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THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND FOOTBALL IN NIGERIA, TODAY AND TOMORROW: A SOCIO-THEOLOGICAL ASSESSMENT

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Abstract

With a popularity that cuts across tribe, class, religion, culture, sex, physical constitution, and politics, football has become almost a Nigerian game. Apart from the government, many individuals, religious bodies and organizations played significant part towards its attaining such a status. One of such religious bodies is the Roman Catholic Church. In the past, this was mainly through its mission schools which produced many notable footballers, coaches, and administrators. This article, however, examines the nature of her involvement with football, today, and, then suggests ways of ensuring a much more engagement in the future so as to enhance not only the development of football in the country, but, also, the Church's overall work of evangelization.

Key words: Roman Catholic Church, Football, Today, Tomorrow, Socio-theological, Assessment.

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Introduction

Apart from the government, many individuals, religious bodies and organizations in Nigeria are, today, one way or the other, involved with football,² the most popular game in the country. The Roman Catholic Church which was officially established in the country in the 19th century, and currently boasts of a population of over 20 million,³ is one of such bodies. In the past, its involvement with football was, among others, through its mission schools.⁴ But secularization, no matter how little, has been pointed out as having often modified differently the age-long relationship existing between religion and sport.⁵ By adopting a socio-theological approach, the paper examines the nature of the Roman Catholic Church's involvement with football in Nigeria, today, the theology underlying such involvement, and then makes recommendations around how it could become much more involved with football in such a way that it enhances not only its work of evangelization, but also, the overall development of the game in the country. But before looking at the nature of its involvement, it is expedient to first of

² Correy L. Williams, "Religion and Sport in Multireligious Nigeria: The Case of Kaduna City Interfaith Football Club," in *Global Perspectives on Sports and Christianity*, ed. Afe Adogame, et al (New York: Routledge, 2018), 114-128.

³ Adolphus Ekedimma Amaefule, "The Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria and Liturgical Inculturation in Chimamanda Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*," *Ecclesiology* 17(2021): 72-90, 73.

⁴ Cf. Adolphus Ekedimma Amaefule, "The Role of Mission Schools in the Development of Football in Nigeria, 1904–1994," *Church History and Religious Culture* 103 (2023): 84–104.

⁵ Cf. Michał Mazurkiewicz, "If God Be for Us, Who Can Be Against Us?": Religion and Religiousness in Polish Football, 2008–2017," *The International Journal of the History of Sport*, 35.1(2018), 108-121,109.

all consider the theology and principles that underlie such an involvement by the Catholic Church.

Understanding the Theology Underlying the Nigerian Roman Catholic Church's Involvement with Football

Not oblivious of contextual realities, the theology and principles underlying the involvement of the Catholic Church in Nigeria with football - just as it does with many other sports and games - may not be so different from the ones behind the Roman Catholic Church's involvement in and with football anywhere else in the world. To start with, there is a general belief in the Latin maxim, *mens sana in corpore sano*, a healthy mind in a healthy body. This, according to Alegi, is the Catholic Church's rendition of muscular Christianity.⁶ This way, the Catholic Church acknowledges that sports, which it sees as a gift of God,⁷ should ensure the all-round development of the whole human person, made up of body, soul and spirit.

The aforementioned position of the Church, however, is but the outcome of her positive evaluation of the human body that has been elevated by the ontological goodness of creation (Gen.1), the incarnation (Jn 1:14) and resurrection of Jesus, the Son of God. The logic here is simple: If the flesh, or better, the human body, was bad, God would not have proclaimed it good; if the flesh was not good, Jesus would not have taken it. This position

⁶ Peter Alegi, *African Soccerscapes: How a Continent Changed the World's Game* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2010), 4.

⁷ John Paul II, *Homily for Jubilee of Sports People*, October 29, 2000. https://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/homilies/2000/documents/hf_jp-ii_hom_20001029_jubilee-sport.html.

which has admittedly had its low moments in the long history of the church, especially in the early Church and medieval period,⁸ runs contrary to the Gnostic understanding of the human body as evil and thus something to be hated. At the same time, however, the Church frowns at any idolization of the same human body.⁹

Again, in his book, *Anatomy of Abuses* (1583), Philip Stubbs had noted that, “Football-playing [...] withdraweth us from godliness.”¹⁰ And much recently, a Nigerian evangelist, A.F. Funmilayo, wrote a book in which she described football as the game of the anti-Christ. According to her, “Football is not a concept from God; it is the vision of the Devil.”¹¹ The Catholic Church, however, takes a different view. It believes that football, like any other sports, is and can become a means of sanctification and encounter with God.¹² This is against the backdrop of the Church’s belief that God could be found in all things, and that, what is required to encounter God thereof are eyes that see. Hence, the prayer of the blind Bartimaeus, “Lord, that I may see” (Mk.10:51), may be regarded as the motto, here. All these are possible because the Catholic Church possesses a worldview that

⁸ Patrick Kelly, “Catholics and Sport: An Historical and Theological Overview and Contemporary Implications,” <http://www.laici.va/content/dam/laici/documenti/sport/eng/pdf>, 1-14.

⁹ Catholic Church, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1994), 2289; Richard R. Gaillardetz, “For the Love of the Game: Toward a Theology of Sports,” in *Youth, Sport and Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Patrick Kelly (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015). <https://books.google.com.ng/>.

¹⁰ Cited in Terry Deary, *The Peasants' Revolting Lives* (Barnsley, South Yorkshire: Pen and Sword Books, 2020), 127.

¹¹ A.F. Funmilayo, *The Game of the Anti-Christ: Exposing the Secret Behind Football* (np. 2019), 27.

¹² Gaillardetz, “Love”.

is wired sacramentally in which created visible realities are believed to manifest or communicate the glory of the invisible God.¹³

Moreover, the Church believes that football is and could be a vital instrument in the education of the youths in such values as honesty, solidarity and fraternity¹⁴, love, self-sacrifice for the common good, mutual respect, even for one's adversaries, and the overcoming of the logic of selfishness and individualism.¹⁵ Where, for reasons, among others, of winning at all costs and maximization of economic interests, these pedagogical and intrinsic values of sports are lost track of as happens often in highly competitive sports, the Church's interest in sports in general and football in particular becomes, then, one of redemption and restoration of such lost ethos.¹⁶

But over and above all these, the Church considers the world of sports, including in a special way, football, as "one of the

¹³ Cf. Adolphus Ekedimma Amaefule, "Football as an Instrument of Evangelisation: Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus* and the Church in Africa", *Practical Theology*, DOI: 10.1080/1756073X.2023.2175129

¹⁴ Benedict XVI, Cited in "And Practising Sport," *Times of Malta*, January 27, 2008. <https://timesofmalta.com/articles/view/and-practising-sport.193669>

¹⁵ Benedict XVI, *Message for the Opening of the European Football Championship 2012* (Vatican, June 6, 2012).https://www.vatican.va/content/benedictxvi/en/messages/pontmessages/2012/documents/hf_ben_xvi_mes_20120606_europei_2012.html

¹⁶ Stanislaw Rylko, "Preface," in *Sport: An Educational and Pastoral Challenge, Seminar of Study on the Theme of Sport Chaplains*, The Pontifical Council for the Laity (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2008), 5-11, 5-6.

frontiers of the New Evangelization,”¹⁷ a “modern Courtyard of the Gentiles and an Areopagus,”¹⁸ that offers huge opportunities for the preaching of the Gospel.¹⁹ Hence, the need for her to be involved thereof.

The Nature of the Roman Catholic Church’s Involvement with Football in Nigeria, Today

Right from the time of the early missionaries in the country, the Roman Catholic Church has considered the school as an important instrument of evangelization.²⁰ It is little wonder, therefore, that today it owns many schools, colleges and even universities. As she did in the past, she has continued, in and through these same institutions, to promote sports in general and football in particular. In her secondary schools, for instance, there is often the annual inter-house sports competitions during which students participate in many sporting activities, notably football. Prizes are often given to the football players and the most

¹⁷ “Vatican Creates New Section ‘Church and Sports’ on the Occasion of Olympic Games,” *Catholic News Agency*, Vatican City, August 2, 2004. <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/1662/vatican-creates-new-section-church-and-sports-on-the-occasion-of-olympic-games>.

¹⁸ Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving the Best of Yourself: The Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person*, June 1, 2018. <https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2018/06/01/180601b.html>, 1.1.

¹⁹ Francis, *Letter to the Prefect of the Dicastery for the Laity, Family and Life to Mark the Publication of the New Document of the Dicastery, ‘Giving the Best of Yourself: The Christian Perspective on Sport and the Human Person’* (Vatican City, June 1, 2018), <https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/letters>.

²⁰ Cf. Nicholas Ibeawuchi Omenka, *The School in the Service of Evangelization: The Catholic Educational Impact in Eastern Nigerian, 1886-1950* (Leiden: Brill, 1989).

valuable among them often receive the best of the gifts, even, in some cases, scholarships. Sometimes, football matches are organized among Catholic schools in a particular diocese, province, or even, state. For instance, the Catholic Diocese of Makurdi, Benue State, is known for holding the All-Catholic Secondary School Games, in which, among other sports, football (both for boys and girls), features prominently.²¹ At the same time, these Catholic schools do not fail to take part in football competitions organized by the government and/or private establishments where they are located.²²

The same promotion of football also obtains in contemporary Catholic seminaries and formation houses in Nigeria, as was the case in the past.²³ Therein, not only are sports, especially, football, observed almost daily in the evenings, there is also the inter-Hostel/inter-House sports competitions that often take place, with football featuring prominently. These competitions are, among others, the breeding grounds for selecting those that would represent a particular major seminary, for instance, at the All-Nigerian Major Seminaries' Games (ANMSG).²⁴ What

²¹ "All Catholic Secondary School Games, Makurdi Diocese, Nyiman 2020," *Universal Reporters*, February 19, 2020. <https://web.facebook.com>.

²² Cf. "Holy Ghost College Owerri Emerges Champion of Kaodili Cares/NDDC Championship," *Imo Trumpeta*, November 6, 2017. <http://www.imotrupeta>.

²³ Cf. Angelo Chidi Unegbu, *The Institution of the Seminary and the Training of Catholic Priests in South-Eastern Nigeria (1885–1970): A Historical Evaluation* (Zurich, 2018), 230; Steve Omojafor, *Archbishop Olubunmi Okogie: Devil or Saint?* (Lagos: STB & Associates, 1992), 20.

²⁴ Cf. Saints Peter & Paul Major Seminary, Bodija, "Inter Semester Games Fiesta," Wednesday, April 7, 2021, <https://ssppseminaryibadan.org/newsdetail.php?tab=206>

obtains in these major seminaries, also holds true in the minor seminaries scattered all over the country. The story is the same among male religious houses of formation in the country. This writer remembers with nostalgia a tradition in the Archdiocese of Ibadan, Oyo State, where all the male religious societies and orders organized annual football competitions. This is the same in the other dioceses in the country that have the presence of two or more male religious orders. Of course, this is apart from the time given to sports, especially, football, in the respective community activities of these same religious houses of formation.

This love for football inculcated into the aforementioned seminarians and religious in these initial stages of formation is usually taken by them into the ministry for those who make it to the priesthood, or, into the “world”, for those who do not. For instance, priests who are involved in school apostolate or seminary formation soon transmit such passion for football to their students or seminarians, as the case may be. The story is the same even for those who work in the parishes and chaplaincies. Often times, priests from one deanery or even diocese engage in football competitions or novelty matches with priests from the other.²⁵ In the parishes, men, women and youths, under the aegis of the Catholic Men Organizations (CMO), Catholic Women Organization (CWO) and Catholic Youth organization of Nigeria (CYON), engage in football, as well as in other sports competitions. This is usually during their respective annual

²⁵ Cf. Joe Chukindi, “Catholic Priest Slumps, Dies During Football Match with Colleagues,” *Daily Trust*, December 5, 2019. <https://dailypost.ng/2019/12/05/catholic-priest-slumps-dies-during-football-match-with-colleagues/>

Talent Week. Prizes are often given to winners and participants. Sometimes, the Catholic men, women or youths of one parish, deanery, diocese, or province engage in football matches with those from other areas. Even, reverend sisters are often not left out. The National Conference of Women Religious (NCWR), made up of Religious Congregations of women in the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria, often organize football matches between nuns/sisters working in one diocese or province and those from the others. This is especially during their own annual Week.

Furthermore, some dioceses and priests in Nigeria have taken their particular support for football to a comparatively higher level. For instance, the Catholic Diocese of Awka, Anambra State, through its sports department, Directorate of Sports Awka Diocese (DOSAD), runs a football academy, the DOSAD Football Academy. It started in 2016 and trains Under-10, 13, 15 and 17 footballers in both the male and female categories to professional levels. The academy is also open to members of other churches and people of other faiths.²⁶ It is headed by Father Obinna Dike, allegedly the first Nigerian Catholic priest to graduate from the National Institute for Sports, and thus becoming a certified football coach.²⁷ In 2017, Father Dike who is also a referee and sports journalist, founded the Anambra

²⁶ “Catholic Diocese of Awka Floats Football Academy, First in Nigeria,” *The News*, April 23, 2016. <https://thenewsnigeria.com.ng/2016/04/23/catholic-diocese-awka-floats-football-academy-first-in-nigeria/>.

²⁷ Simbiat Ayoola, “Meet Handsome Nigerian Catholic Priest who is a Football Coach,” *Legit*, October 20, 2017. <https://www.legit.ng/1131307-meet-handsome-nigerian-catholic-priest-a-football-coach-photos.html>.

Independent Football League (AIFL), made up of amateur football clubs in Anambra State. While Father Ejike Mbaka, a priest of Enugu Diocese and the Spiritual Director of the Adoration Ministry, Enugu, recently founded the Adoration Football Club which currently plays in the Nigerian National League (NNL)²⁸, Father Andrew Eze of the Nsukka Diocese not only referees in the Nigerian Professional Football League (NPFL)²⁹, he is also the current Chairman of the Enugu State Referees Council.³⁰ There are, of course, many others that space may not permit their mention, here.

Similarly, many of the professional footballers and coaches in and from Nigeria are Catholics. They take their faith as well unto the football pitch. This is especially true, for instance, of Ikechukwu Ezenwa, one of the former goal keepers of the country's national football team, the Super Eagles. He is well known for frequently making the sign of the cross on the field and brandishing his rosary beads after wins. This is in addition to his leading the Super Eagles' players in prayers before and after matches. Recently, he had confessed of his initial desire to be a

²⁸ "Outspoken Catholic Priest Mbaka Forms Football Club," *Premium Times*, March 9, 2022, <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/regional/ssouth-east/516236-outspoken-catholic-priest-mbaka-forms-football-club.html>

²⁹ Toby Prince Udo, "Meet the Reverend Father who Doubles as Referee in the Nigerian Premier League," *Qed.ng*, July 1, 2015, <https://www.qed.ng/meet-the-reverend-father-who-doubles-referee-in-the-nigerian-premier-league/>.

³⁰ Cf. "NFF Celebrates Former FIFA Referee, Technical Adviser, Linus Mba at 81," *The Whistle*, (January-March 2022), 29.

Catholic priest, but for his football career.³¹ His show of religiosity and those of similar others attest to the observation of Onwumechili and co. that African Christians who play football embed religion also in the game, and show this through religious demonstrations which though occur elsewhere, are, however, pervasive in African football.³² Similarly, among other Super Falcons' players, Perpetua Nkwocha, four-time CAF African women footballer of the year, is also a Catholic. Some time ago, she equally confessed of how she would have become a reverend sister but for her love for football.³³ Although she and other male and female national players who are Catholics never exhibited their Catholicism as much as Ezenwa did on the field of play, their individual involvement in the game has undeniably had a hand as well in its growth and development in the country.

Again, Catholic players and coaches often go to their priests for prayers, sacramental preparation and spiritual direction. This is often before and after major games. Thanks to Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs), distance is no longer a barrier to this. Often, priests are called on phone by some of these players to be prayed for and to be remembered at Mass. Even, non-Catholics are known to have visited many Catholic priests for prayers. Many of the players and coaches equally go for thanksgiving services in parishes and chaplaincies after

³¹ Mohammed Saliu, "Why I didn't Become a Catholic Priest – Ezenwa," *Brilla*, May 30, 2019. <https://www.brilla.net>.

³² Chuka Onwumechili, et al. "Nigeria," in *The Palgrave International Handbook of Football and Politics*, ed. J.M. DeWaele, et al (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 403-422, 409.

³³ "Nkwocha: 'Football Stopped Me from Being a Reverend Sister'," *Complete Sports*, May 10, 2015, <https://www.completesports.com>.

successful outings. Even when they do not win, some have gone to their priests for consolation and encouragement. All these, one way or the other, have helped to improve their overall performance.

Also, during matches, the fans of both the national and local teams, many of whom are equally Catholics, often sing some Catholic songs. This, of course, does not prevent them from singing songs of other Christian Churches. These Catholic songs are done not only by Christians, but also by non-Christians, especially, Muslims. The opposite also holds: Christians often join Muslims in singing Muslim songs as well during these matches.³⁴ And by singing these Catholic Christian songs during matches, the fans wish, on the one hand to praise God, and on the other, to – using the Nigerian Pidgin English – “ginger the swagger” of the players, to motivate them.³⁵

Furthermore, Catholic priests in Nigeria as elsewhere, preach. In their homilies, they say something about football or rather football matches to animate such homilies or to help bring their points clearer home. Often, by the way these matches are commented upon, the interest and curiosity of the audience are roused. There is also the fact that some Catholic scholars, in their various disciplines and from different perspectives, have also written - no matter how small - on and about the game of

³⁴ Ade Ojeikere, “Shame at ‘The Cathedral’ in Enugu,” *The Nation*, September 18, 2021, <https://thenationonlineng.net>.

³⁵ Chiweshe Manase Kudzai, *The People's Game: Football Fandom in Zimbabwe* (Bamenda: Langaa Research and Publishing, 2017), 19.

football.³⁶ Through such writings, the love that people have for an already-loved game has increased. Even Nigerian creative writers who are Catholics, or better, grew up Catholics, are also not left out. They have also incorporated football scenes in their works in ways that make for an overall appreciation of the game.³⁷ Neither has the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), the hierarchy of the Catholic Church in Nigeria, been found missing in action. Following the exploits of the national football teams, they have always, in their communiques, congratulated the teams and urged that positive lessons be drawn thereof both by the government and the average Nigerian.³⁸

Equally, facilities in the Church's seminaries have often been made use of by the government in the training of the national teams. This is with particular reference to the Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu. One of its three standard football pitches was chosen by the Federal Ministry of Sports in 1999 as one of the training fields for the FIFA Junior World Cup tournament,

³⁶Cf Nnamdi Mbefo. "The Gospel Aspect of Sports: Nigeria at Riyadh," in *Coping with Nigeria's Two-Fold Heritage* (Onitsha: Spiritan Publications, 1996), 140-143; Anthony Akinwale, "Football Food for Thought," *The Guardian*, February 10, 2022. <https://guardian.ng/opinion/football-food-for-thought/>

³⁷Cf. Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie, *Purple Hibiscus* (Lagos: Farafina, 2004), 178-179.

³⁸ Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), "Rays of Hope: Communique after Second Plenary Meeting, Benin City, 10-13 September, 1996," in *Voice of the Voiceless: Pastoral Letters and Communiqués of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria 1960-2002*, ed. Peter Schineller (Ibadan: Daily Graphics, 2002), 329-333, 329; Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), "Communique: Faith and the Dignity of the Human Person", Lugbe, Abuja, 16-22 February, 2013. <https://www.cbcn-ng.org/docs/g12.pdf>.

otherwise, Nigeria '99. Today, the field remains one of the best maintained in the country.³⁹ This is not different from the way many parishes have, on many occasions, allowed their premises to be used by teams and individual sportsmen and women in training.⁴⁰

Towards a Greater Involvement of the Nigerian Roman Catholic Church with Football in the Country

It has been pointed out that the future of football is bright in Nigeria⁴¹, even as it is granted that such brightness is dependent on many variables.⁴² Under this section, my interest, - based on what has been said in the foregoing - is to point out the things, I believe, the Church could still do as far as its involvement with football is concerned in such a way that it enhances not only its work of evangelization, but also, the overall development of football in the country.

³⁹ <https://www.bigardenugu.org/sports-facilities.html>

⁴⁰ Cf. Tunde Eludini, "Interview: It's time for Nigeria to Produce Another African Footballer of the Year — Ezenwa," *Premium Times*, September 5, 2020. <https://www.premiumtimesng.com/sports/football/412515-interview-its-time-for-nigeria-to-produce-another-african-footballer-of-the-year-ezenwa.html>

⁴¹ Cf. Ifreke Inyang, "Nigeria's Future in Football is Bright – FIFA President, Infantino" *Daily Post*, July 27, 2016, <https://dailypost.ng/2016/07/27/nigerias-future-football-bright-fifa-president-infantino/>

⁴² Paul Darby, "Towards Global Football Citizenship?" in *The Cambridge Companion to Football*, ed. Rob Steen, et al (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 102-114, 113; Inyang, "Nigeria's Future in Football is Bright."

Consolidation of a Football Culture in its Mission Schools

In the many schools and colleges owned by the church, it should help consolidate and entrench all the more a culture of football in particular and sports in general. Special attention should be paid to students, both boys and girls, who show footballing skills. Even, scholarships could be given to them to encourage them, as it was done in the past. Adequate sports facilities should be put in place, just as qualified Physical Education teachers should be employed thereof, in this case, starting right from the kindergarten/primary schools, to help hone the skills of the pupils and students in football as well as in the other sports. The importance of this could be seen in the fact that the successes registered in the past in most Catholic mission schools were attributable to the presence of competent Games masters/mistresses and, of course, head teachers who were in love with the game. Head teachers in Catholic schools in the country should help convince parents of their students of the significance of whatever time that is allotted in the curriculum to football and other sports. It is reported that when Rev James Luke wanted to introduce football into the school timetable at Hope Waddell Institute, Calabar, in 1902, many parents of the students had protested, seeing such as a waste of time. But Rev. Luke had defended his inclusion of football in the school timetable as means of developing self-discipline, cooperation and good health.⁴³ Today, the rest is history. Again, Seevdra has pointed out that women's football in many African countries, or even, their participation thereof, is often met with skepticism, neglect

⁴³ William H. Taylor, *Mission to Educate: A History of the Educational Work of the Scottish Presbyterian Mission in East Nigeria 1846-1960* (Leiden: E.J. Brill, 1996), 110.

and sometimes, outright hostility, since football is deemed, as it were, a man's game.⁴⁴ Despite whatever gains that women's football may have made in Nigeria, it cannot be denied outright that such sentiments as these may still exist in some quarters. Hence, the aforementioned conviction of parents to allow their kids and wards to participate in soccer would be much more needed in the case of girls, especially, those of them who show interest in playing the game.

Creation of a Church Department of Football and Sports:

The Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria(CSN), the administrative headquarters of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), has, at present, five departments: Church and Society; Directorate of Social Communications; Mission and Dialogue; Pastoral Affairs, and Pastoral Agents.⁴⁵ The paper suggests that it could create yet another one, Department of Football and Sports, or, simply, Department of Sports, with football featuring prominently. Or, where, this is not immediately possible, it could look towards its present Department of Church and Society. The latter has currently five units: Family and Human Life; Education; Health; Justice, Development and Peace/Caritas (JDP/Caritas Nigeria) and then, Migrants and Nomads. It could add another unit to it, Football and Sports. In so doing, it would be following in the footsteps of John Paul II. In 2004, he created a new section, "Church and Sports", within the Pontifical Council for Laity, to, among others, "be a point of reference in the Church

⁴⁴Martha Saavedra, "Football Feminine - Development of the African Game: Senegal, Nigeria and South Africa," *Soccer & Society* 4.3-3(2003): 225-253, 225.

⁴⁵ <https://www.cbcn-ng.org/departments.php>.

for national and international sports organizations”, and to help “foster a sports culture, as a means of bringing about the holistic growth of the person at the service of peace and brotherhood between peoples.”⁴⁶

This proposed unit should be specifically empowered by the bishops to get much more involved in issues of football in particular, and sports in general, than the Church is currently doing. Among others, it should see to the formation of Catholic Professional Footballers’ Association of Nigeria (CAPFAN), which will be made up of Catholics, both male and female, who have played professional football in the past, or, are currently doing so, anywhere in the world. As obtains, for instance, in the case of the Association of Catholic Medical Practitioners of Nigeria (ACMPN), etc., a national chaplain could be appointed for the group. Again, the department should see to the building of more diocesan football academies and then even the possibility of floating a football club on behalf of the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria. Inspiration for the latter could come, among others, from some other Christian churches in Nigeria that have football clubs playing in the domestic league,⁴⁷ or, even, from the recent establishment, as pointed out above, of Adoration Football Club by Father Mbaka. Again, it should not be forgotten that

⁴⁶ https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/; “Vatican Creates”.

⁴⁷ For example, there is the Mountain of Fire and Miracles Ministries which currently has a football team, Mountain of Fire and Miracles Football Club (2007); The City of David Parish of the Redeemed Christian Church, Lagos owns The City of David Football Club (2007); The Light Football Club (2021) is owned by the Church of Christ in Nations (COCIN), Jos, and the Seat of God Football Club (2021), is owned by the Seat of God Ministry, Kaduna.

many of the football clubs making waves, today, in Europe, especially, in the Premier League, were actually founded by Christian churches and groups, even if it is accepted that secularization has taken its effect on them.⁴⁸

Again, a good number of current and retired Nigerian professional footballers at home and in the diaspora, like many others, elsewhere in Africa, often dropped out of high school or university in order to pursue their football career. Catholic professional footballers are also included. The proposed unit should see to it that the Roman Catholic church in Nigeria, through its own University, the Veritas University, Abuja (VUNA), or the other universities in Nigeria that run on Catholic principles⁴⁹, can help these catholic professional footballers, and, indeed, others, by floating a remedial programme that can help them finish their high school, and go even for a degree. This, they can do in two ways: Either by helping them to combine their football careers with their studies, or starting off their studies once they are done with the former since football career is temporary. The necessity of this is hinged on two realities. One, the fact that education helps the footballer to discover and develop him/herself. Two, the fact that acquiring, for instance, a

⁴⁸ For instance, football clubs like Aston Villa (1874), Everton (1878) and Liverpool (1892), were founded by the Methodist Church, while Fulham (1879), Manchester City (1880) and Tottenham Hotspur (1882) football clubs, were founded by the Anglican church. Elsewhere in Scotland, Celtic Football Club (1887) was founded by the Catholic Church.

⁴⁹ Cf. Madonna University, Okija; Tansian University, Umuoya; Caritas University, Enugu; Augustine University, Lagos; Godfrey Okoye University, Enugu; Dominican University, Ibadan; Claretian University of Nigeria, Nekede; Spiritan University, Nneochi.

degree - while not the only criterion for making it in life - helps, however, a particular footballer to a large extent to have something to bank on after retirement.⁵⁰ For instance, Onwumechili notes how it was the academic training of such Nigerian footballers as Patrick Ekeji, Adokiye Amaesiemaka, Segun Odegbami, and Taiwo Ogunjobi, that helped to improve their social status after their playing careers/retirement.⁵¹

Organization of More Inter-Denominational and Inter-Faith Football Matches:

The Nigerian Roman Catholic Church should organize more football matches between it and other Christian denominations in Nigeria. This could be handled as well by the proposed Department/Unit of Football and Sports. This would help a lot in ecumenism. This is against the backdrop of unnecessary denominationalism at the heart of Christianity in Nigeria today, despite the gains recorded by the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN).⁵² In these inter-denominational matches, the Orwellian understanding of serious sports as something “bound up with hatred, jealousy, boastfulness, disregard of all rules and sadistic

⁵⁰ “Ogunjobi Urges Oshoala to Return to School,” *Complete Sports*, January 19, 2015. <https://www.completesports.com>; Ben Church, “Giorgio Chiellini: ‘Just Being Able to Play Football is Not Enough,’ Says Juve Star,” *CNN*, October 17, 2018. <https://edition.cnn.com/>.

⁵¹ Chuka Onwumechili, “Migration of Nigerian Footballers: ‘Oh Lord, you are the Lord who remembered John Obi Mikel, Cristiano Ronaldo, and Ronaldinho – remember us as you remembered them.’” *Sports Africa*, May 5, 2021, <http://social.sportsafrica.org/>

⁵² Adolphus Ekedimma Amaefule, “Ecumenism of Blood and Christian Churches in Contemporary Nigeria,” *International Bulletin of Mission Research* 46.4 (2022): 565-573, 567-568

pleasure in witnessing violence,”⁵³ should have no place. The focus would not always be on winning but on the bigger meaning conveyed by the coming together of these churches in the first place. In that case, both the actors (the players) and the spectators should endeavour to cultivate the attitude of Jesus at a football tournament as captured in the following story:

Jesus Christ said he had never been to a football match. So, we took him to one, my friends and I. It was a ferocious battle between the Protestant Punchers and the Catholic Crusaders. The Crusaders scored first. Jesus cheered wildly and threw his hat high up in the air. Then the Punchers scored. And Jesus cheered wildly and threw his hat high up in the air. This seemed to puzzle the man behind us. He tapped Jesus on the shoulder and asked, ‘Which side are you rooting for, my good man?’ ‘Me’, replied Jesus, visibly excited by the game. ‘Oh, I’m not rooting for either side. I’m just enjoying the game.’⁵⁴

Similarly, the Roman Catholic Church could organize more matches between her and other faiths, especially, Islam. The latter, like Christianity, remains a major religion in Nigeria. Here, the proposed Department of Football and Sports of the Catholic

⁵³ George Orwell. “The Sporting Spirit,” *Tribune*, December 14, 1945. <https://www.orwellfoundation.com/the-orwell-foundation/orwell/essays-and-other-works/the-sporting-spirit/>.

⁵⁴ Anthony De Mello, *The Song of the Bird* (New York: Image, 1984), 147-148.

Secretariat of Nigeria could work together with the Department of Mission and Dialogue in order to make this happen. Matches like these could help break down all the more the walls of fear, prejudice and stereotyping. They could, consequently, help better the relations between these two major religions, and thus see to the greater peace and unity of the country. Here, as well, the Catholic Church could enter into alliance with some NGOs involved in peacebuilding as well as with proprietors of most of the interfaith football clubs existing in many parts of the country.

Greater Participation of Priests, Religious and Seminarians in Football:

In their homilies, catechesis and ordinary conversations, priests should encourage and build up all the more the spirit of the lay members of the Church who are involved in football so that they may become the best versions of themselves. They are also to help them to see the same football not only as a means of leisure or, in the case of professionals, as means of making money, but also as means of their sanctification. On their part, without being professionals so to say, the priests should make themselves all the more available to participate in the game. The matches that they, and even seminarians, often play, one parish/diocese/religious family against another, could be much more standardized. They could be modelled after the Clericus Cup, a tournament started in 2007 and involving seminarians from of all the seminaries and colleges in Rome.⁵⁵ Again, the priests, with the permission of

⁵⁵ Jerrad Peters, "Clericus Cup: The Story of the Vatican's Quirky Football League," *Bleacher Report*, March 14, 2013, <https://bleacherreport.com/articles/1567415-clericus-cup-the-story-of-the-vaticans-quirky-football-league>

their superiors, should be more willing to be trained in football management and administration. As the document, *Giving the Best of Yourself*, makes clear, “Pastoral care through sport cannot be improvised, but requires people trained and motivated.”⁵⁶ The past example of Father Denis Slattery of the St Finbarr’s College, Lagos⁵⁷, often considered the “father of Nigerian football from the early days”⁵⁸ as well as those of the other priests like Dike, Mbaka and Eze, etc., mentioned before now, should motivate them.

More so, while they are still in the seminary and religious houses, the church authorities should sometimes allow the seminarians to play more matches with some domestic football clubs or, even, the senior and junior national teams. As happened in other places, their involvement in such games may not but elicit criticisms from some sections of the Church’s hierarchy.⁵⁹ But these criticisms should not blind one from seeing the bigger picture in all this. For one, such matches would help the players of the two teams to grow their skills, as well as show the wider world that seminarians not only pray and study, but they also play. This could have implications for the recruitment of candidates to the priesthood. In fact, one or two persons, even among the footballers themselves, may come to consider thereafter a call to the priesthood. And history is not without instances of footballers

⁵⁶ Dicastery for Laity, Family and Life, *Giving*, 5.4.

⁵⁷ Cf. Amaefule, “The Role of Mission Schools”, 93-95.

⁵⁸ Segun Odegbami, *Goal Bound* (Lagos: Worldwide Sports, 1993), 21.

⁵⁹ James Mills, “Colonialism, Christians and Sport: The Catholic Church and Football in Goa, 1883-1951,” *Football Studies* 5.2(2002):11-26, 15.

who had to embark on a journey to the priesthood.⁶⁰ Inspiration for the kind of matches suggested here may be drawn from the famous match between seminarians from the Royal English College in Valladolid, Spain, and Real Madrid Football Club. The year was 1907. Real Madrid was basking in the euphoria of its then recent victories. At the end of the match, however, scores stood at 6-2, in favour of the English seminarians who were captained by Father Linehan.⁶¹

Being Much More Alive to its Prophetic Ministry:

There have been in recent times reports of corrupt practices in the administration of football at the Nigerian Football Federation

⁶⁰ There is the case of the now American Catholic priest, Chase Michael Hilgenbrinck, who played both for the US Under-17 national team and his university team, and professionally for clubs in Chile and America, before his priestly ordination in 2014 for the Catholic Diocese of Peoria, Illinois (M. Jack, "This Professional Soccer Player Gave Up the High Life to Become an Ordained Priest," *The Plaid Zebra*, February 7, 2016. <https://theplaidzebra.com/this-professional-soccer-player-gave-up-the-high-life-to-become-an-ordained-priest/>). Philip Mulryne played many times for his country, Northern Ireland, and professionally for such clubs as Manchester United and Norwich City before being ordained a priest of the Order of Preachers in 2017 ("Former Manchester United Footballer Ordained as Priest," *BBC News*, July 8, 2017. <https://www.bbc.com/news/uk-northern-ireland-40545129>). The Italian priest, Samuel Piermarini played with the Under-17 Serie D football club, Ostia Mare, and had successful tryouts with the youth team of AS Roma, before his priestly ordination for the Diocese of Rome in 2021 (Hannah Brockhaus, "Ex-Film Director, Soccer Player to be Ordained Catholic Priest by Pope Francis on Sunday," *Aciafrica*, April 20, 2021. <https://www.aciafrica.org/news/3286/ex-film-director-soccer-player-to-be-ordained-catholic-priest-by-pope-francis-on-sunday>).

⁶¹ D.J. Kearney, "The English Priests Who Taught Real Madrid a Football Lesson," *Catholic Herald*, May 22, 2014. <https://catholicherald.co.uk/the-english-priests-who-taught-real-madrid-a-football-lesson/>.

(NFF), Nigeria's governing football body.⁶² This is understandably an outgrowth of the endemic corruption in the wider contemporary Nigerian society.⁶³ Many a time, funds, both from FIFA and the Nigerian government, meant for particular football projects have been misappropriated or stolen entirely; the welfare of players and their coaches have been neglected, while some football administrators, mostly incompetent, have continued to grow fat on their misery. Little wonder, former Nigerian Senate President, David Mark, once described the Nigerian Football Federation, as "the center of corruption in the country."⁶⁴ This cannot but have tremendous implications for the growth of football in Nigeria. In fact, what Munro says about corrupt sports officials in general, could be applied in particular to some of the football administrators in Nigeria: "Corrupt sports officials are not just stealing money. They are also stealing the future of our youth, the future of our athletes, and the future of our sports."⁶⁵

Against such a background, the Catholic Church in Nigeria which, admittedly, has not been found wanting, on many

⁶² "Taint of Corruption in Nigerian Football," *Punch*, March 21, 2017. <https://punchng.com/taint-of-corruption-in-nigerian-football/>; Onwumechili, et al, "Nigeria," 417-418.

⁶³ Adolphus Ekedimma Amaefule, "Inauthentic Devotion to the Eucharist in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*," March 2020, *The Heythrop Journal*, DOI: 10.1111/heyj.13506.

⁶⁴ Henry Umoru and Inalegwu Shaibu, "NFF: Centre of Corruption in Nigeria – Senate," *Vanguard*, February 29, 2012. <https://www.vanguardngr.com/2012/02/nff-centre-of-corruption-in-nigeria-senate/>.

⁶⁵ Bob Munro, "Sports as a Force for Good," in *Global Corruption Report: Sport*, ed. Transparency International (London: Routledge, 2016), 3-11, 8.

occasions, in the exercise of her prophetic ministry,⁶⁶ should not, at this time, keep silence. It should speak out all the more against these cases and many other ills that trouble football administration in Nigeria. It should endeavour to put much more pressure on the government and, on FIFA, - the latter on whose internal statutes the NFF, like many of its ilk world over, run - to bring such bad football administrators to book. The ripple effects of such interventions on football development in the country can only be imagined.

Greater Theological Investigations into Football and Sports:

Kelly points out that Catholic theologians and scholars of spirituality have not paid much attention to sport in the modern world.⁶⁷ Granted, the observation is made with the West and, particularly, the United States, in mind.⁶⁸ At the same time, however, it becomes much more pronounced when transported, for instance, into the Nigerian context, where there is an obvious paucity of research by Catholic theologians and scholars on

⁶⁶ Adolphus Ekedimma Amaefule, "The Prophetic Role of the Church and Postcolonial Portrait of Nigeria in Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie's *Purple Hibiscus*," *International Journal of Public Theology* 15 (2021): 84–100, 95.

⁶⁷ Patrick Kelly, "Introduction," in *Youth Sport and Spirituality: Catholic Perspectives*, ed. Patrick Kelly (Notre Dame, IN: University of Notre Dame Press, 2015). <https://books.google.com.ng/books?id=Kelly,++Introduction+to+Youth+Sport+and+Spirituality:+Catholic+Perspectives>; Carlo Mazza, "The Pastoral Ministry of Sport: Taking Stock and Looking Ahead," in *Sport: An Educational and Pastoral Challenge*, Pontifical Council for the Laity (Liberia Editrice Vaticana, 2008), 31-59, 31.

⁶⁸ Patrick Kelly, *Catholic Perspectives on Sports: From Medieval to Modern Times*. New York/Mahwah, NJ: Paulist Press, 2012. <https://books.google.com.ng/books>

modern sports, especially, football. Hence, theologians of the Catholic Church in Nigeria should become much more involved with the issue of sports in general and football in particular. It is their systematic theological investigations that would continually nourish the Nigerian Catholic Church's pastoral care in sports.⁶⁹ To this effect, the Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria (CATHAN), which, over the years, has preoccupied itself with different themes - often motivated by events at the local and global levels - could actually put the issue of football on its table, as well, especially, at its annual conferences. This is important in view of the power and space football occupies in contemporary Nigerian culture. The same holds for the Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN). It should try and excavate the biblical background of sports and what it says to the Nigerian context. Similarly, the *Nigerian Journal of Theology*, published by the same CATHAN, as well as many theological journals owned by the church's major seminaries in the country should have special editions dedicated to football.

In doing these, they, Catholic theologians and biblical scholars, should endeavour to listen to what the theologians and biblical scholars of the other denominations in the country have to say as well on the same issue of football. This way, it would be easier to come up with what could be termed a "Nigerian Theology of Football", which could be taught in seminaries, theological institutes, and universities in the country and beyond. Such theological output would become at least two things: One, a Nigerian response to Kelly's above-mentioned remark. Two, a

⁶⁹ Mazza, "Pastoral", 56.

modest addition to the ongoing conversation on the necessity of taking the dialectical relationship between sports and Christianity beyond a Western perspective to include diverse cultures from Africa, South America, Asia, etc.⁷⁰

Conclusion

The paper looked at the involvement of the Roman Catholic Church with football in Nigeria today by way of giving prizes and scholarships to those who excel in football in her schools; allowing individual footballers and teams to make use of her facilities; allowing her clergy, seminarians and laity to participate in the playing and administration of football; Involvement of her priests in the spiritual direction of players and coaches, etc. It then

⁷⁰ Nick J. Watson and Andrew Park, *Sport and the Christian Religion: A Systematic Review of Literature* (Newcastle Upon Tyre: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2014), 110-111; Afe Adogame, et al., ed. *Global Perspectives on Sports and Christianity* (London: Routledge, 2018).

suggested ways that she could be much more involved with the same football in the future. Granted, the proposals made here are not exhaustive. But they surely would help the Catholic Church in Nigeria all the more in her work of evangelization, as well as in the overall development of the game in the country.