

Serving the Common Good of Society: Reflections for the Socio-Political Transformation of Nigeria

Efeturi A. Ojakaminor, OMV

*The National Missionary Seminary of St. Paul
Gwagwalada, Abuja*

<https://dx.doi.org/10.4314/tcv.v22i1.8>

*A Lecture delivered at the maiden Catholic Social Teaching
Colloquium organized by the Veritas University, Abuja (Nigeria)
and the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Abuja, October 31, 2024.*

Christians who occupy positions of responsibility are to be carefully prepared for political, economic and social tasks by means of a solid formation in the church's social doctrine, so that in their places of work they will be faithful witnesses to the gospel. – *Ecclesia in Africa*, #90

At the core of what has come to be known in Catholic Christianity as the Social Doctrine of the Church, following the publication of Leo XIII's ground-breaking encyclical, *Rerum Novarum* is St Thomas Aquinas' doctrine of the Common Good, a vision of society where the good of each member is bound to the good of the whole. It is considered the *raison d'être* of all politics. It consists primarily of having the social systems, institutions, and environments in which we all depend, work in a manner that benefits all the people. Ordinarily, the common good is a good to which all members of society have access, and from whose enjoyment no one can be easily excluded. It

may as well be described as the collective good. This means that politics is expected to cater for the needs of all and of each member of society. This is why in what is known as the principle of subsidiarity, society or the State is expected to provide social safety nets for the most vulnerable and to serve as helping hand to those who have the will to achieve a place in the sun but simply lack the means. The common good is so important that if it is lost sight of, politics becomes sterile and bastardised and loses its soul and the weak in society become objects in the hands of the powerful, who invariably end up as in the days of the prophet Amos, grinding the face of the weak in the dust and selling the poor for a pair of sandals. And this generally eventuates when politics is excised from morality.

Wherever you have the aberration of a country that is not poor – recall that a few years ago, our president said that Nigeria was not poor because it has the highest number of private jet owners in Africa – yet features the highest concentration of poor people anywhere in the word (poverty capital, so-called), as is the case with Nigeria, the common good has not been achieved – because something counts as a common good only to the extent that it is a good to which all have access. Now for the majority of our people, the fruits or so-called democracy dividends have remained elusive. For these disinherited Nigerians poverty is not merely an academic notion but an existential reality. Where the larger society is rich yet the citizens are poor, the common good has not been achieved.

So, shall we begin with the self-evident? At the very heart of the topic for our reflection is the idea of the common good – a simple idea that has eluded every attempt to codify it into a universally accepted definition. And the common good is not a value easily understood in modern culture. In fact, until the genial intellect of Pope St John Paul

II came up with a very simple presentation, to which we shall return later, the various presentations of the idea proved not very satisfactory to both scholars and statesmen. For now, let us look at what the common good is and why it is important.

According to GS, #26, “the common good refers to the sum total of social conditions which allow people either as groups or as individuals, to reach their fulfilment more fully and more easily.” On the other hand, when he reflected on the Christian virtue of solidarity, John Paul II talked about “a firm determination to commit oneself to the common good; that is to say to the good of all and the good of each individual, because we are all responsible for all.”¹

The kind of being that we are makes the common good a necessity. We are not created to live a solitary life. Human flourishing is always communal and social. We are created to live in social unity. Indeed, we have been created to be members of a certain community. As *Gaudium et Spes*, puts it: “... by his innermost nature man is a social being; and if he does not enter into relations with others, he can neither live nor develop his gifts.”² The human person is a rational being, therefore, he sees the need for a well organised society (government) where his essential needs can be met. The thriving environment must be one in which the society is a common project to which everyone contributes. On a team your individual good and the good of the team are not really separable – or if you try to separate them the team will break down. A good illustration will be the situation in a small town. In that set up doing a favour for the hardware store owner may not simply be looking out for another,

¹ John Paul II: Encyclical Letter *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, #38.

² *Gaudium et Spes*, #12.

since it may be reciprocated and make your life easier the next time your refrigerator or bicycle breaks down. The phrase that Catholic Social Doctrine uses to express this relationship is “the common good.” A common good suggests that you and others are not simply isolated individuals pursuing isolated goals, but also that you and your neighbours are not simply cogs in a larger social collective. Rather, there is a shared good that belongs to everyone. What this means is that tied to the concept of the common good is the conviction that the welfare of society is the corporate responsibility of all its members in their rank and file – all share in their different capacities and competencies for the upkeep of the society. (Obodoechina, p.103)

The communitarian character of human existence means that the good of each person is bound up with the good of the community. Thus, the obligation of justice and love will only be fulfilled when each person contributes to the common good in accord with his or her abilities and in the light of the needs of others. The common good is a social reality in which all persons should share through their participation in it. And the common good is not achieved until all are able to share in and contribute to the social systems and conditions necessary for human fulfilment and human flourishing.

In Catholic Social Teachings (CST), social justice is understood in terms of participation. Since humans are called to live socially, each individual is responsible for promoting the conditions that will allow for the authentic development of all. This is why in the thinking of the Council Fathers, “Every group must take into account the needs and legitimate aspirations of other groups, and still more of the human family as a whole. (GS, #26). This implies that persons have an obligation to be active and productive participants in the life of

society and that society has a duty to enable them participate in this way. This is why the common good demands that society should provide a level playing field for all. The principle of participation is rooted or grounded in the created dignity of the human person, who is endowed with freedom and charged with self-determination, and in the obligation of a just community.

The principle of participation is important in achieving the common good because it empowers persons and even nations to have a voice in the decisions that affect them.

Back to the idea of the good of all and the good of each individual which John Paul II canvassed (or enunciated). The common good is not the same as Jeremy Bentham's utilitarian greatest good for the greatest number, because that is compatible with the exclusion of some persons from participation in it. According to John XXIII, participation of all in the common good is particularly important in a world characterised by a 'daily more complex interdependence of citizens.' (MM, 59).

Christian participation in the realisation of the common good

Recognising that the modern world presented Christianity with formidable new complexities, the Second Vatican Council committed the Church to a process that Pope John XXIII had called *aggiornamento*, literally updating. This also extends to our consideration of politics.

As far as the magisterium is concerned, there can be no doubt as to what Christians should do toward the achievement of the common good. The present-day Magisterium in various pronouncements unambiguously affirms that the church and individual Christians are

to be engaged in the work of transforming the world. Thus, in what is perhaps its most quoted passage, the 1971 Synod of Bishops on Justice in the world declared that:

Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world is a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the gospel, or in other words, of the Church's mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every form of oppressive situation.

This simply means that the Gospel is not preached if justice is not done and if Christians do not participate in building up a more just and loving society. And this is because the work for the liberation of man is not foreign to evangelisation.³ We should note that the expression “constitutive dimension” employed by the synod is an arresting term and not one that can be thrown around easily. This is because the Church's self-understanding is that she is mandated to act as leaven of society. Thus, as Catholics we are called to be “salt, light and leaven” in society. In fact, it has been well observed that “At three levels, Christianity has a mandate in the world. The first level is the injunction to be good Christians; to be salt and light in the world (Mt.5). *This is the essential reason why Christ left us in the world; to affect the world positively for good.* At the second Christianity has a responsibility to project the message of love, hope, joy and perseverance to a world of godless modernity circumscribed by drugs, crime and deadly materialism defined around money and the fast life. And lastly, exemplary Christianity must necessarily also speak through a life of professionally calling as a calling of duty and responsibility – in such a way that our professional calling can be not

³ Paul VI: Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #30.

only a means of livelihood but also as an exemplary lesson of how our well-being ought to become a source of blessing to others.”⁴ The point being made is that as Catholics we have a duty to take part in public life according to our God-given abilities. Catholics cannot simply withdraw from civic affairs. The reason is simple. The classic civic virtues named by Cicero – prudence, fortitude and temperance – can be renewed and elevated to the benefit of all citizens, by the Christian virtues of faith, hope and love. Therefore, political engagement is a worthy Christian task and public office is an honourable Christian vocation (Chaput and John Paul II in *Vademecum*)

From the very beginning the Christian faith has intimately affected social as well as personal conduct, and the main Christian tradition has always carried with it a massive body of social teaching.

The word “politics” may be ambiguous or off-putting, yet we cannot gloss over the importance of politics, because ultimately in the social and economic fields, both national and international, the ultimate decision rests with political power. Because politics is the arena where important decisions that impact the life of all are taken. It is therefore understandable that the Magisterium’s appreciation of politics run deep. Perhaps the Catholic Church’s most counter-cultural teaching is that politics is a good thing. In its best form, politics is nothing more – and nothing less – than making decisions about how we want to structure our communities. Figuring out how

⁴ Tunji Olaopa: “Spirituality and Good Governance in Nigeria Part 2, *The Guardian*, 16th October, 2017. (italics mine).

to live well together is one of the most fundamentally human things we can do.⁵

In modern times, we begin with John XXIII. He wrote: “Once again we deem it opportune to remind our children of their duty to take an active part in public life.” (*Pacem in terris?*). He practically affirmed that through active participation in public life one contributes towards the attainment of the common good of the entire human family, as well as to the individual’s own political community. In the wake of John’s encyclical, the Second Vatican Council, through its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes* said: “The Church regards as worthy of praise and consideration the work of those who, as service to others, dedicate themselves to the public good of the state and undertake the burden of this task.” (GS, #75). The same Constitution could not have been more emphatic when it said: “They are mistaken who, knowing that we have here no abiding city but seek one which is to come think that they may therefore shirk their earthly responsibilities. For they are forgetting that by their faith itself they are more obliged than ever to measure up to these duties each according to their proper vocation. Nor, on the contrary, are they any less wide off the mark who think that religion consists in acts of worship alone and in the discharge of certain moral obligations and who imagine they can plunge themselves into earthly affairs as to imply that these are altogether divorced from religious life. ... Therefore, let there be no pernicious opposition between professional and social activities on the one hand, and religious life on the other. Cryptic and to the point was John Paul II’s definition of politics. In his 1981 social encyclical *Laborem Exercens*, he defined

⁵ Cf. Michael Jordan Laskey: “A Good Catholic Meddles in Politics” *Church Life Journal*, 28th September, 2016.

politics as “a prudent concern for the common good.”⁶ Before him, Paul VI had also evinced that politics “is a demanding way – but not the only one – of living the Christian commitment to the service of others.”⁷ The Catechism of the Catholic Church also insists that “as far as possible citizens should take an active part in public life.” (CCC, #1915). In 1996, the Catholic Bishops of England and Wales published a statement where, among other things, spoke of politics in glowing terms and urged Catholics to go into politics. They exhorted:

We are especially grateful to Catholic citizens who join and play an active part in the political party of their choice, provided they take their Catholic principles, ... with them. We offer them every possible encouragement. (...). The fact that some politicians from time to time fall short of the highest standards is not ground for dismissing the whole class of politicians as unworthy of respect.

Besides, the US Bishops’ Conference averred that “volunteering time, talent and money to work for greater justice is a fundamental expression of Christian love and social solidarity.”⁸ Therefore, the church’s position regarding the participation of Catholics in politics is abundantly clear. Politics is the intelligent regulation of common life for the sake of the common good. This is why it is very important that we understand the principle of the common good.

⁶ John Paul II: Encyclical Letter *Laborem Exercens*, #20.

⁷ Paul VI: Apostolic Letter to Maurice Cardinal Roy on the Eightieth Anniversary of Rerum Novarum, *Octogesima Adveniens*, #46.

⁸ U.S Catholic Bishops’ Conference Pastoral Letter *Economic Justice For All*, #119.

Again, the bishops of England and Wales made some important observations that need to be quoted at some length. In their 2010 Statement, *Choosing the Common Good*, they wrote:

The common good is about how we live well together. It is the whole network of social conditions which enable human individuals and groups to flourish and live a full, genuinely human life. (...). The principle of the common good expands our understanding of who we are and opens up new sources of motivation. The fulfilment which the common good seeks to serve is the flourishing of humanity expressed in the phrase “integral human development.” Such development requires that people are rescued from every form of poverty, from hunger to illiteracy; it requires the opportunity for education. ... It calls for active participation in economic and political processes...

From the perspective of the above statement, that Catholics are expected to participate actively in politics. Voting in elections, for instance, is the minimum required, that is passive citizenship; participation in the full sense of the term needs much more than that and demands active citizenship.⁹ It is very clear therefore that active participation is a daunting exercise that is aimed at the promotion of the human person. And in fact, politics does exact great personal cost from those who engage in it and from their families.

Following from the above assertions we can intuit or surmise that politics is intimately linked to the great commandment of the Lord – love of neighbour. Thus, for those who engage in political activities

⁹ Dennis Chiles: *Christianity And Politics*, (London: CTS Publications, 1989), p.25 (italics mine)

it is a means to love one's neighbour. We know that all of Christian life is tied up with the exhortation "go and do likewise." This means that our being called to right belief (orthodoxy) and right living (orthopraxis) are inevitably linked to putting the care of neighbour at the centre of our lives. It follows that if it is intimately linked to the commandment of love, there can be no way a Christian will despise politics or set political involvement aside. As it is, there is no way a Christian can possibly follow Jesus without following him into politics and public policy. This is because "For Catholics – the pursuit of justice and the common good – is part of the history of salvation."¹⁰ (**Chaput:** Render, p.6). After all, the issues that drive public policy and politics include homelessness, poverty, immigration, wages, (un)employment, etc. Who better than the Christian who is mandated by the Lord to care for the needs of his neighbour should occupy him/herself with politics which is the pre-eminent forum where solutions to these issues are addressed? The implication is that not to be involved in the political pursuit to bring about a more just society would be a lack of love. Thus, the religious commitment of the Christian becomes the very foundation on which he or she grounds his/her political involvement.

Catholics participate in politics inasmuch as they are citizens who have a programme for the common good which, inspired by the SDC can (and should) find consensus among persons of good will (or right conscience) who do not share the Catholic faith. In fact, the great ethical themes such as human rights (beginning with the right to life and religious freedom), promotion of the family and bioethics are not

¹⁰ Charles J Chaput: Render Unto Caesar,

confessional, rather they are properly human according to a correct anthropology. These issues resonate even with people of no faith.

While all of us cannot engage in active politics, we are all called to a common commitment to ensure that political life serves the common good and the human person. This is why we must all ensure that we vote during elections. We are not all called to be members of the legislature or the local councils, but we are called to be citizens and as such to be conscientious in the performance of our duty to vote in the elections. This is why, according to Vatican II, “every citizen ought to be mindful of his/her right and his/her duty to promote the common good by using his vote” (GS, #75). The idea of politics is tied up with the common good because it is its *raison d’etre*. The common good, from what we have seen, calls for a better running of the public space so that all may benefit from an equitable sharing of the resources. This is why all must be concerned about electing those to whom the running the public space will be entrusted. Participating in elections is therefore both a duty and a responsibility. The faith does not call us to abandon the world but to help shape it by working for a just order. Therefore, in order to promote a just order in society no one can renounce participation in politics. Citizens cannot morally remove themselves from this serious commitment of promoting a just order in which the rights of all will be guaranteed. Refusal to pay attention to their duties in the political arena has serious consequences, for as was stated by the Council Father in *Gaudium et Spes*: “The Christian who neglects his temporal duties neglects his duties towards his neighbour, neglects God himself and endangers his eternal salvation.” (#43). The Christian involvement in public life is an important way to exercise responsible citizenship. Thus, the choice

of abstaining is morally not acceptable because it means abandoning the responsibility toward achieving the common good.

Seeing the importance of what is at stake, in the work of transformation of society, Catholics must be present today, even more than in the past. Christians are expected to vote with freedom, awareness and the coherence demanded by the faith. They are expected to vote with freedom because the act of voting is always and essentially a free act of the citizen that demonstrates the will of the people through civic channels. They are to vote with awareness because since this is their way of contributing toward the common good, before they exercise their franchise, they are expected to examine the candidates and their political parties and the extent to which their policies correspond to our fundamental vision of the dignity and worth of the human person. It should be very clear to all that when we exercise our right to vote, we determine to a large extent the wellbeing of society. Therefore, when voting, Christians are expected to do so with this question in mind: 'How can my vote best serve the common good?' This is because responsible citizenship means making choices, not simply voting the way my parents did. This is why when the Catholic goes into the voting booth, s/he shouldn't leave his or her faith outside. His or her identity as a Catholic should permeate every decision of his or her life, especially one of great importance like voting.

Citizenship is an exercise in moral judgement, not tribal or clan loyalty. Understandably, the right to vote carries with it a corresponding obligation to exercise that vote responsibly, and so to affirm political leadership as valued and necessary for the common good. Christians are expected to vote coherently because the exercise of freedom is inseparable from the duty to choose well. This is

because no political option is morally neutral. From this point of view, all Christians must be involved in politics with respect to the human, moral and Christian values that are supposed to mould society. This means shouldering the responsibility of political participation in a responsible manner.

But there are also those who take part in active politics, i.e., those who take upon themselves the task of contesting to gain power so as to govern society. This is where many Catholics have serious misgivings. It should be noted that church law forbids clerics and members of religious institutes from taking part in party politics. I dare suggest that the church's position here is a wise one. Public life is primarily the realm of laymen and women.

Admittedly, careerism, idolatry of power, egoism and corruption that have often been associated with certain politicians tend to lead many to see participation in public life as an absolute moral danger. That a number of politicians may have, by their conduct, contributed to a climate of distrust must not lead to a broad-brush painting of all politicians as corrupt. One of the unintended results of such an attitude could be the discouragement of those contemplating a political career. As Christians, we must recognise that politics and public life, like all other institutions, retain their God-given purposes to assist one's neighbour to live peaceably and justly in this world and to find eternal life. In other words, politics and other social institutions are less than perfect but they retain their original call to work for the common good understood as the good of all and the good of each person taken as a whole. Therefore, politics must be seen as the pursuit of power to advance the common good.

No true man or woman of good will can despise politics because that may amount to leaving the conduction of the *res publica* to forces that may care less for the common good. Besides, if these are Christians, they must feel challenged to bring the light of Christ into the sensitive arena of public policy. This gives him or her ample opportunity to manifest his or her Christian values in the public space. Ordinarily, being in public office must be seen as providing one with an opportunity to make impact on the lives of the people, because it is also about the power of ideas.

We cannot reasonably doubt that some of those who engage in politics exhibit traits that are less than noble and in fact, it is this that makes the political vocation come across as an immoral endeavour. But this, it must be said, is false because in itself politics cannot be immoral since it follows upon human nature which is ontologically social. {One must therefore feel concerned because politics....}. this is the reason why the Church does not tire of calling on the faithful to play an active role in politics. To dispel any doubts about how the church feels about participation in political activities, the position of the Bishops of England and Wales comes handy again. In their widely publicised Statement, *The Common Good and the Catholic Church's Social Teaching*, they said:

... Politics is an honourable vocation, which exacts great personal cost from those who engage in it, and from their families. ... An attitude of cynicism towards those engaged in public life is one of those tendencies against which we feel we must speak out. Not the least of its harmful consequences could be the discouragement of those contemplating a political career. It is the teaching of the church that all rightful authority comes from god, and therefore those who exercise legitimate

political authority are worthy of respect. It is not ignoble to want a successful political career, nor dishonourable for politicians to seek political power. #359

It is understandable that Vatican II urged that those with a talent for the difficult yet noble art of politics, or those whose talent in this matter could be developed, should prepare themselves for it, and, forgetting their own convenience and material interests, they should engage in political activity (GS, #75).

According to George Cardinal Pall, “Lay people are powerfully assisted in this work by the social teaching (doctrine) of the Church and the political ethics that it has developed over the century.”¹¹ But then, we must ask:

Social teachings, what are they?

This may sound provocative or irreverent, but we must admit that we do not have a Catholic ethos in Nigeria – and we have never created one. For many years the Church in Nigeria has raised a generation of Catholics who have avoided politics like a plague under the pretentious claim that politics is a dirty game. The nobility of politics was never addressed in our catechesis. A generation of ineffective catechesis has produced Catholic “politicians” who are nothing short of baptised pagans. This explains why there is no difference between Catholic politicians and the rest. Any wonder, then, that the few Catholics who venture into the political terrain go there with a “buffet mentality” where people are called to go and serve themselves?

¹¹ Pell, George: *God And Caesar: Selected Essays on Religion, Politics and Society* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press, 2007), p.26.

Let us turn to our hierarchy. Our bishops issued a communique at the end of their plenary meeting in 2001 and said, among other things, that “we commit ourselves to a nation-wide programme of education in the social teachings of the Church.” Again, in February 2002, they declared: “... in accord with the social teachings of the Church, we encourage Catholics to enter into the difficult world of politics. Through JDPC/ Committees and Catholic Social Forum (CSF), the Church will provide political education and formation both for candidates vying for office and the electorate. One imagines that this was because they were convinced about the importance of the social teachings and that it was something all Catholics ought to know about. To my knowledge, both declarations were observed in the breach. Until the emergence of the experience such as the one we are having now, it was clear to me that the Nigerian church had failed to realise that to a large extent, the impact of the Church in the public space will be determined by the capacity of Catholics to participate actively in “scrutinising the signs of the times and interpreting them in the light of the Gospel.”¹²

The Church’s vision of a just society, if assimilated and applied by Catholics in politics, has the capacity to transform our nation. And this is something that the universal Church demands of us. But as John Paul II asked in *Ecclesia in Africa*, “Has the Church in Africa (read Nigeria) sufficiently formed the lay faithful, enabling them to assume competently their civic responsibilities and to consider socio-political problems in the light of the Gospel and faith in God? And the great pontiff was convinced that “This is certainly a task belonging to Christians: to bring to bear upon the social fabric an

¹² *Gaudium et Spes*, #4.

influence aimed at changing not only our ways of thinking but also the very structures of society, so that they will better reflect God's plan for the human family."¹³ It is part of the mandate of our higher churchmen to see to it that the flock entrusted to their care is well grounded and also interested in the running of the secular space. Every adult Catholic has the responsibility to devote some attention to politics and government. As followers of Christ and citizens of a democratic regime, we bear responsibility for justice and the common good. We need to recall here that our politics is an interpretation of *who we are, what we are* and *the things or values we stand for*. Hence, it is expected of the Christian that he or she will shed the light of the Gospel on politics. This is why it is a given that a distinctively Catholic political voice will be defined by its strong moral commitments.

There can be no doubt that the Nigerian church has failed woefully to harness the enormous spiritual, ethical and intellectual resources entrenched in the Catholic Social teachings. Simply, she has not inculcated in the faithful those noble values that will elevate politics and make political activity attractive. This is why she has not encouraged her children to go into politics and thus transform politics from within. There can be no doubt that there is an urgent need for conscientisation. John Paul II wished that "Christians must be formed to live the social implications of the Gospel in such a way that their witness will become a prophetic challenge to whatever hinders the true good of the men and women of our time."

What are the signs that show that the Catholic church in Nigeria has not measured up to expectation in this field? A few examples will do

¹³ John Paul II: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, #54

here. In response to the exhortation of *Ecclesia in Africa*, a number of Catholic universities have been established. The Nigerian hierarchy has established the Veritas University, Abuja; and together with this a number of other universities that boast of having some affiliation to the Catholic church litter the country. In the light of what both *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus* say about such universities and the importance of having the social teachings of the church disseminated, it will be interesting to see how many of these universities offer CST in their curriculum. This would be the case also in many of our seminaries. Of course, it goes beyond having the course in our seminary curriculum. The question is: of those teaching it how many effectively qualified in this field? Remember the famous Latin *nemo dat quod non habet*. I am also aware that there are bishops who would have their priests study anything but Catholic social teachings.

At this point, I like to propose an interesting experiment in a number of our parishes on a typical Sunday. With the permission of the parish priest, ask the congregation whether they have been presented with the riches of the social doctrine of the church? And you are most likely to get for an answer an affirmation such as: “we have never been told that there was anything like a social doctrine” (Acts 19:2). No doubt, many of you must have heard about “Our Best Kept Secrets.” Prod them on and you are likely to hear; “Sir, give us this water (social doctrine) so that we would not thirst again” (John 4:15). And the thing is, for us here in Nigeria, we cannot possibly argue that Nigeria’s public space is informed by the spirit of the Gospel. This is also why as Christians, we must be actively involved in the public space.

What is the way out of this quagmire?

After some twenty-five years of another attempt at democratic rule, the Nigerian state is still groping and wobbling on all fours. No doubt, the broken state of the nation is in part due to the absence or refusal of good people to take part in politics. We must remember that the price paid by the wise for refusing to take part in politics is to be ruled by the unwise. These are certainly not the best of times for our country. The uncertainty about the future of Nigeria is certainly due to the fact that the political terrain is peopled by individuals who privilege their personal good over the common good. Nigeria is clearly on the road to being a failed state today and the temptation, for many, is to throw up their hands in desperation. But the question is: Can Christians who are men and women of hope succumb to this state of despair? Surely, not you who belong to the category of those that Fr Obodoechina calls *the people of value* and *men and women of light*. Giving in to despair is not an option, also because a new Nigeria is possible.

The evils that have come to characterise our polity, such as the monetisation of politics, violent behaviour of politicians, etc are an indication of a political class that has lost sight of the common good. And so, one can say with the Psalmist:

*... their deeds are corrupt, depraved,
Not a good man is left.
No, not even one.* (Psalm 52:1&3).

This situation has made the re-appropriation of the common good an urgent necessity. This is where the active participation of well-formed Catholics in politics becomes imperative. The attempt towards nation building to which we should all be involved cannot be

achieved (or come about) through prayer and exhortation alone. This has to be followed by concrete action as is being suggested by the Catholic Social Forum. A very important fact that cannot be overlooked is that the transformation – be it socio-political, economic or cultural – of Nigeria must begin with the personal transformation of its citizens. This is because the aggregate well-being of a society depends on the collective efforts of its members.

There can be no doubt that there is a lot to be done. Fr Obodoechina in his seminal work of the same title as our colloquium has put before us great intuitions that need our attention. At the heart of our discourse is the welfare of our society which he sees as the corporate responsibility of all its members in their rank and file – all share in their different capacities and competencies for the upkeep of the society. Our interdependence and even survival as a country call for a re-awakening of interest in the common good. Because every member of our society is a major stakeholder in the life and activities of the society. The degree of our responsibility may not be the same but we are each part and parcel of the entire system.¹⁴ Each person, then, has the responsibility to use his or her gifts for the betterment of society and to participate in creating a more just community.¹⁵

Nigeria is certainly not in good shape. Many of Nigeria's problems are the result of a manner of governing often driven by corruption. Nigerians are hurting. It has to be said that in recent years, in more ways than one, the various political leaders have shown that their agenda are not for the common good. Unfortunately, when that

¹⁴ Paul VI: Encyclical Letter *Populorum Progressio*, #17.

¹⁵ J. Milburn Thompson: *Justice & Peace: A Christian Primer*, (New York, Maryknoll Orbis Books, 1997), p191.

happens government loses its *raison d'être*. Nothing shows this more poignantly than the fact that every Nigerian becomes a local government by providing himself with the basic necessities of life like energy for which today, apart from being the poverty capital of the world, Nigeria is also the *generator* capital of the world. The Nigerian is also expected to sink his own borehole for water and also provide his own security. Poverty in what should have been a land of plenty is a symptom of things gone wrong. Ours is a litany of woes. Nigeria's democracy is at the verge of collapse, and the nation risks collapsing with it. There is a loss of confidence in the electoral system of the country. When one looks at the socio-political situation in Nigeria, there is a general agreement with the phrase "things cannot go on like this." The nation needs re-fixing or transformation and this must start with a return to the idea of the common good. And the Church believes that with her social doctrine she has something to offer in the attempt to fashion out a more humane and just society for the benefit of God's children. A necessary step in this all-important endeavour will be a recommitment on the part of the Church's hierarchy to see to the dissemination of the riches of the Church's Social Teachings to all nooks and crannies of the land. Secondly, committed Catholics formed in the moral teachings of the church have to put themselves forward for elective office in the service of the people. And I hear the Lord saying: "who shall I send?" This is where I see our presence here today as a breath of fresh air and indeed a ground-breaking endeavour. For who better than the agents of the church's prophetic message can come up with the soothing balm of Christ's gospel to heal the fractured and cracked walls of our nation? And I think I can hear you all saying: "here I am Lord, send me." Thanks for your patience. I rest my case.