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THE SPIRITANS' CONTRIBUTIONS TO PASTORAL MINISTRY IN IGBOLAND, 1885-1970

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Abstract

The story of Catholicism among the Igbo of south-eastern Nigeria began with the Spiritans (Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers) in 1885, and was identified with them for the next eighty-five years until their forceful eviction and repatriation by the Federal Government of Nigeria in January 1970. With a teaming worshipping community in virtually all towns and villages of Igboland, the region has turned out to be a hub of Catholic clergy and Religious, diocesan and missionaries alike. The picture being painted of the spread of Catholicism here is a successful one. In such a successful story, the place of pastoral ministry cannot be wished away. Using the analytical method, this paper reflects on the contributions of the Spiritans to the Pastoral plans and ministry employed in Catholic evangelism in Igboland between 1900 and 1970. By these contributions, the Spiritans played an important role towards the transformation of Nigerian society. The deductions of the assessment are presented in thematic and narrative methods.

Introduction

All over what used to be the Eastern Nigeria, and Igboland in particular, the Catholic Church with her activities seems to have popular acclaim. In every city, town or village, Catholic Church buildings, usually packed full with members in times of worship and other church activities are almost taken for granted. A

teeming number of Catholic priests and Religious from this corner of the globe has become a major hub from where missionaries are sent to all parts of the world. Interestingly, the Catholic Church has existed for only about one and a quarter of a century in Igboland. The situation as presented soars far above what obtains in most other places where the Catholic Church made its debut about the same period of time with Igboland or even in some places that witnessed the Church long before Igboland. A typical example that comes to mind is the region of south western Nigeria which witnessed Catholicism as early as 1860s.

Such picture as painted above, a picture that could be considered “successful” by many standards, will naturally elicit quests into what may constitute the various factors that oiled the wheel of Catholic evangelism in this region to success. Unarguably true, such quests or review are incomplete without the assessment of the pastoral plans and ministry employed in the region with the passage of time.

For about eighty five (85) years (1885-1970), the Spiritans (members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit; otherwise called the Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers) completely held sway over the Catholic Church in Eastern Nigeria except in the present Akwa Ibom, Cross River, and Ebonyi States which they handed over to Saint Patrick missionaries in the 1930s. Suffice it to say therefore, that the Spiritans were more or less, responsible for the pastoral ministry of the Church in Igboland for this length of time. This, having been said, an assessment of the pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nigeria and in Igboland in particular will primarily have the contributions of the Spiritans in focus. This paper, therefore, is an attempt to decipher, through an historical approach, the contributions of the

Spiritans to development of pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church in Igboland.

Conceptual definitions

Spiritans is a household name adopted by the members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (the group is also known as the Congregation of the Holy Ghost or the Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers).

Two other words in the title of this paper that need some sort of definitions or explanations, are "pastoral" and "ministry" (pastoral ministry). Ministry, from its Greek etymology is a "word for serving and attending upon someone" (O'Meara 1996: 657). There are varieties of ministry. One can talk of ministry in a secular sense which may involve an arm of service of the government. We may also talk of ministry in a religious sense, implying an office held or executed on behalf of a religious body. Reviewing the origins and development of ministry in the Christian Church, Schillebeeckx (1981: 12) explains that "at a time when the local leaders had lost the great bearers of their traditions and the pioneers in their community: Paul, Peter, James, a certain John and so on, they could best legitimate their own leadership to their fellow-Christians by stressing that they are simply carrying on the work... of the apostles and prophets." This explanation reveals the traditional Christian understanding of ministry to connote participation in the continuation of the assignments of the apostles and prophets in the footsteps of Jesus Christ. From the Christian point of view, ministry means doing something for the advent of the kingdom of God on behalf of the Christian community (O'Meara 1996: 659). Paul Bernier (1992:26) agrees with this understanding when he defined ministry as "... service to the kingdom of God... ministry, like

the Church serves something outside of itself... the early church described its ministry as actions, not as honorific offices.” In this sense, the kingdom of God remains the source, the centre, and the objective of ministry. This paper will consider ministry from this traditional Christian religious point of view. In this regard, we shall be viewing ministry here, to refer to the plans and activities of the Church, whether performed collectively or individually for the Church or within the Church in Igboland.

On a similar note, the word pastoral is also considered in this paper from the religious point of view and from the word “pastor” (shepherd). It is seen in terms of the office and actions of the pastor (shepherd) and his delegates. With this background of understanding, “pastoral ministry” is construed here as the means the pastor or priest applies to reach the people; the means he uses to make the people’s faith stronger; what he applies to heal the people; in fact, what the pastor or priest applies for the spreading of the Gospel of the kingdom of God, as well as the sanctification of people.

The Spiritans and the Development of Pastoral Ministry in Eastern Nigeria

The Spiritans: an Overview

The Congregation of the Holy Spirit was founded in France with dual heritage from Father Francois Poullart des Places (1679-1709), founder of the Society of the Holy Ghost (1703); and Father Francis Libermann (1802-1852), founder of the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary (1841). Both Societies were merged with the approval of the Holy See in 1848 and became the Holy Ghost Congregation, Under the Protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary. The Holy Ghost Congregation has also a dual concern, as

seen from its rules and traditions, of implantation of the Church through preaching the "Good News" especially in the difficult mission areas, and uplifting the life of the down trodden in the society. It is good to note that the mission objective of the Congregation towards the poor is an integral one: spiritual, civil and material. Thus, the Spiritans could be said to approach the spreading of the Gospel as spiritual, civil and material upliftment.

Some members of this Congregation; two priests, Fathers Joseph Lutz, C.S.Sp. and John Horne, C.S.Sp. and two religious Brothers, Hermas Huch, C.S.Sp. and John Gotto Jacob, C.S.Sp., arrived Onitsha in south eastern Nigeria on December 5, 1885 as an out station of their mission in Gabon. On arrival, the Spiritan missionaries did not meet a single Catholic among the natives; the people were largely traditional religionists. However, the Church Missionary Society (CMS) of the Anglican Communion had already settled in Onitsha since 1857, and had managed to expand to neighbouring towns of Osamara and Obosi. Such was the religious environment met by the first Catholic missionaries to Igboland. Nonetheless, the Spiritan missionaries settled down and worked out pastoral plans to help them win converts.

Initial Strategies: 1885-1905

Within the period 1885 to 1905, the Spiritan missionaries employed different strategies for the purposes of evangelization and expansion of the mission in Igboland. Beginning with the redemption of slaves, they moved to the establishment of Christian villages, the use of gifts and primary health and medical services, the introduction of elementary education, and so on. The missionaries, however, reviewed these strategies from time to time, and while they invigorated the use of the ones they

found to be very beneficial, they gradually dropped those they considered less beneficial or burdensome. The redemption of slaves though officially kicked against by Father Leon Lejeune, C.S.Sp. as Prefect Apostolic (1900-1905) for the purposes of its cost implications, was gradually overtaken by events that followed the colonial government edicts on slavery and slave trade. Lejeune also moved to end the establishment of Christian villages. Except for the Christian village at Aguleri, the idea was then proving to be unproductive in other parts of the Prefecture. Incidentally, the Aguleri Christian village was riddled by many problems later and it became a ghost of itself as most Christian inhabitants abandoned the village because of various reasons to return to their kith and kin (Okafor 2013: 50-61). The most prominent of the strategies which the missionaries considered and used for their work and services in Igboland (1900-1970), and which stood the test of time and could be veritably considered as the contributions of the Spiritans to pastoral ministry in Igboland are presented here below.

Pastoral Plans and Ministry: 1900-1970

Physical Presence and Availability

One of the primary strategies of the Spiritan missionaries in Igboland was to bring themselves as close as possible to the people through their physical presence. This idea led to the many treks undertaken by these missionaries even when it was so dangerous for them to do so since the Igbo hinterland was unfamiliar and very hostile to the Whiteman during the early years of the mission in Igboland,. Tales abound of the great pastoral treks of missionaries like Father Joseph Lutz, C.S.Sp. (Koren 1996: 20-21), Father Joseph Bubendorf, C.S.Sp. (Koren 1996: 25-26), and Father (later Bishop) Joseph Shanahan,

C.S.Sp. (Forristal 1990: 78-89) among many others. The reason for these treks was essentially to meet with the people, acquaint themselves with the people, discover their expectations, and see if they could establish a mission among them. The reason of physical presence and availability also encouraged the continuous creation of resident missions and catechist stations. This strategy has remained primary in the pastoral plan of the Church in Igboland even now that such presence and closeness to the people have become rare in many parts of the world.

Education apostolate

Also among the pastoral strategies the Spiritans bequeathed to Eastern Nigeria and Igboland in particular is the education apostolate. From the beginning of the Igbo Catholic mission, the establishment of a mission station was often followed with the establishment of a school. This strategy actually placed the Catholic mission ahead of the CMS group in the region. The natives had the craze for the "whiteman's language" and thus, almost every community mounted pressure on the missionaries to bring their school and establish in their community. The missionaries soon discovered this as a potent strategy and were determined to exploit it to the maximum. They would give schools to the people, not just for the acquisition of the "whiteman's language", but especially for purposes of evangelization. The objective is more apparent in a report from the Onitsha-Town mission in 1906 which read as follows:

Our objective would not be to train clerks or employees for commerce or for the Government. Our aim, especially ... is to form future catechists and future school masters for the Igbo country.... In accordance with the strict demands of the government education regulations, the pupils are scrupulously

drilled in reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, English composition, and some elements of science, however, the emphasis is on religious instructions, catechism, church songs, and the Scriptures (Omenka 1989: 97).

Despite its short comings especially in the area of curriculum, the school turned out numerous converts and members for the Catholic Church in Igboland every year. In 1960, only 10 years before the Spiritans relinquished charge of the Church in Igboland, they had engineered the establishment of about 1858 primary schools, 35 secondary schools, and 29 Teachers' Training schools in the then Onitsha Archdiocese, Owerri and Umuahia Dioceses (CSSP Archives, Box 3, File 4 and 5), as well as 178 primary schools in Abakiliki Diocese (Eke 1985: 294). The result of the school strategy was so phenomenal and Omenka rightly puts it thus:

By all account, the priority given to proselyte-making in Catholic education produced phenomenal results: Eastern Nigeria is today the most important Catholic stronghold in West Africa, if not in the whole of Africa. This is, to a large extent, the outcome of a missionary enterprise which made the education of the masses its *raison d'être* (1989: 282).

Education apostolate remains a factor in pastoral ministry in Igboland as virtually every parish in Igboland has a school attached to it and which serves as a pastoral means,

Vocational training

The school apostolate was not limited to literacy goal, it was combined with the establishment of workshops or trade-schools where adults were also groomed in different trades such as

carpentry, masonry, tailoring, and so on. This strategy led to the empowerment of the converts and attracted more converts to the Catholic faith (Nnabuike 1983: 130-136). The success of this pastoral strategy employed by the Spiritans has remained the inspiration behind the expansion of Catholic education apostolate and vocational schools in Igboland even till present. Virtually every diocese in Igboland has at least a "Social Centre" or Vocational Institution for skill acquisition.

Teacher/catechist strategy

The school apostolate strategy must have given rise to another strategy that helped to maximize the pastoral success of the Spiritans in Igboland. The strategy was no other than the "teacher/catechist" strategy. Shortage of personnel in the face of daunting demands for schools and the desire for the Catholic faith to spread into the interior left the missionaries in Igboland with no other choice than to recruit teachers from the mission schools who would equally serve as catechists. Indeed the option of catechist/teachers became a springboard for the spread of the Catholic mission in Igboland as they provided almost every needed service. For most of the period under review:

They taught in their mud-walled straw-roofed schools from 8.00 a.m. until 2.00 p.m. The rest of their day was given over to pastoral work, visiting houses, drumming up support for the school, recruiting new pupils, attending the sick, organising classes for adult catechumens. On Sundays, if the priest was not coming, the catechist conducted a prayer service in the school. If the priest came to say Mass, it was the catechist's duty to see that everything was prepared.... He himself would normally be expected to read the

scriptures and to interpret the priest's sermon (Forristal 1990: 75).

To a great extent, they filled the personnel vacuum and what was more, they contributed next to the missionaries to the growth of the Church in Igboland, for "Without their devotion, zeal and self sacrifice, the fathers (sic) would have achieved very little" (Agbodike 2008: 108). The catechists have continued to play a very important supportive role in pastoral ministry of the Church in Igboland till today.

Collaborative ministry

In a similar vein, the Spiritan missionaries realized the need to also collaborate with women in pastoral ministry. They were aware that certain pastoral concerns, especially those that had to do with the female gender and with children, were better handled by women. The difficulty in getting the foreign female religious congregations to come and collaborate with the Spiritans in the Igbo mission pushed Bishop Shanahan to found the Missionary Sisters Holy Rosary Congregation in 1924, specifically for the Eastern Nigerian mission. This has since been followed by many other religious congregations at the instance of other Spiritans (Eke 1985: 318).

Indigenous clergy

Very much aware that "the harvest is rich but the labourers are few" (Matt. 9:37), the Spiritan missionaries in Igboland began to open seminaries so as to raise up indigenous clergy that could collaborate with them, and eventually take over the local church. Evidently, the Spiritan missionaries had initially, some misgivings allowing the Igbo to go for the priesthood. A clear

case of this could be established with a comment made by one of the Rectors of the Seminary at Igbariam, Father Denis Kennedy. He had this to say of the seminarians:

We often asked ourselves, could we ordain to the priesthood, boys who were only baptized as teenagers, whose non-Christian parents expected to be faithful to the family and take part in family life? They were very good under supervision in school. But ordained and sent out on mission alone in the bush, what would happen? How could celibacy succeed in such an environment? Would they resist the temptation to divert the funds of the mission to their relations and friends? (Eke 1985: 307)

However, such misgivings gradually gave way and a seminary was opened at Igbariam on July 19, 1924 by Bishop Joseph Shanahan, C.S.Sp. From then on there was constant effort to get candidates for the priesthood from among the people. Their efforts yielded some results for in 1930, John Cross Anyogu was ordained as the first Igbo priest, east of the Niger, and in December 1937, three other Igbo sons (Michael Tansi, Joseph Nwanegbo, and William Obelagu) were ordained priests (Eke 1985: 308). From then on, there became a gradual growth in the number of Igbo priests.

The Igbariam seminary was later moved to Onitsha and to other places until it finally settled as the Bigard Memorial Seminary. The establishment of other minor and major seminaries gradually followed suit (Ozigbo 7-10). Today, the seed that was sown by the opening of the Igbariam Seminary has made the Igbo to count possibly as the ethnic nationality with the largest number of priests in Africa.

Catechesis and the use of vernacular

The Spiritan missionaries in Igboland must have recognised the importance of communicating in a clear language in pastoral ministry. The school system solved part of this need as it introduced the alphabetization of Igbo words and promoted literacy, but it could definitely not serve to communicate the Church's message to those who had not the opportunity to pass through the schools. The need to reach this group and other categories of the people inspired the missionaries to organize the translation of the Church's doctrine and prayers into Igbo language. In the period of Father Leon Lejeune, C.S.Sp. as the Prefect Apostolic, therefore, catechist Ephraim Agha was mandated in September 1900 to translate several instruction books and the Penny Catechism. With the input made by other mission catechists and the final input of Father Lejeune, the Prefecture printed the Igbo catechism to complement the one earlier printed from Father Ganot's (a French Spiritan missionary) translation (Nnabuike 1983: 186). The Igbo catechism and other instruction books translated have helped so much in instructing the people on the Church's doctrine and tradition, as well as in providing aid for spiritual exercises. This Igbo version of the Penny Catechism masterminded by the Spiritan missionaries with the subsequent revised editions has remained a veritable tool for pastoral ministry in Igboland.

Roving preachers and retreats

Realising the effect of communication in their evangelizing enterprise, but faced with shortage of capable personnel, the Spiritans who worked in Igboland also made use of peripatetic preachers. Such preachers who were considered to be "powerful"

and motivational in preaching were engaged to be going round the parishes, organizing and preaching retreats. Father Denis T. O'Keefe, C.S.Sp. was very popular in this regard. "He booked great success and was in constant demand, awakening new fervor and bringing back those who had gone astray" (Koren 1996: 173). No wonder most Igbo people then misconceived his name to be "*Oke ifufe*" (the strong wind). His wind actually blew people nearer to God. No doubt, the pastoral ministry of the Church in Igboland has continued to benefit from such roving preachers and their retreats.

Charity and medical works

In addition to the already mentioned pastoral strategies, charity works and medical services were equally employed in the pastoral ministry of the Spiritans in Igboland. The leader of the first group of Spiritans in Igboland, Father Joseph Lutz, was a trained medical personnel and he employed his skill to the fullest in the Igbo mission. Charity works and medical services turned out to be among the successful strategies used in increasing the number of converts in Igboland. It is a common knowledge that a healthy body makes for a sound mind. These means touched deeply the life of the people. For many Igbo people in those days, it was heart warming to realize that certain ailments thought to be caused by spirits or charms from evil men and women were actually ordinary occurrences that required simple administration of some medications. It therefore paid off, as the medical services and gifts attracted many to become Catholic. And what is more, the use of gifts, charity works and medical services left so much impression on converts that most of them quickly saw and imbibed the Christian principles of giving and rendering services (Okafor 2013:86).

The importance that these missionaries attached to medical services in their evangelising mission led them to building hospitals and other health centres. In 1956, the “Sacred Returns” of Onitsha Archdiocese reported that the Archdiocese had four hospitals, fifteen maternity homes and fifteen dispensaries. The subsequent “Sacred Returns” from 1957 were, however, silent on the number of medical and health centres in the Archdiocese. By 1960, Owerri Diocese had three hospitals and twenty-five maternity homes while Umuahia Diocese had eight maternity and child welfare centres (CSSP Archives Onitsha, Box 3, Files 4 and 5). Areas of Igboland under the then Calabar and Ogoja Dioceses, but which now fall under Abakiliki Diocese had, between 1947 and 1963, established three hospitals and many outpatient clinics as well as leprosy settlements (Eke 1985: 294).

The pastoral strategies of charity works and medical services by the Spiritans were epitomised in the Nigerian/Biafran civil war time evangelization. Individually and collectively, the Spiritan missionaries staked their lives to provide essential social services for the Biafrans. Their solidarity throughout the war period and their provision of beverages and food of different types imported from Europe and America; the medical services they offered to Biafrans; and their flying away the endangered children to safety in Libreville and Sao Tome saved the Biafrans from extermination. The Igbo came to understand through these gestures, that the Gospel message cares, not only for the spiritual, but also for the temporal needs of human beings. Father Tony Byrne, the then Director of Catholic Social Services in Biafra, was outstanding in this regard (Byrne 1997). The use of these social services in pastoral ministry has remained one of the means through which the Church in Igboland effectively touch the lives of the people.

Inculturation

Another area where the Spiritans made much impact in pastoral ministry in Igboland is in inculturation. An understanding of these missionaries as people coming from Europe, then a continent with a totally different world view, where many had little or no regard for anything African, will help one to appreciate the contribution these missionaries made to inculturation in Igbo Catholicism. It is true that for quite some time, the missionaries were slow to accommodating some Igbo cultural practices that we know today as not being contradictory to the Christian message and belief, yet it remains true also that they did not just discard such practices with a wave of hand, rather, they devoted time to study such practices and at the end of the day, approved what they considered to be worthwhile. For instance, in Ihiala, just as in most areas of Igboland that came under the then Onitsha Archdiocese, the issue of *Ozo* title taking by Catholics, which was earlier suppressed, was later revisited. Under Archbishop Charles Heerey, who got a better knowledge and understanding of the institution, a compromise was reached to accommodate Catholics who wished to participate in the title taking (Agbodike 2008: 122-123). Such was the case in most other parts of Igboland.

Just like in the case of *Ozo* title taking, there were many other traditions and cultural practices of the Igbo that were integrated into Igbo Catholicism. Commenting on the level of inculturation of the local practices into Igbo Catholicism, Ejizu contends that:

Virtually every aspect of Roman Catholicism has been influenced, albeit in varying degrees, by the indigenous religion and culture. Not only elements of belief, but also sacramental and other ritual practices, as well as organisational patterns, have all been impacted upon. Even the fundamental perception of reality, its

interrelated values as well as the attitudinal orientation of the average contemporary Igbo Catholic, do bear discernible imprints of the indigenous religious tradition.

Conclusion

There is no gain saying the fact that the Spiritans contributed in many ways to the pastoral ministry of the Catholic Church in Igboland. So far, this paper has tried to highlight the strategies that the members of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritans) employed in their evangelizing mission or their pastoral ministry in Igboland. The Spiritans arrived Igboland with pastoral concerns of implanting the Catholic Church and uplifting the life of the down trodden. We realized that at the time of their venturing into Igboland, both the whiteman and Igboland were strange to each other. The Spiritans had also no plans of where to begin and had no knowledge of any Catholic living in the area, but trusted in God's mercy and the direction of the Holy Spirit. The progress of their missionary endeavour, therefore, depended completely on whatever plan they could come up with. This was evidently, a herculean task.

These missionaries proved not to have shied away from this responsibility despite all odds. As human beings with limited capabilities, yet as visionaries too, they employed the processes of observation, trial, and elimination or implementation. Finally, through education, trade schools, communication, catechism, teacher/catechist services, resident mission stations, establishment of the local clergy and collaborative groups, charity works and medical services, and inculturation, they were able to confront the challenges of the dual objectives that brought them to Igboland.

An assessment of these pastoral strategies employed by this group of missionaries especially between 1885 and 1970 would reveal that though some of these strategies had their short comings, their positive impact on the pastoral concerns of the Church outweighed whatever problems they may have posed. The worth of these strategies would be better appreciated when one considers the present state of the Catholic Church in Nigeria and in Igboland in particular. The Spiritan Mission that began in Onitsha on December 5, 1885 without any indigenous Catholic could rightly be said to be the progenitor of twenty-five dioceses scattered today in South-East, South-South and North-Central geo-political zones of Nigeria. Among these dioceses, fourteen are in Igboland, including the Ikwere-Igbo of Rivers State. The current Catholic situation in Igboland reveals over a thousand parishes, with official record of about eight million Catholic faithful (Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, 2008).

The credit goes to the pastoral plans that the Spiritans in particular introduced which paved the way for this successful expansion. If the pastoral plans of Spiritans were able to lift the Catholic Church in Igboland to its present status, one can rightly conclude that the Spiritans' contributions to pastoral ministry in Igboland were immense and that the Igbo Church totally owes its pastoral ministry and success to the Spiritans. The contributions span across especially the areas of education apostolate, catechetics, vocational development, collaborative ministry, justice, development and peace apostolate, healthcare apostolate, development of the local clergy and inculturation. True to the aims and objectives of their Congregation, their contributions achieved to a reasonable extent, the integral development of the Igbo; individually and collectively.