being actively involved in the struggle for democracy; ‘Economical’ – going beyond charity institutions to create and invest in wealth generating structures; ‘Social’ – mobilizing the societies around values like solidarity, work, freedom, justice and truth.

From the foregoing, we can see that throughout the Church’s tradition, the challenge of political theology has been how to articulate prophetic action of social critique and the proposal of inventive ways of constructing a political society. This

¹⁹ J. MILBANK, *Theology and Social Theory: Beyond Secular Reason*, Oxford/Cambridge USA, Basil Blackwell, 1990; John Milbank, Catherine Pickstock, Graham Ward(eds), *Radical Orthodoxy*, London, Routledge, 1999.

²⁰ W. CAVANAUGH, *Eucharistie et Mondialisation. La liturgie comme acte politique*, Genève, AD SOLEM, 2001, 10.

²¹ Cf. M. KIRWAN, *Political Theology*, 184-185.

²² J.-M. ELA, *Le cri de l’homme africain*, Paris, L’Harmattan, 1980.

²³ Cf. SECAM, “L’Église et la promotion humaine aujourd’hui”, *La Documentation catholique*, 1913 (2 March 1986) 260-272.

²⁴ K. MANA, *Christ d’Afrique, Enjeux éthiques de la foi chrétienne en Afrique*, Paris, Karthala, 1994 ; *Foi chrétienne, crise africaine et reconstruction de l’Afrique. Sens et enjeux des théologies africaines contemporaines*, Nairobi/Lomé/Yaoundé, CETA/HAHO/CLE, 1992.

²⁵ K. MANA, *Christ d’Afrique*, 58-60.

supposes that religions renounce the temptation of fusion of the political community and the religious community. In other words, it is not enough to say “no” to the unacceptable, it is also important and necessary, on the basis of the “no” to take risks and say “yes” to the creation of a possible living together. The next section will explore how Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium* pursues this Christian tradition of political theology.

***Evangelii Gaudium* and Christian Tradition of Political Theology**

Pope Francis did not use the expression “political theology”. Nevertheless, the relationship between Church and Politics, which forms the background of his presentation of the social dimension of the evangelization, is a real political theology in the line of the tradition inaugurated by Augustine and Thomas Aquinas and prolonged by contemporary political theologies.

While re-echoing the tradition of the Church’s social doctrine developed by his predecessors²⁶, Pope Francis brings in some accents of Latin American Liberation theology. This is not surprising when we remember that he was the principal writer of the *Apparecida* Document.²⁷

Refusal of the Privatization of Faith and Religion

First, Francis refuses the privatization of faith and religion imposed by secularization that dates back to the philosophy of Enlightenment (*EG* 182-183). “The Church’s pastors, taking into account the contributions of the different sciences, have the right to offer opinions on all that affects people’s lives, since the task of evangelization implies and demands the integral promotion of each human being. It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven” (*EG* 183).

In the light of Aquinas’ vision and the social doctrine of the Church, Francis argues that the Church has responsibility to the world to which it belongs. This he said belongs to the logic of the Christian faith. Confessing the Trinitarian faith, incarnated in the person of Jesus Christ, and celebrated in the Eucharist, in the power of the Holy Spirit, implies a profound desire to transform the world (*EG* 24, 178). Consequently,

²⁶ PAUL VI, Encyclical Letter, *Populorum Progressio*, Rome, 26 March 1967; Jean XXIII, Encyclical Letter, *Mater et Magistra*, Rome, 15 May 1961; Paul VI, Encyclical Letter, *Octogesima Adveniens*, Rome 14 May 1971); John-Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Centissimus Annus*, Rome, 1 May 1991; Encyclical Letter, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* Rome, Rome, 30 December 1987; Benedict XVI, Encyclical Letter, *Deus Caritas Est*, Rome, 25 December 2005.

²⁷ V General Conference of the Episcopate of Latin America and the Caribbean, *The Aparecida Document* 29 June 2007.

the Church should intervene in the debates on the social and national life, on the health of the institutions of social life and on the events that concern the citizens (EG 183).

Expanding on the principle of subsidiarity (EG 240-241), Pope Francis recognizes the positive role of the State and its proper sphere. While underlining the co-responsibility between the Church and the State, he affirms that the mission of the Church is to open up politics to transcendence, by teaching those involved in state affairs and social institutions to listen to God.

Critique of Socio-political Institutions and Constructive Proposals

Secondly, Pope Francis demonstrates a fine political theology through a remarkable balance between a severe critique of socio-political and economic institutions and the proposal of ways to invent a true political society based on social peace.

The Church as an institution of social critique comes out clearly in the denunciation of what Pope Francis calls the forces of dehumanization. To these forces he says an unequivocal «No». «No to economic exclusion» and social disparity based on the culture of prosperity and competition where «human beings are themselves considered consumer goods to be used and then discarded» (EG 54). «No to the new idolatry of money» (EG 55-56) which rules rather than serves (EG 57), which tends to take the place of God and man (EG 55). «No to the inequality which spawns violence» (EG 59) and to the spirit of consumption (EG 60). «No to cultural relativism» which gives “priority...to the outward, the immediate, the visible, the quick, the superficial and the provisional” (EG 62, 64). Here, quoting *Ecclesia in Africa*²⁸, Francis underlines the devastating impact of this culture on Africa. “In many countries globalization has meant a hastened deterioration of their own cultural roots and the invasion of ways of thinking and acting proper to other cultures which are economically advanced but ethically debilitated. This fact has been brought up by bishops from various continents in different Synods. The African bishops, for example, taking up the Encyclical *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, pointed out years ago that there have been frequent attempts to make the African countries “parts of a machine, cogs on a gigantic wheel” (EG 62).

However, as we observed above, Francis is not content with the critique of socio-political institutions. He also makes concrete proposals for the construction of a true political society. This comes out clearly in his unequivocal «Yes».

«Yes to solidarity» motivated by the Christian conviction about “the universal destination of goods” (EG 189). Solidarity helps to place the dignity of the human person and the common good at the center of all political and economic projects.

²⁸ JOHN-PAUL II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Rome, 14 September, 1995, 52.

Yes to the transformation of the Market economy, in such a way that reduces inequality which is one of the evils of the society (EG 202). This transformation should also aim at solving the problem of poverty in a radical and definite way.

Yes to political commitment. Contrary to nihilistic ideologies, Pope Francis underlines the “noblesse” of politics. “I ask God to give us more politicians capable of sincere and effective dialogue aimed at healing the deepest roots – and not simply the appearances – of the evils in our world! Politics, though often denigrated, remains a lofty vocation and one of the highest forms of charity, inasmuch as it seeks the common good (EG 205).” He calls on convinced Christians to be involved in the political structures of the society in order to bring the most noble convictions of Christianity and humanity to bear on decisions concerning the common destiny of peoples.

Eschatological Reservation

Finally, in the light of Augustine’s eschatological reservation, Pope Francis refuses to sacralize both the State and the Church. He subjects both institutions to severe critique from the point of view of the Gospel, or what J. B. Metz calls “the dangerous and subversive memory” of Jesus Christ – “*the memoria passionis, mortis et resurrectionis Jesu Christi*”.

Both State and Church must adopt “the fundamental option for the poor” (EG 198-200) while being careful not to reduce the kingdom of God to the commitments and achievements of the present time. Here shines out the significance of the four principles for the construction of a people and the establishment of social peace: a) “Time is greater than space” (EG 222-225): the deepest aspirations of the human person cannot be reduced to and judged by the successes and failures of the present moment; b) “Unity prevails over conflict” (EG 225-230), the reality of conflict has to be faced, however, people must not let themselves be drowned in conflict to the extent of losing sight of the horizon; c) “Realities are more important than ideas” (EG 231-333); d) “The whole is greater than the part” (EG 234), this is the principle of catholicity. It affirms necessary connection between globalization and localization.

What are the implications of Pope Francis’ political theology for the shaping of the relationship between Church and Politics in Nigeria?

Political Theology in Nigeria:

Continuing the Critique of Socio-political and Economic Institutions

Many people, especially, politicians are worried about the Church’s intervention in the political process of Nigeria. They would have preferred that bishops, priests and religious be contained in the sacristy. However, the dangerous memory of the

death and resurrection of Christ has socio-political implications. As we saw above, Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* underlined clearly, “the profound connection between evangelization and human advancement” (EG 178) which flows from heart of the Gospel itself. Hence this affirmation already quoted, “It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven” (EG 183).

The communiqué of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, at least since 1993 until the last two quoted above have been vigorous and consistent in addressing the state of the nation, critiquing distortions and proposing ways for the healing of the nation. These documents belong to the genre of political theology.

Individual bishops have also been consistent in the critique of social, political and economic institutions in Nigeria. Suffice it to mention the positions adopted by Cardinals Anthony Okogie and John Onaiyekan as well as Archbishop Anthony Obinna and Bishop Matthew Kukah. We have seen their likes in other African countries with Desmond Tutu and Buti Thlagale of South Africa; Isidore De Sousa (Benin); Laurent Monsengwo (DRC); Ernest Combo (Congo Brazzaville); Peter Sarpong (Ghana), etc. Theologians have to take up their texts/interventions and explore their impact on the socio-political transformations of Nigeria as well as the democratic transitions of their countries.

Certainly, the Church cannot draw political programs from Christian dogmatic expressions. Neither can she be involved as Church in partisan politics. However, a well-articulated political theology brings theologians and pastors to understand the Church as an institution of social critique that is situated neither besides nor above the social reality. Such a Church will avoid the trap of aligning with a particular political ideology. This sets her free for a possible cooperation with the different institutions and groups in the state and society.²⁹ In that sense, even if the Church does not issue political laws or decrees to the civil state, she continues “to make demands on law-givers from a gospel perspective”³⁰ and to urge Christians to participate actively in the construction of the civil society.

Raising Foot-soldiers

Pope Francis invites convinced Christians to be involved in the political transformation of their societies. This call has been reiterated in different documents of the Church in Nigeria and Africa in general. What the Church needs to do better is to reflect on how to equip convinced Christians for leadership and how to help them

²⁹ Cf. J.-B. METZ, “Théologie politique et liberté critico-sociale,” 24.

³⁰ E. JÜNGEL, *Justification, the Heart of the Christian Faith*, T & T Clark, 2001, 276.

to acquire the skills and competences that will help them to influence decisions at the different political institutions of Nigeria.

There is a reality we have to face: everywhere in the world, involvement in politics requires a lot of resources. It is sufficient to see how much one has to pay to obtain the ticket as a candidate of a political party in Nigeria. Moreover, a lot of money is required to influence economic, health and other policies at the highest levels of government institutions. No economic policies are made without taking into consideration the position or even the body language of some economic powers and lobby groups. The point I am making here is that it is not enough to be a convinced Christian for one to be involved in politics. It requires financial backing. Could there be a lobby of Christian venture capitalists as we see in Germany, US and other areas?

More still, in Nigeria, Africa and worldwide, beyond the officially recognized parties, a lay person who wants to impact on politics must belong to one secret society or another. There they get spiritual, moral and financial support as well as security. This marginalizes and disqualifies convinced Christians, especially Catholics. This role is being played more and more by certain fraternities like the Knights.

I always think of two images in the Bible. Sometimes, some Catholic politicians look like the crippled at the Pool of Bethesda (Jn. 5:1-15) who could not access healing because he had no man to put him into the pool when the water was stirred up. Whenever he attempted to enter the pool, others stepped before him. The second image is that of the rich man, Joseph of Arimathea. He had the audacity to step into Pilate's palace and demand the body of Jesus after his crucifixion (Mt. 27:57-60, Mk. 15:42-46; Lk. 23:50-54). The rich man used his social status to influence the policies of the then political power. What would have happened to Jesus' body if Joseph of Arimathea did not risk his honor and privilege for him?

Can the Church in Nigeria venture further in this direction? Christian and Catholic ideals cannot have concrete effects if there are no competent and lobby groups that bring them to bear on discussions on policies and strategic plans of governments? In a recent interview, Archbishop Anthony Obinna details some initiatives taken by the Church.

Yes, the Church has a role in politics. In fact, the Catholic Church has played a key role in the politics of Nigeria and Imo State.... Through our Justice, Development and Peace Commissions/Caritas, JDPC, we have been conducting voter education, monitoring elections. We've tried to even involve potential candidates for office, particularly governorship. We've had open debate to interview some of the candidates to find out what kind of quality they had.... We had occasions for political seminars inviting people from the national office of Church and Society Abuja, with certain

international foundations. We've been in league also with some NGOs promoting good governance.³¹

Such initiatives need to be multiplied. Church leaders can go further and encourage men and women entrepreneurs, bankers, lawyers, health economists, medical doctors, etc, who consider themselves as disciples of Jesus, to come out of their reflex of self-protection and risk their positions and privileges in order to influence decisions and policies in favor of justice and peace in the country. *The Kukah Center*³², founded by Bishop Matthew Kukah is a milestone in this endeavour. It aims at training responsible leaders for good governance. It also offers programs for the conscientization of people so that they can participate actively in forging the destiny of the country by voting actively and judiciously.

Living the Liturgy as Place of Resistance

African theologians have not paid much attention to the political implication of Christian prayer and worship. Here again, it is not a question of instrumentalization of Christian worship for political purposes. The reality is that Christian worship offers resources for the right understanding and critique of socio-political structures as well as the transformation of the society. William Cavanaugh affirms that Christian liturgy “constitutes a political act which involves another representation of space and time, where a body of resistance is built, the body of Christ³³”. Contrary to liberalism, Eucharistic practice expresses catholicity and fraternal communion, which extends beyond the limits of every Nation-State.³⁴ In that sense, when Christians celebrate “One bread, One body, One Lord” they affirm the communion to which all humanity is called beyond ethnic and political divides.

We do not have space here to analyze the political implication of the different parts of the Eucharist. But let's take for example the doxology which concludes the Eucharistic prayer: “Through him with him and in him, in the unity of the Holy Spirit, all glory and honor is yours for ever and ever.” This prayer declares that all glory and honor, all power belongs to God, through Christ, with Christ and in Christ, in the unity of the Holy Spirit. This is a great political affirmation which contests and rejects all forms of absolutism of earthly power. This is in line with the proclamation of Christ as King of the Universe. Nigerian Christians know this very well when they proclaim “*Jisos Igwe*”. The way they shout it shows that they are talking to all powers that be, especially those they feel oppress their people.

³¹ A. OBINNA, Interview with Emeka Ani – *The Leader*, Sunday April 22, 2018, 4.

³² Cf. The Kukah Centre, <http://thekukahcentre.org/about-us>, (Consulted on 30 May 2017).

³³ W. CAVANAUGH, *Eucharistie et mondialisation*, 17-18.

³⁴ W. CAVANAUGH, *Eucharistie et mondialisation*, 83.

This liturgical space offers a wonderful and subtle political resistance that cannot be domesticated by any political power. Different political regimes in Africa are afraid of the subversive force of Christian worship. That is why they try to domesticate it. They make efforts to attend Church celebrations during political campaigns and attribute to themselves soteriological symbols that belong to Christ. In some cases, like in Congo-Zaire of Mobutu Sesse Sekou, they attempt to ban or disrupt Christian ceremonies. They follow and analyze the homilies of priests for fear of their political implications.

In 1993, after the cancellation of the June 12 elections, which were considered free and fair, Nigeria was at the threshold of chaos. The Bishops of Nigeria composed the «*Prayer for Nigeria in Distress*».

All powerful and merciful Father. You are the God of Justice, Love and peace, you rule over all the nations of the earth. Power and might are in your hands and no one can withstand you. We present our country Nigeria before you, we praise and thank you for you are the source of all we have and are. We are sorry for all the sins we have committed and the good deeds we have failed to do. In your loving forgiveness, keep us safe from the punishments we deserved. Lord, we are weighed down not only by uncertainties but also by moral, economic and political problems. we are weighed down by clueless and inept leaders. Listen to the cries of your people who confidently turn to you. God of infinite goodness, our strength in adversity, our health in weakness, our comfort in sorrow. Be merciful, to us your people; spare this nation Nigeria from chaos, anarchy and doom. Spare us bad leaders. Bless us with your kingdom of Justice, Love and Peace. We ask this through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.³⁵

This prayer is still said today in all the Churches. It is a severe critique of bad governance and oppression in Nigeria. It is difficult for any government to control freedom and protest people express while saying this prayer. At the same time, this prayer keeps pricking the conscience of all, including those saying it, reminding them of the necessity to build a healthy, just and peaceful political society. Theologians and pastors need to help Christians to continue reflecting on the connection between this liturgy and life in the society? In other words, how does what is celebrated in the liturgy impact on the transformation of the social and political realities of African peoples?

³⁵ Cf. A. OBINNA, Interview with Emeka Ani – *The Leader*, Sunday April 22, 2018, 4.

Developing the Political Implication of Sainthood

As Pope Francis recently wrote, “The processes of beatification and canonization recognize the heroic virtue, the sacrifice of one’s life in martyrdom, and certain cases where a life is constantly offered for others, even until death”.³⁶ The cause of the beatification and canonization of saints belongs to hagiography, history of holiness and exhortation to piety. The saints are models of faith, whose lives bore witness to Christ in the world and are proposed to Christians for emulation.

However, the beatification of saints has political implications and can be used by the Church to propose values for an alternative society in a country like Nigeria. The lives of saints can offer resources for the critique of the culture of death and violence as well as the utilitarian culture that has eaten up the fabrics of our societies. We cannot underestimate the political impact of the recent beatification of Salvadorian Archbishop, Oscar Romero, for Latin America. Think also of the impact of the history of the Martyrs of Uganda, of Josephine Bakhita, Anuarite Nengapeta and Blessed Michael Iwene Tansi. In his homily at the canonization of the Martyrs of Uganda, on 8 October, 1964, Pope Paul VI declared that the memory of these African martyrs marked the beginning of a spiritual, cultural and socio-political revolution in Africa.

These African martyrs herald the dawn of a new age. If only the mind of man might be directed not toward persecutions and religious conflicts but toward a rebirth of Christianity and civilization! (...) The infamous crime by which these young men were put to death was so unspeakable and so expressive of the times. It shows us clearly that a new people needs a moral foundation, needs new spiritual customs firmly planted, to be handed down to posterity. Symbolically, this crime also reveals that a simple and rough way of life – enriched by many fine human qualities yet enslaved by its own weakness and corruption – must give way to a more civilized life wherein the higher expressions of the mind and better social conditions prevail” (Saint Charles Lwanga and his Companions, *Office of Readings*, 3 June).

Africa needs more of such examples today.³⁷ The ongoing process of beatification of Julius Nyerere (Tanzania) and hopefully that of Alioune Diop (Senegal) could be an act of political theology. By so doing, the Church affirms the connection between statesmanship and holiness; that politics could be a locus of expression of holiness. African political theology will help the local churches to articulate programs that can support and sustain the emergence of Catholic men and women capable of exercising political offices and remaining faithful to Christian and humanitarian ideals.

³⁶ FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation, *Gaudete et Exsultate*, Rome 19 March 2018, 5.

³⁷ Cf. E. KATONGOLE, *Born from Lament. The Theology and Politics of Hope in Africa*, Grand Rapids, William Eerdmans, 2017, 164-178.

Respecting the Eschatological Reservation

In light of *Evangelii Gaudium*, prolonging Augustine and the Church tradition of political theology, the Church in Nigeria needs to maintain the principle of “eschatological reservation.” No human institution, even the best of them, is perfect. Even institutions with the best intentions can produce ambiguous and adverse effects. Moreover, be it in Haiti, Democratic Republic of Congo or Nigeria, history shows that the political sphere always reserves great surprises. Politicians do not always keep their promises. Most times they use Church institutions and services to accomplish their personal strategies. Here the Church should meditate deeply on Pope Francis’ four principles for the construction of the society: Time is greater than space; Unity prevails over conflict; Realities are more important than ideas; The whole is greater than the part.

The Church’s Pastoral Constitution, *Gaudium et Spes* 76, teaches that the salvation of man, the reign of God is not limited to the earthly realities. Speaking of eschatological reservation, the German theologian, Eberhard Jüngel says: “I believe, therefore I hope that world history will not be the judge of the world”.³⁸ Even if the efforts made do not yield all the expected results, we should not lose hope. Our future is in God and this future has already been inaugurated in the death and resurrection of Christ. In that sense, even if the Church does not issue political laws or decrees to the civil state, she continues “to make demands on law-givers from a gospel perspective”³⁹ and to urge Christians to participate actively in the construction of the civil society.

Conclusion

I would like to conclude with few proposals that summarize the thesis of this article.

- (i) While it is true that the Church as an institution, as well as the clergy and religious individually, should not be involved in partisan politics, the Church cannot shy away from the political implication of the Christian faith.
- (ii) Pope Francis’ Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Gaudium* offers some solid proposals for a healthy political theology. The Church in Nigeria can borrow from it in order to contribute to the social, political and economic transformation of the country.

³⁸ E. JÜNGEL, “My Theology, A Short Summary”, *Theological Essays II*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 1995, 15.

³⁹ E. JÜNGEL, *Justification, the Heart of the Christian Faith*, Edinburgh, T&T Clark, 2001, 276.

- (ii) Borrowing from Pope Francis' political theology, the Church in Nigeria should continue to refuse the privatization of faith and the marginalization of the Church in the political and cultural spheres. Given that the Christian faith is founded on the incarnation of the Trinitarian God and that the redemption of the human person has a social significance, the Church will continue to intervene in the social, political debates where the lives of Nigerian citizens are at stake.
- (iv) The Church can and should help in the training of a Christian elite that is capable of taking up political responsibilities and influencing economic and political policies at all the levels of government.
- (v) Theologians and pastors can help the Church to understand the value of Christian worship as a free space where faith critiques unjust institutions. The celebration of the Lordship of the Trinitarian God contests the absolutization of all earthly power. Eucharistic celebration promotes catholicity and communion and critiques all forms of discrimination and violence.
- (vi) The Church in Nigeria and Africa can develop the political implications of the theology of holiness. The causes of beatification/canonization of the sons of daughters of Africa who lived an exemplary life can underline how these lives challenge call for a spiritual, cultural and socio-political revolution. Where those involved have assumed social and political responsibilities, it can show that political commitment can also be a way to holiness.
- (vii) Finally, by respecting the *eschatological reservation*, the Church in Nigeria will recognize the distance between the present and the future. The reign of God that we expect and hope for cannot be confused with the socio-political achievements of this world. Hence the need to avoid the sacralization of the State or even the Church as institutions of the present time.