

BUILDING THE KINGDOM OF GOD THROUGH CATHOLIC EDUCATION: THE ROLE OF CATHOLIC SCHOOLS

CELESTINE ARINZE OKAFOR

Introduction

The Church exists only for one purpose: to further the kingdom of God, to establish God's reign on earth. Whatever evangelizing mission she engages in is channelled to this meta-purpose. To understand the nuances of the Kingdom of God, one needs to look at the Hebrew scripture, the life and ministry of Jesus, and contemporary theology.¹ The construct of the Kingdom of God in contemporary theology develops from the former two. For the Israelites, the kingdom of God signifies a time of favour, peace and justice. It represents a time of deliverance through God's active reign in history. It is begun already in the person of Jesus Christ and will be completed at a future time. Although contemporary theologians are still debating on the full import of the Kingdom of God, there is a consensus that the central theme in the preaching and life of Jesus was the Kingdom of God.² In fidelity to Christ the head, the Church continues His work on earth: praying and working that His Kingdom may come. Hence, the kingdom of God is central to the Church's ministry. It is the focal point of the kerygma, expressed in her doctrines and celebrated in her sacraments.

This ministry of furthering the Kingdom of God has many faces; there is the parish apostolate, the family, and the Catholic school. The Church relies on these institutions to accomplish its mission. "The Catholic school participates in this mission like a true ecclesial subject, with its educational service that is enlivened by the truth of the Gospel."³ Catholic schools are places of evangelization, they promote the reign of God through an environment of community and communion, and by the way they interpret the state curriculum: imbuing it with the spirit of the Gospel of Jesus Christ.

¹ Cf. T. GROOME, *Christian Religious Education. Sharing Our Story and Vision*, San Francisco, Jossey Bass, 1980, 35-48.

² Cf. H. KUNG, *On Being A Christian*, Garden City, N. Y. DoubleDay, 1976, 214; E. SCHILLEBEECKX, *Jesus*, New York, Seabury Press 1979, 140; J. SOBRINO *Christology at the Crossroads*, MaryKnoll, N. Y., Orbis Books, 1978, 41; T GROOME, *Christian Religious Education*, 53.

³ CONGREGATION FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools: Shared Mission Between Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful*, 8 September 2007, 3.

This critical role of the Catholic school is epitomised in the Nigerian context where schools were used by the missionaries as a veritable tool of evangelization.⁴

This article highlights the role of the Catholic school in the Church's mission of promoting the kingdom of God. It traces the implication of the term, *Adveniat Regnum Tuum*, for Catholic education and schooling.

The Kingdom of God in Jewish Scripture and the Preaching of Christ

In the Jewish scripture, the vision of God's kingdom is presented as God's own vision and intention for all people and creation. "The symbol of God's kingdom is rooted deeply in Hebrew consciousness. It means both the actual rule and sovereignty of God in the world as its creator and sustainer, and the universal goal of that divine rule at the completion of history."⁵ Furthermore, Jewish understanding of the Kingdom of God does not mean a territory ruled over by God, it is a symbol which refers to the concrete activity of God in history. Such activity is often described as the "reign of God."

Norman Perrin writes that in Jewish biblical tradition, the Kingdom of God is a symbol. As a symbol, it points to God's everlasting and complete dominion over all creation (cf. Ex. 15:18; Ps. 145:13). There are two perspectives in the Israelites' understanding of the Kingdom of God: one is that the Kingdom is already concrete and realised; the other is futuristic and still hoped for. As Rudolf Schnackenburg puts it:

For the Israelites the kingdom of God is already a reality in that it is Yahweh who rules all things and people. And yet the final completion of the kingdom is still to come. It is promised and God is active on its behalf. Therefore it is already being realised and will be realized completely. But it is not an authoritarian rule by a capricious God. It is instead a caring and trustworthy God intervening in history to transform the present order and bring creation to fullness and completion. In the triumph of God's vision for creation, Nature is wholly and wondrously transformed, the serenity of paradise is renewed.⁶

The life and preaching of Christ is consistent with this Hebrew understanding of the coming of God's kingdom – God's will being done and all creation being brought to wholeness and completion. Hence, for Jesus too, "the kingdom of God is a dynamic

4 Cf. K. B.C. ONWUBIKO, *The Catholic Church and the Development of Education in Eastern Nigeria*, in C. A. OBI *et al.* (Eds.), *Hundred Years of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nigeria, 1885-1985*, Onitsha, Africana- Fep, 1985, 225-232.

5 T. GROOME, *Christian Religious Education*, 36.

6 R. SCHNACKENBURG, *God's Rule and Kingdom*, New York, Herder and Herder, 1963, 35.

and concrete reality, pointing to God's saving action in the midst of history."⁷ A look at the synoptic gospels renders it obvious that the central message in the preaching of Christ is the kingdom of God. He frequently speaks about the Kingdom. Mark's gospel begins with this central message. After John was arrested, Jesus appeared in Galilee proclaiming the good news: "The kingdom of God is close at hand! Repent and believe the gospel" (Mk. 1:14-15). From then onwards, the kingdom was Jesus' constant reference and central theme. Thomas Groome notes that He not only preached the kingdom, He tied its coming to his own person and ministry.⁸ Jesus also speaks about the Kingdom of God as both in the present and the future. Pointing to its *already-ness*, he said in the gospel of St. Luke: "but if it is by the finger of God that I cast out demons, then the kingdom of God has come upon you" (Lk. 11:20). On the other hand, he talks of the Kingdom of God in the future and asked his disciples to pray for its coming (Mt. 6:10; Lk. 11:20). Jesus did not only proclaim the kingdom of God, he lived his own life in response to it. The kingdom of God therefore calls for a response. Jesus calls his disciples to respond to the kingdom. The Church equally presents the kingdom as an invitation to respond to God's plan and activity.

The Kingdom of God in Contemporary Theology

In contemporary theology, there is a renewed awareness of the centrality of the Kingdom of God or the Reign of God in Christian faith and practice. Theologians are bringing back the Kingdom to the centre of Jesus' preaching and making it the main issue in Christian theology. "Over the past twenty five years, the 'hope' and 'political' theologians have been most influential in bringing the symbol of the Kingdom of God back into the central focus, and have built their theological constructs around the symbol."⁹ These theologians, bolstered by their colleagues of the liberation movement, insist that Christian theology must arise out of the context of active participation in society as a way of building the kingdom of God therein. Moreover, apart from the aforementioned, many contemporary theologians, especially those who espouse a 'Christology from below' are placing central emphasis on the Kingdom of God.¹⁰ "In fact, the whole broad-spectrum of

⁷ *Ibid.*, 39.

⁸ GROOME, *Christian Religious Education*, 40; G.AULÉN, *Jesus in Contemporary Historical Research*, Philadelphia, Fortress Press, 1976, 101.

⁹ GROOME, *Christian Religious Education*, 43.

¹⁰ "Christology from below" emphasizes the humanity of Christ and his activities as human and among humans, in other words, it is a Christology that begins by analysing the historical Jesus. The opposite which is Christology from above is typical of John's gospel. It begins with Christ's divinity downwards to his incarnation. See E. L. KRASEVAC, 'Christology from above' and 'Christology from Below' in "The Thomist: A Speculative Quarterly Review", 51 (1987) 2, 299-306.

critical theology within which most ‘middle of the road theologians’ today can be placed, is informed by a new awareness of the centrality of the kingdom of God to Christian faith and to the meaning of being Christian.”¹¹ When reflection on the identity of Christ and of what it means to be Christians begins with “the life, work, and preaching of the historical Jesus, then the centrality of the Kingdom in his ministry becomes obvious and calls us clearly to make it central in preaching what he preached.”¹²

A holistic Christology must take account of both the humanity and divinity of Christ and desist from ascribing primacy to one over the other. My view is that the kingdom of God is being worked out by God with human cooperation through history. It should not be understood as a purely otherworldly realm where God reigns. The Kingdom of God has come and will come as God works through men and women who give positive response to it. Such men and women become co-creators and co-builders of the kingdom on earth. When they pray, “thy Kingdom come,” they offer themselves for God to use in realizing its coming.

Implications of the kingdom of God for Catholic schools

The Catholic school is an *Ecclesial subject*. This means that it is a genuine instrument of the Church in building the Kingdom of God on earth. The Catholic school participates in the evangelizing mission of the Church and is the privileged environment in which Christian education is carried out.¹³ Thus, the *raison d’être* of Catholic school is to further the mission of its parent institution, namely, the Church. It is right to say, therefore, that the Catholic school goes where the Church goes. The Church’s project of furthering the kingdom of God calls Catholic schools to become authentic places of evangelization. This reminder becomes even more urgent when one sees many Catholic schools relegating their mission to the margins as they struggle to survive a market-driven education system. The struggles to be relevant, accepted, and survive in the midst of competition leads many Catholic schools into the trap of a secular academic success culture.¹⁴ It will be necessary for the Catholic school to assume a missionary orientation proper to the Church’s mission.¹⁵ This is without prejudice to its role as a school in the secular sense.

The implication of these submissions is that the Catholic school should be explicitly “Catholic” in its programmes and structure. The religious dimension

¹¹ GROOME, *Christian Religious Education*, 43.

¹² *Ibid.*, 43.

¹³ Cf. CCE, *The Catholic Church on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 11.

¹⁴ J. M. MILLER, *The Holy See’s Teaching on Catholic Schools*, Atlanta, Sophia Institute Press, 2006, 3.

¹⁵ ALBERICK-VALLABARAJ, *Communicating a Faith that Transforms*, 48.

should not be some sort of appendix to its programmes; it should be the motivating factor and its inspiration. This is what Vatican II means when it says that Catholic schools orient the whole of human culture to the message of salvation, so that the knowledge which the pupils acquire about science is illumined by faith.¹⁶ Failure in this is a failure of the Catholic school project, even if they were excellent in academic performance or by any other criteria of success bandied around by those who reduce education to a mere cognitive activity. Such criteria should not be used to judge the performance of Catholic schools. If the Church exists for the reign of God, then the Catholic school exist for the same purpose: in the service of the Kingdom of God.

Challenges Encountered by the Catholic School in Promoting the Kingdom of God

Catholic schools, in trying to be true ecclesial subjects must overcome certain obstacles that militate against this mission. Awareness of these challenges is critical so that they do not obstruct the realization of the school's mission. Among them is ignorance or loss of the Catholic identity of the school. Insufficient information concerning the identity and mission of the Catholic school distorts the ecclesial face of the school. Many Catholic schools in Nigeria are staffed by managers and teachers who received little or no preparation on Catholic education. They have no clear idea about what makes Catholic schools uniquely Catholic. They pursue excellence and good performance – according to state indices of success – at the cost of the core values of Catholic education.¹⁷

Secondly, there is the generic religious education curriculum operative in Nigeria's secondary schools. The CRS (Christian Religious Studies) curriculum has no specific faith appeal, so the Catholic school must make up for this lack. There is also inadequate pastoral presence in many Catholic schools across Nigeria. The presence of priests and religious supports in the school environment helps in creating that ecclesial climate so recommended by the CCE.¹⁸ Inadequate pastoral presence compromises the pastoral care of students which is a special responsibility of the Catholic School¹⁹. Often, parochial schools are left in the hands of incompetent

¹⁶ VATICAN II, *Gravissimum Educationis*, 8.

¹⁷ Cf. ARCHDIOCESE OF ONITSHA, *Evangelization in Onitsha Archdiocese Today: Synod Acta*, Enugu, Snaap Press, 2006, 406; OGUH, *Religious Education*, 27.

¹⁸ The ecclesial nature of the catholic school is written in the very heart of its identity. Cf. SCCE, *Catholic School on the Threshold of the Third Millennium*, 11.

¹⁹ Cf. CBCN, *The Catholic Church Policy on Education in Nigeria*, Lagos, Catholic Secretariat, 2005, 10-11.

parish priests who, though may be wonderful pastors, are not adept school leaders. Added to this, most of them are busy with parish activities.

Then there is the challenge of teacher formation, especially in-service formation. Inadequate spiritual formation for Catholic teachers is the major challenge to the ability of many Catholic schools to promote the kingdom of God in the school. Majority of teachers do not receive formation from Catholic institutions where solid spiritual formation is expected to be part of teacher formation program. State institutions where most of them were prepared have no provision for the religious dimension or activities that may enhance the spiritual formation of prospective teachers. A recent study conducted in the South Eastern part of Nigeria supports the foregoing argument. The survey conducted on a sample of 300 teachers selected from different Catholic schools in the region suggests that teachers feel inadequate to function as pastoral agents.²⁰ As the CCE rightly notes in *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*, for teachers to transmit the Christian message, it is presumed that they have a mastery of the knowledge of the truths of the faith, and of the principles of spiritual life.²¹ Where they are not prepared for this, they may not contribute much to the mission of the Catholic school.

Furthermore, some teachers in Catholic Schools are not Catholics, and they normally enter the Catholic school with their own religious-cultural orientation. Without proper induction and orientation, they cannot educate according to the mind of the Church. More so, there is a certain lack of awareness of the effects of this phenomenon, which explains why policy statements about non-Catholic teachers have not been made by relevant authorities. Unknown to Catholic school administrators, a subtle sub-culture could ferment the Catholic educational community.

One may also worry about the educational rapport between the Catholic school and parents.²² Presently, the existing rapport is limited to the Parents Teachers Dialogue (PTD) meetings. The PTD meetings held a few times a year do not signify quality relationship between parents and the school. At best, it has become a forum for updating parents on new policy decisions, new regime of school regulations, a hike in school fees and things of the sort.

There are also administrative problems which involves human management, relational and organizational competence. The lack of these administrative competences portend danger to the mission of the Catholic school. The Catholic school as an ambient of evangelization should have strong collaboration with the

²⁰ A. OKAFOR, *Formation of Teachers as Pastoral Agents: Building Teacher Capacity for Pastoral Agency*, Mauritius, OmniScriptum Publishing Group, 2018, 109-116.

²¹ SCCE, *Educating Together in Catholic Schools*, 26.

²² Cf. ARINZE, *Our Bishop*, 68.

parish to which it is attached. Even if it is not a parochial school, there is always a parish of reference nearby. Between the school and the parish of reference, sometimes, there seemed to be weak interchange of pastoral initiatives. Some parish priests quarrel with religious sisters who manage the school; such power tussle often escalates into scandals which injure the schools' pastoral mission. In cases where the Catholic school belongs to a religious congregation, some of them complain that the parish does not give enough pastoral services to the school.²³ These things happen when the parish of reference fails to see the school as part of her ministry. The diffusion of ignorance concerning the principles and ethos of the Catholic school plays a damaging role. Many understand very little of what prophetic role they ought to play in the Catholic school attached to their parish.

The Catholic schools in the Service of the Kingdom of God

In the first place, we must acknowledge that schools are places where learning is transmitted in a critical and systematic manner. Like other schools, the Catholic school promotes human culture and civilization; otherwise it would not be a school at all. And if it is not a school in the first place, it cannot be a Catholic school.²⁴ The question now is how the Catholic school could genuinely promote the reign of God without betraying its formal role? The answer lies in the synthesis of faith, culture and life. Rossano Sala puts it succinctly thus:

A School configured and structured according to the Gospel principles should be a place that proposes a living and realizable synthesis between faith, religion and culture; instituting, through its practices, the possibility that every individual and every society could live their vocation as children of God, both as a personal conviction and as a shared community orientation/practice.²⁵

The Catholic school will not become an instrument in the service of the Kingdom until it achieves a living synthesis of faith, the disciplines taught in the school, and all extra-curricular programmes. By so doing, it provides opportunities for pupils and teachers to respond to their vocation as children of God. A lot could

²³ Some religion teachers complained of poor spiritual assistance from the parish priests. There is also a general lack of interest (obviously caused by ignorance) on the part of the parish community to the religious life of the school. Cf. OGUH, *Religious Education*, 102.

²⁴ Cf. *The Catholic School*, 26.

²⁵ R. SALA, *La presenza della chiesa nell'ambito educativo: la scuola*, in A. Bozzolo - R. Carelli, *Evangelizzazione e Educazione*, Roma, LAS, 2011, 157.

be said on the ways in which the Catholic school can promote the kingdom of God in practical terms, but for want of space, we just limit our recommendation to: (1) the structure of school governance and administration; (2), synthesis of faith, religion and academic disciplines.

Structure of School Governance and Administration

There is no doubt that learning is socially constructed. The way a society or organization is structured is critical for the orientation of its members. If an institution is overly bureaucratic, it kills spontaneity and the creativity of its members. In the *Social Cognitive Learning Theory* propounded by Albert Bandura, an *Observer* learns from a *Model* – significant personalities who are attractive to them. Learners acquire new behaviour or skill by observing such Models.

In the Catholic school, teachers are the models while students are the observers. How the school community is structured can affect the type of teachers found in such a school. Bandura argues that “the way in which a society is socially organized largely determines the types of models to which its members have easy access.”²⁶ In other words, in the school context, the school culture and environment determine the kind of models that teachers become.

This means that in-service development of teachers should go beyond cognitive interventions. In-service development programmes in many Catholic schools often target only the cognitive aspect with seminars, conferences and workshops. But the complexity of the determinants of teacher effectiveness requires deeper layers of intervention. A holistic teacher care programme is important if the Catholic school hopes to involve teachers in its mission of building the Kingdom of God. Ultimately, the teachers are the foot soldiers who determine what the students become. They are responsible for creating a Christian climate in the Catholic school community. Hence, no effort should be spared in building teacher capacity for pastoral agency.

Research suggests that when teachers’ psychological and economic needs are neglected, they are demotivated at other levels of functioning.²⁷ Therefore in order to

²⁶ A. BANDURA, *Social Foundations of Thought and Action: A Social Cognitive Theory*, New Jersey, Prentice-Hall, 1986, 55.

²⁷ Louise Moore discovered that staff development programmes fail when teachers’ emotional needs are not met. In one of such programmes, “teachers felt a sense of isolation and uncertainty”. He notes that unless there is a positive sense of community, a caring community that meets teachers’ needs at various levels including paying good salaries; it would be difficult to generate intrinsic motivation. “Such manner of professional development will be the caring response [to teachers needs] of a caring community.” See, L. MOORE, *Staff Development in the Catholic School: The*

promote intrinsic motivation, school administrators need to attend to the emotional wellbeing of teachers as individuals and as a team. They need to ensure quality relationships that are marked by mutual respect between staff and management. The care shown by the school administrators has a modelling effect on teacher attitude and perception of the Catholic school as an institution for the human person. There is no better formation programme than the lived experience of staff and students. Teachers must first experience the Christian anthropology that they are supposed to promote, otherwise they cannot operate with such anthropology in their relationship with students.

Synthesis of Faith, Religion and Academic Disciplines

For the Catholic school to synthesize faith and culture within its community means that all the dimensions and aspects of the school life and learning should be permeated by the spirit of the Gospel – lived, preached, celebrated and taught. Education in the Christian sense is holistic in that it leaves no aspect of the pupil's life unattended. No discipline or moment of the school life is empty of human and supernatural values. By teaching the different disciplines in the spirit of the Gospel, by direct religious instruction and by the witness of life of the staff and management of the school, pupils perceive and catch the faith. Thomas Groome aptly notes that "Faith is caught, not taught."²⁸ If one does not live it, one cannot teach it.

The Synthesis of faith and academic disciplines means that the Catholic school should not compromise excellence in academic pursuits. Yet it does not make academic pursuit the *Summum bonum* of its efforts. The highest goal of the Catholic school is the integral formation of pupils (intellectual, human and religious/spiritual formation). Catholic schools understand the role of the intellectual development even for the faith. The promotion of the reign of God does not preclude excellence in the intellectual domain. Hence, no effort should be spared in continually developing teachers in the pedagogical and technical aspects of their duty. They should be competent professionals with a mastery of their subject content; they should also possess the method and skill to teach same effectively.

Similarly, the religious life of the school should distinguish the Catholic school from other schools. Prayers, Masses and celebration of the sacraments are strong cultural contents that tell the Christian story. They are also symbols of the Catholic culture of the school. Equal attention should also be given to human formation and

Caring Response of a Community, in T.C. Hunt-T.E. Oldenski-T.J. Wallace, *Catholic School Leadership. An Invitation to Lead*, London RoutledgeFalmer, 2000, 93-104.

²⁸ T. GROOME, *Christian Religious Education*, 68; J. Fowler-S. Keen, *Life Maps: Journey of Conversations on the Journey of Faith*, Waco-Texas, Word Books, 1978, 18.

mentoring pupils on emotional intelligence. This creates balanced personalities with the capacity to deal with the daily frustrations that life throws at individuals. Human formation, apart from other types of intervention is mostly achieved through the example of teachers and their relationship with pupils. Teachers teach *respect* and *responsibility* by the way they deal with students and dedicate themselves to their classroom and school-wide practices. As active and intelligent observers, students would learn from such teachers to respect others and to be conscientious in carrying out duties assigned to them. If they fully internalized such comportments, they would be reliable members of the society in the future – extending the reign of God in civil life via witnessing.

The Catholic school can therefore help in building the kingdom of God by the kind of formation they give to their pupils. Students must experience the active reign of God in the school community where they absorb the ability to become its promoters in civil life, even after many years of leaving the school.

In sum, Catholic schools contribute to the reign of God by making their school programme effectively pastoral. This is achieved not by turning the school into a parish or sacrificing the formal nature of school education, but by giving equal attention to all the dimensions of the human person; ensuring that the student who graduates from the Catholic school is fully human, an honest citizen, and a good Christian.

Conclusion

In this contribution, I have examined the implication of the Kingdom of God for Catholic schools in Nigeria, beginning from the theological understanding of the term “Kingdom of God”. The latter signifies the active presence of God in history with His overarching influence on human culture. *Adveniat regnum tuum* is not only a prayer of the Church but its mission in which the Catholic school shares. The Catholic school advances the kingdom of God by imbuing its entire educational programme with the spirit of the gospel. In doing this, it must overcome obstacles such as ignorance of the mission of the Catholic school, a market-driven education environment, generic religious education curriculum, management problems, and poor teacher capacity for pastoral agency, etc. Overcoming these obstacles begins with an awareness of their existence in the first place and the damage they are capable of doing to the mission of the Catholic school. There is no doubt that awareness is the key.

Tackling these challenges will require the support of the local church and the local ordinary in particular, problems of funding for instance may need the latter’s direct intervention and negotiation with government to attract grants to Catholic

schools. Catholic school leaders will require ongoing formation in Catholic school leadership. They should equally be in position to organize periodic ongoing formation for their staff, bearing in mind that teachers are the foot-soldiers of the Catholic educational project.

Of the many recommendations that one could find in magisterial and curial documents on Catholic schooling, I have emphasized the structure of school governance, and the synthesis of faith and other aspects of the school life. These, we have argued, will ensure that the Catholic school becomes a veritable tool of evangelization without compromising its role as a formal educational institution. My central argument remains that, given the right environment and administration, the Catholic school can promote the reign of God in line with the mission of its parent institution – the Church. The role of the Catholic school in promoting the kingdom of God goes beyond the school community. It extends to the wider world because of the many alumni that would eventually ferment the fabric of society with the values and orientation they have received from the Catholic school. Indeed, in this way, the Catholic school could change the world, make it a better place and realize the prayer and mission of *adveniat regnum tuum*.