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NIGERIAN SPIRITANS AND PROPHETIC WITNESSING IN THEIR HOMELAND

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Abstract

The Spiritans (Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers) appropriate the mission statement of Jesus in Lk 4:18 in which Jesus speaks of his being anointed by the Holy Spirit to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim freedom to prisoners, recovery of sight to the blind and to set captives free. Nigeria currently has the greatest number of Spiritans world-wide, so it is an important demography in the Church's missionary apostolate. This essay examines how Nigerian Spiritans are living out this mission statement of the Spiritans in their homeland, Nigeria, challenged as it is by poverty, insecurity, corruption and other factors that diminish human flourishing. The essay will do this by highlighting some of the missionary engagements of Nigerian Spiritans, with a view to establishing their fidelity to their prophetic calling. It concludes that while Nigerian Spiritans have

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reasons to celebrate their accomplishments, much more is expected of them in the living out of the prophetic mission.

Introduction

The 19th/20th century Spiritan missionaries to Africa left an impressive legacy on the continent. One of these legacies is a vibrant Catholic Church in Nigeria, especially in the South-East and Middle Belt regions of the country. The great majority of Spiritans from Nigeria come from these regions of Nigeria and they now constitute the most members in the worldwide Spiritan family. This paper highlights the achievements of Nigerian Spiritans in carrying forward the prophetic mission of the Spiritans in their homeland, Nigeria, as well as some of the challenges that they face. The paper submits that even though the Spiritans of Nigeria have reasons to be proud of their accomplishments, still much remains to be done, especially regarding the need for the raising up of prophetic voices against injustice and evil and engagement in prophetic action in order to bring change to the unfortunate situation of things in Nigeria.

The Liberating Spirit of God and the Spiritan Missionary Vocation

The Spiritans have two foundational claims to a special relationship with the Holy Spirit. The community of like-minded students of theology that the founder of the Spiritans, the young French seminarian, Claude-François Poullart des Places (1679-1709), assembled in Paris and offered material and spiritual support and guidance, was dedicated to the Holy Spirit and this dedication happened on the day of Pentecost, May 27th, 1703. They were twelve in number and they called themselves

“Community and Seminary consecrated to the Holy Spirit, under the invocation of the Holy Virgin conceived without sin.”² When eventually their members became priests, they were called Holy Ghost (Spirit) Fathers or Spiritans for short.

In 1848 the Spiritans merged with another religious order, the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary, founded in 1842 by Father Francis Libermann (1804-1852), a French man and convert from Judaism. After the merger, the new order came to be known as, The Congregation of the Holy Spirit, under the Protection of the Immaculate Heart of Mary and Fr. Libermann became its eleventh Superior General and first after the merger. He is recognized as the co-founder of the Spiritans.

The Spiritans’ special relationship with the Holy Spirit is therefore based on the fact that their order is named after the Holy Spirit, their order was founded on the day of Pentecost, and they, as members of this order, are consecrated to the Holy Spirit.³ Bona Ikenna Ugwu, himself a Spiritan, has in several of his works underscored the fact that in the worship and life of Christians and

² This is an extract from an old Spiritan register, which is now lost but which was copied into “Gallia Christiana” in 1744 (Cf. Jean Savoie, “Claude Poullart des Places: How a Young Man Became a Founder,” *Spiritan Horizons* Issue 1 (Fall, 2006), 9 (Footnote 5). Savoie also observes that the title “community” used here was not officially adopted until it was formally recognized in 1734 and that the Rule of Life developed gradually (See “Claude Poullart des Places,” footnote 4).

³ Several articles have appeared in the *Spiritan Horizons* that highlight the theme of the place of the Holy Spirit in Spiritan life. See, Francis X. Malinowski, “The Holy Spirit in the Writings of the Venerable Father Libermann,” *Spiritan Horizons*, Issue 10 (Fall 2015), 7-18; Bede Uche Ukwuije, “The Holy Spirit in Spiritan Life,” *Spiritan Horizons*, Issue 10 (Fall 2015), 19-27; Phung Manh Tien, “The Holy Spirit in Spiritan Life,” *Spiritan Horizons*, Issue 12 (Fall 2017), 19-30.

especially of Catholics, the Holy Spirit is very much neglected.⁴ If this is true one would expect Spiritans to be not just an exception in this area but agents for reversing this trend. In fact, given their very inauspicious beginnings, the fact that the Spiritans are still around and thriving is itself a testament to the active presence of the Holy Spirit in the Spiritan enterprise.⁵ And in many corners of the world the Spiritans in their life and ministry are daily bearing witness to the active presence of God's Holy Spirit. Spiritans of Nigeria, who today constitute the majority of Spiritans worldwide, are an example of what the Holy Spirit is doing in the world through the work of Spiritans.

The *Spiritan Rule of Life (SRL)* opens with the following words from St. Luke's gospel: "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for He has anointed me, to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord" (Luke 4:18-19). These were the words with which Jesus launched his public ministry in his hometown of Nazareth. The Spiritans appropriate these words for themselves and see in them a mandate from Jesus to continue his ministry in the world. By appropriating these words, the Spiritans are underscoring the importance of the Holy Spirit as the driving force behind their apostolic engagement.

⁴ See his *Holy Spirit: Fire from Above*, SAN Press, 2008; "The Holy Spirit in Christian Life," *Spiritan Horizons*, Issue 10 (Fall 2015), 28-40.

⁵ I do not know of any other religious order whose founder was a seminarian, who died three years after his ordination and five years after the order was founded, that is still thriving more than 300 years after the founder's death.

A Brief Overview of the Spiritan Presence in Nigeria

The Spiritan presence in sub-Saharan Africa began in 1842 with the arrival of seven missionaries of Fr. Francis Libermann's Society of the Holy Heart of Mary at Cape Palmas in present-day Liberia. This Society will in 1848 merge with the Holy Ghost Fathers, otherwise known as Spiritans. Libermann's missionaries came at the invitation of the Vicar Apostolic of the Vicariate of the Two Guineas, Msgr Edward Barron (1801-1854).⁶ This initial 'Spiritans' incursion into sub-Saharan Africa was marked by tragedy, as most of the missionaries died within a year of their arrival. Bishop Barron eventually abandoned the mission in 1845 at which point the Vicariate was handed over to the 'Spiritans.' Two of the original seven 'Spiritans' missionaries who arrived in Cape Palmas, Fr. John Bessieux and Br. Gregory Sey, had survived and slowly but surely the Spiritan missionary enterprise in Africa was built on the foundation of these two survivors.⁷

The first Spiritans arrived in Nigeria in 1885. These pioneer Spiritan missionaries in Nigeria were four in number, two priests and two brothers. Fr. Josef Lutz, from the Alsace region of France was the leader of the delegation and their base was at the bank of the River Niger at Onitsha, in South-East Nigeria. The other members were Fr Jean Horne, Brothers Hermas Huck and Jean Gotto Jacob. Fr. Lutz's time at this mission was cut short by

⁶ Seán Farragher has a full monograph in which he highlights Msgr Barron's importance for the 19th century mission to sub-Saharan Africa. See, *Edward Barron, 1801-1854: Unsung Hero of the Mission to Africa* (Paraclete Press, 2004).

⁷ See Charles A. Ebelebe, *Africa and the New Face of Mission: A Critical Assessment of the Legacy of the Irish Spiritans in Southeastern Nigeria* (University Press of America, 2009), 43-44.

illness, which forced him to return to France and he was replaced by Fr. Léon Lejeune, a veteran of the Gabon mission. It was during the time of Lejeune that this mission was established on a more solid footing. He oversaw the construction of better housing for the missionaries and gradually moved away from the practice of ransoming and Christianizing slaves in Christian villages to school apostolate as the dominant missionary strategy. This turned around the fortunes of the mission. Fr. Lejeune was replaced by Fr. Joseph Shanahan (1871-1943) as head of the mission and it was under his leadership that the mission blossomed. His appointment also marked the beginning of the gradual replacement of the French by the Irish Spiritans in line with the colonial reality of Nigeria, as Nigeria became a British colony in the aftermath of the scramble for Africa and the Berlin Conference of 1884/1885 that settled it. This was the first Spiritan presence in Nigeria and the heir to this legacy is the Province of Nigeria South-East, with headquarters at Onitsha.

There were other centres of Spiritan presence in Nigeria other than this original mission in the South-East. In 1930 Spiritans from the Province of Germany were invited into the Nigerian Mission by Bishop Shanahan, and they were assigned to take charge of the northern part of the Prefecture, close to the River Benue. They set up mission centers at Makurdi, Oturkpo, Gboko, and Idah where they worked principally among the Tiv, Idoma and Igala peoples. This mission was raised to the status of a Prefecture (The Prefecture of Benue) four years later with Msgr Philip Winterle its first Prefect Apostolic. The headquarters of the Prefecture was at Oturkpo and later transferred to Makurdi. The outbreak of World War II (1939-1945) saw the expulsion of the

German Spiritans from this mission. They were replaced by Spiritans from the Province of England.

In 1947, following the end of World War II, Spiritans from the Province of Canada came to this part of Nigeria to join the Spiritans from the Province of England in the work of evangelization. They concentrated mostly in the Igala-speaking area of the Prefecture. In 1955 the Canadian Spiritans inherited the Prefecture of Kabba from the Society of African Missions (SMA) Fathers. The area of operation of the Canadian Spiritans later expanded beyond Igala land to include the Yoruba and Igbira speaking peoples on both sides of the River Niger and River Benue confluence in present-day Kogi State. The Prefecture of Kabba was later raised to a diocese and transferred to Lokoja because of its political importance as the State capital. Later, Idah, on the eastern side of the River Niger, became a separate Prefecture and in 1978 was made a diocese.

In 1976, the Spiritan presence in Nigeria was organized into one Province and Two Districts: The Province of Nigeria-East and the Districts of Makurdi and Kwara-Benue.⁸ With the growth of indigenous Spiritan vocations from these different Spiritan centres of operation in Nigeria and without going into the several stages of transformation, these various Spiritan presences in Nigeria in October 2001 eventually came under one umbrella as

⁸ Ayodele Ayeni has a good article on the legacy of the expatriate Spiritans, who worked in the Kwara-Benue Spiritan District. See his, "Evangelization as Empowerment: The Legacy of the Quebecan/French Canadian Spiritans in the Kwara-Benue Spiritan District, 1947-1997" In Ebelebe, ed. *The Missionary Legacy of the Spiritans (Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers) in West Africa (Acts of the 15th SIST International Missiological Symposium, April 26-29, 2016)* (Spiritan Publications in conjunction with Eminota), 45-64.

one Nigeria Province and four administrative Regions located in the key centers of the various Spiritan presences namely, Onitsha, Makurdi, Okura, and Ekiti Regions. The headquarters of this one Nigeria Province was in Abuja, the federal capital. As the number of the members continued to increase this one central administrative arrangement became more difficult to manage and the Spiritan presence in Nigeria was once more reorganized in October 2010 with the various regions becoming full-fledged Provinces or Circumscriptions namely, the Province of Nigeria South-East; the Province of Nigeria South-West; the Province of Nigeria North-East, and the Province of Nigeria North-West. These Provinces maintained a loose federation as the Union of Spiritan Circumscriptions of Nigeria (USCN). When I speak in this paper of Nigerian Spiritans it is to the members of this Union that I refer.

Education was the method of evangelization favored by Spiritans in Nigeria. It was more successful in South-East Nigeria than anywhere else because of a combination of colonial, missionary, and local factors.⁹ Foreign Spiritan missionaries in Nigeria used education to fight some of the unwholesome traditional practices in Nigeria such as, human sacrifice, killing of twins, caste system, etc. Even though the expatriate Spiritan missionaries in Nigeria were mostly apolitical, they frequently sided with the people against the colonial masters in some of their oppressive policies. This was especially the case in South-East Nigeria where the Irish Spiritans held sway. This was not unconnected with the situation

⁹ For a good account of the educational legacy of the expatriate Spiritans in South-East Nigeria see, Charles Ebelebe, "The Spiritan Educational Achievement in Southeast Nigeria" In Ebelebe, ed. *The Missionary Legacy of the Spiritans*, 65-90.

back home in Ireland where there was no love lost between the Irish and the British. The Irish Spiritans were also very prophetic in choosing to stand with their Igbo flock during the Nigeria-Biafra civil war (1967-1970). This courageous stance by the Irish Spiritans saved countless Igbo lives and helped bring the tragedies of the war to the world's attention. They eventually paid for this prophetic stance by being expelled en masse from Nigeria after the war.

The Contemporary Nigerian Situation

Nigeria is a very important country in Africa, if for nothing else, for the sheer size of its population, which estimates put at over 200 million. It is said that one in every five black Africans is Nigerian. This vast number of people come from more than 250 different ethnic nationalities,¹⁰ making Nigeria a very diverse country indeed. It is also home to one of the largest number of Christians and Muslims in the world.¹¹ This diversity is at once Nigeria's strength and weakness. Almost every issue in Nigeria is seen through ethnic or religious lens. The Nigeria-Biafra civil war was principally as a result of both of these issues. Almost 50 years after the war, Nigeria is still plagued by issues of ethnicity and religion. The Igbos are still claiming to be marginalized and persecuted by the federal government of Nigeria. This has given birth to separatist movements such as the Movement for the

¹⁰ See <https://study.com/academy/lesson/nigerian-ethnic-groups.html>. Accessed October 5, 2018.

¹¹ Nigeria's population is generally said to be evenly split between Christians and Muslims, with Christians predominant in the South and Muslims in the North. See, worldpopulationreview.com/countries/nigeria-population/.

Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB), Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and their offshoots all calling for an independent state of Biafra.¹²

While movements such as MASSOB and IPOB are not new, they have assumed greater force and visibility during the previous administration of Muhammadu Buhari, who came to power in 2015 and continuing into the current administration of Bola Ahmed Tinubu. Buhari was elected under a mantra of change and an anti-corruption agenda. Under his administration, however, Nigerians had more reasons for lamentation than for songs of joy. Buhari promised, if elected, to bring an end to the menace of the Boko Haram insurgency in the North-East. While brazen attacks by this terrorist group reduced during his tenure, they were by no means defeated. In addition, a new and probably more insidious problem arose during Buhari's presidency, and that was the attacks by mostly Muslim Fulani herdsmen on mostly Christian farmers.¹³ These attacks were not restricted to any part of Nigeria

¹² For a quick overview of how these groups came into being, see the article, "Biafra: How MASSOB and IPOB Began" obindigbo.com.ng/2017/06/biafra-massob-and-ipob-began/.

¹³ The fact that these attacks are carried out by Muslims against Christians highlights the religious component of this crisis. Religion is hardly far away in most of the crises in Nigeria. But there are other components including the economic and political. Increasing desertification has reduced the available grazing land in the North forcing the herdsmen to continue to move South in search of grazing fields. The herdsmen have so far resisted the calls for them to adopt modern ranching as a way out of the problem of the lack of grazing fields, with the argument that nomadic herding is their way of life. Also, some unscrupulous politicians see political advantage in the crisis and have exploited it for political advantage. The fact that these normally unarmed herdsmen now have sophisticated weapons such as AK-47s at their disposal suggests that they have powerful sponsors and financiers both within and outside of government.

although they are more prevalent in the Middle Belt region of Nigeria. This is the region where the Muslim north meets the Christian south. One such attack happened in 2016 in the village of Ndiagu-Attakwu, Akegbu-Ugwu, Enugu State, where the Spiritan seminary is located and resulted in the death of two people, including a seminarian, and injury to scores of others. On April 24, 2018 another such attack targeted a Catholic Church in Makurdi Diocese of Benue State killing two priests and 17 worshippers, who were at morning Mass.¹⁴ These incessant attacks brought untold hardship to tens of thousands of Nigerians and significantly increased the number of internally displaced persons (IDPs) in the country.¹⁵ They also increased the level of anger and discontent in the land. The situation was made worse by what seems at best to be the apparent lack of will by the federal government to tackle the problem and at worst complicity by the government in the said problem. During the eight years of the Buhari presidency, poverty, pain, and suffering increased significantly for so many Nigerians. The situation has got even worse under the current government of Bola Ahmed Tinubu.

Having exposed the general state of affairs in Nigeria at the moment, a state of affairs that leaves a lot to be desired and one that could use prophetic witnessing, I now assess the impact of Nigerian Spiritans on the contemporary Nigerian situation.

¹⁴ This incident was well covered in local and international news outlets. See, for example, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/.../nigerian-herdsmen-kill-19-in-catholic-church>. This incident finally brought the ordinarily reticent Catholic bishops of Nigeria to the streets as they called for and led a nationwide protest on May 22, 2018 against the killings.

¹⁵ The UNDP puts the number of IDPs in Nigeria at 7.7 million. This number reflects mostly those displaced by the Boko Haram terrorists in the North-East region of Nigeria.

Present-Day Nigerian Spiritans and their Liberating Impact on the Nigerian Situation

The Spiritans are probably in the top three of religious Orders of men in Nigeria with the most members. The Spiritans are also among the most widely spread, with membership from many of the major ethnic groups in Nigeria. The Igbos, however, make up a significant majority, and that is the same in most other religious Orders in Nigeria both male and female. As have been observed earlier, Nigerians make up the majority of the Spiritan population worldwide, and this is likely to remain so for the foreseeable future. The following table shows the top-20 distribution of Spiritans by country of origin:¹⁶

1 Nigeria	543	11 Kenya + South Sudan	51
2 France	182	12 Madagascar	50
3 Ireland	155	13 Poland	49
4 Tanzanie	125	14 USA	46
5 Ghana + Benin	123	15 Netherlands	33
6 Portugal	82	16 Germany	31
7 Angola	79	17 Sierra Leone + Liberia	30
8 Cameroun	79		
9 Congo Brazzaville	66		

¹⁶ https://spiritanroma.org/corunum/circ_stats.php. The figure for Nigeria is from the four provinces of Nigeria.

10 Congo Kinshasa	61	18 Central Africa	28
		19 Uganda	26
		20 Brazil	25

We can see from this table that Nigeria has by far the highest number of Spiritans worldwide.

As would be expected, a sizable percentage of this Nigerian Spiritan workforce are to be found scattered around the globe in the 60 or so nations in which Spiritans are working. The majority, again as would be expected, are working in Nigeria. What impact are Nigerian Spiritans working at home making in the prophetic mission of bringing good news to the beleaguered Nigerian masses and how are they liberating those held captive by so many anti-human forces?

Like their expatriate Spiritan forebears, Nigerian Spiritans have been making significant contributions to liberating the Nigerian people from all that hold them captive. Just as the early Spiritans in Nigeria, one important way that present-day Nigerian Spiritans are preaching the gospel of liberation is through education. Most Spiritan parishes in Nigeria are engaged in the provision of formal education to Nigerian youths through the establishment of kindergarten, primary, and secondary schools. The Province of Nigeria South-East has established a university, the Spiritan University Nneochi (SUN), thus providing a complete system of Spiritan education from kindergarten through to tertiary-level education. From the very beginning education has been an

essential part of the Spiritan charism¹⁷ and through the provision of formal education, Nigerian Spiritans are preaching the gospel of liberation and continuing the Spiritan legacy in education.¹⁸

Each of the four provinces that comprise USCN has an office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC). This is an integral part of the Spiritan mission through which Spiritans preach the social gospel. The statement of the 1971 Synod of Bishops cited above already gave authoritative backing to this aspect of the Church's missionary apostolate. The *Spiritan Rule of Life* aligns itself closely to the Synod Fathers when it states:

We count the following as constitutive parts of our mission of evangelization: the “integral liberation” of people, action for justice and peace, and participation in development. It follows that we must make ourselves “the advocates, the supporters and the defenders of the weak and the little ones against all who oppress them” (*SRL* 14).

This aspect of the Spiritan charism has not always been emphasized but this has started to change in recent times. Recent General Chapters of the Congregation from Itaici (1992) through Maynooth (1998), Torre d'Aguilha (2004), to Bagamoyo (2012)

¹⁷ You may recall that the Spiritan Order began as an effort to help poor seminarians, both financially and spiritually, to complete their priestly formation.

¹⁸ The space constraints of this article would not permit me to go into spotlighting some of the educational establishments by Nigerian Spiritans. That would be a work for another essay. But something that Spiritan school administrators need to be attentive to is the cost of Spiritan education. Many Spiritan schools are priced beyond the reach of the very poor that they are seeking to empower through education.

have sought to fan aflame throughout the congregation the Spiritan JPIC ministry. The fruit of this new emphasis is a heightened awareness of the centrality of JPIC in Spiritan mission.¹⁹ I now highlight some achievements of the JPIC offices in some of the Nigerian Provinces.

Spiritans in Integral Development Foundation (SIIDF) is the brainchild of Fr. Kuha Indyer, CSSp. He founded it in 2004 and in 2016 the Province of Nigeria North-East adopted it as its development arm. Since its inception SIIDF has made positive impact in the lives of many people in the Middle Belt area of Nigeria, especially in the areas of education and human development. In 2014, it opened the Spiritan Youth Resource Centre, Chonku, Wukari LGA, Taraba State, as a non-formal institution with the aim of providing opportunities for less privileged youths to acquire skills to help them earn a living. SIIDF also provides scholarships to indigent students from the elementary education level to the university. To date it has helped more than 50 students through the various stages of education. SIIDF also has a revolving loan scheme for widows in need. Many widows have benefitted from this scheme so far. In 2018, with funding made available by two donor agencies, Kibanda, Belgium and Misean Cara, Ireland, SIIDF was able to donate food and other relief materials totaling over 6 million Naira to two camps of Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) in Benue State. These were victims of Fulani herdsmen attacks.

¹⁹ Several publications have appeared from the Spiritan Generalate to promote JPIC in the congregation including the booklet, *Spiritan Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation* (2004).

Fr. Boniface Ugwo, CSSp is the coordinator of the JPIC office in the Province of Nigeria South-West. Oyede is a poor community in Isoko North LGA of Delta State where portable water is hard to come by. The Oyede Chapter of the JPIC in collaboration with the local parish, SS Peter and Paul Catholic Church, Oyede, which is run by the Spiritans, provided a bore hole that has taken care of the problem of portable water in Oyede. This is in addition to offering scholarships to some indigent secondary school students in the area. One such student after completing his secondary school was assisted to get training in shoemaking. Also, one of the Spiritan parishes in the Province, Annunciation Catholic Church, Ogunu, Warri, built a new house for a poor family whose house was razed by fire. In addition, Fr. Ugwo has set up a social media chatroom on WhatsApp called “Dignity of Creation,” which he administers and through which he promotes some of the values and objectives of JPIC such as, the dignity of creation, peaceful coexistence and fundamental human rights.

The JCIP office of the Province of Nigeria South-East has Fr. Vitalis Anusionwu as coordinator. The JCIP membership in this Province includes lay people in collaboration with which the office is able to do a lot of good in terms of material support to the less privileged in the society, especially during the festive seasons such as, Christmas and Easter. It also liaises with VIVAT International²⁰ to carry out periodic enlightenment campaigns on social issues such as, human rights and healthy living. St Gregory

²⁰ Vivat International is an advocacy organization founded in 2000 by two religious Orders to work for the eradication of poverty and promotion of human rights around the world. Fourteen religious Orders including the Spiritan Congregation are currently members of VIVAT. For more, visit their website: <https://vivatinternational.org/>.

the Great Church, Bomu, Gokana LGA is one of the parishes in the Province. This parish is located in Ogoni land in the Niger Delta, a crises-prone part of the country. Fr. Peter Benson Okwori, CSSp worked in this parish during a volatile period. His ministry centred mainly on mediating peace between different cult groups that were at war with each other. Cultism is a major problem in this area. Through the efforts of Fr. Okwori, over 5,000 cult members publicly renounced cultism and were reintegrated into normal life in the society.

The foregoing are samplings of how Nigerian Spiritans are living their mission of proclaiming the good news to the poor in their home country. As commendable as these are, I believe that the Nigerian Spiritans could do more, especially in the area of raising prophetic voices against injustice and oppression and engaging in prophetic action to bring positive change to their homeland.

Challenges Facing the Spiritan Prophetic Mission in Nigeria

Nigerian Spiritans have done well but they could do more to witness to the prophetic dimension of their calling, especially with regards to being the voice of the voiceless and opposing unjust and oppressive structures or policies either of the government or of corporate bodies or individuals. Much of what was highlighted above with regards to JPIC has to do mostly with humanitarian services. Helping the poor with food, clothing, etc. is important but discovering and addressing the root causes of poverty is even more important.²¹ Such causes are usually to be

²¹ The fact that the powers that be, who keep the poor, poor do not like this further step is captured by the Brazilian liberation theologian, Dom Hélder Câmara, who is credited with the statement: "When I give food to the

found in unjust and oppressive structures both of government and of corporations. One important challenge facing Nigerian Spiritans in their prophetic mission is that of enlightenment of the members as to the importance of JPIC as an integral part of the Spiritan mission. Many of the members do not know this. Such training and enlightenment should start in the formation houses and should continue during ongoing formation through periodic seminars and workshops. Besides the general enlightenment of the members some members need to get special training so as to become experts and resource persons who could animate the rest of the members.

One of the cultural practices that expatriate Spiritans met in many of the culture areas in which they labored was the caste system, whereby certain members of the community were discriminated against and denied some of their basic rights on the ground that they were descendants of cult slaves. This tradition was especially strong in many Igbo culture areas. The early Spiritan missionaries in Igboland fought against this obnoxious cultural practice. It is unfortunate that almost a half century since the expatriate Spiritan missionaries left Igboland, this practice is still alive and well in many Igbo communities. It is heartening that one of the leaders of the church in Igboland, Archbishop Anthony Obinna, the emeritus archbishop of Owerri and Metropolitan of the Owerri Ecclesiastical Province, waged a war against this anti-Christian Osu caste system in Igboland. This has been more or less a one-man's fight, as it has not been picked up by other Catholic bishops in Igboland. It would have been wonderful if the

poor, they call me a saint. When I ask why the poor have no food, they call me a communist." See, <https://cac.org/dom-helder-camara-2015-10-20/>.

Spiritans in Igboland have made common cause with Archbishop Obinna to highlight and to fight this oppressive cultural practice. I was delighted to read in one of the Nigerian dailies that the traditional ruler of Nri Kingdom, the Eze-Nri, probably the premier traditional ruler in Igboland, and his Council are set to formally abolish this practice in Nri Kingdom.²² Also, crediting the News Agency of Nigeria (NAN) the *Guardian* Newspaper of October 1, 2018 reports that 24 traditional rulers in Oguta LGA of Imo State have resolved to abolish the Osu caste system in their communities. This welcome development came about through the efforts of a civil society group, Initiative for The Eradication of Traditional and Cultural Stigmatisation in Our Society (IFETACSIOS).²³ My hope is that other Igbo communities would follow suit. It would have been wonderful if Spiritans of the Province of Nigeria South-East in whose territory this obnoxious practice still thrives were in the forefront in the fight to eradicate it.

One major problem that has plagued Nigeria in recent decades is corruption. The former Nigerian president, Muhammadu Buhari, was elected in 2015 principally to fight corruption. After he completed eight years in office, not only is corruption alive and well in Nigeria, other problems have emerged including incessant Fulani herdsmen attacks. After one year of the Tinubu administration, the situation has gotten even worse. The difficult

²² See Rotimi Agbana, "Ancient Igbo Community Set to Abolish Osu Caste System," in *Vanguard*, September 17, 2018. See, <https://www.vanguardngr.com/.../ancient-igbo-community-set-to-abolish-osu-caste-system/>.

²³ See, <https://guardian.ng/news/imo-monarchs-agree-to-end-osu-caste-system/>. A few other Igbo communities have taken similar steps.

economic situation in the country has brought untold hardship on poor masses across the country. One would expect Nigerian Spiritans to raise a prophetic voice against this state of affairs in the country. I am not aware of any instance in which Superiors of the Union of Spiritan Circumscriptions of Nigeria (USCN) issued a communique or statement condemning many of the policies of government that adversely affect the poor masses of Nigeria. One looks in vain for a prophetic Nigerian Spiritan voice either as a group or individually. Religious orders and their members usually have more freedom in such prophetic witnessing than do diocesan priests. Being among the religious orders in Nigeria with the most members one looks to Nigerian Spiritans for leadership in this area.

There is no doubt that Nigeria is a dangerous environment for prophetic witnessing. Nigeria is a country where the concept of the rule of law exists only in the books; where the government and the rich and powerful are, to all intents and purposes, above the law.²⁴ Nigeria has been described by many social commentators as a lawless country.²⁵ Raising a prophetic voice

²⁴ See the article in *Bloomberg*, “Army Habits Die Hard as Nigeria’s Buhari Defies Court Orders,” <https://www.bloomberg.com/.../military-habits-die-hard-as-nigeria-s-buhari-defies-court-orders/>; also the *Premium Times Nigeria* article, “How Buhari administration serially disobeys court orders,” <https://www.premiumtimesng.com.../233665-special-report-how-buhari-administration.../>.

²⁵ See the following articles, *Leadership Newspaper*, “Nigeria, The Absolute Lawlessness Within,” <https://leadership.ng/2018/03/31/nigeria-the-absolute-lawlessness-within/>; *Business Day Online*, “A Lawless Country,” <https://www.businessdayonline.com/opinion/analysis/editorial/.../a-lawless-country/>; *Vanguard Online Community*, “Is Nigeria a Lawless Country?” <https://community.vanguardngr.com/profiles/blogs/is-nigeria-a-lawless-country/>.

against the government and the rich and powerful in Nigeria has dire consequences. It could cost one his life. Over the recent decades some social prophets in Nigeria have indeed paid the ultimate price for daring to raise their voices against the government and the rich and powerful. But is it acceptable for Nigerian Spiritans to shirk their duty to speak out against evil and to defend the poor, the weak and the marginalized just because it is dangerous? It is not enough merely to speak out against the persons and structures that oppress the weak and the poor, it is also important to take concrete action to liberate the poor and oppressed.²⁶

There are some who may interpret my call for Nigerian Spiritans to engage in such prophetic witnessing as meddling in politics, which the Church frowns upon. In fact, not just the Church but our co-founder Father Libermann cautions his missionaries against dabbling in politics. In an 1846 letter to Fr. Stanislas Arragon, one of his missionaries stationed in Guinea, Libermann encourages his missionaries to cooperate with government officials but warns them to be careful to not by such cooperation dabble in politics. He writes: “Be on your guard . . . and do not leave the sphere of a minister of the Holy Gospel. The people must not see in you a political agent of the French Government, but the priest of the Most High and a teacher of the truth.”²⁷ Libermann was generally against anything that would bring the

²⁶ The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), for instance, is very good at issuing communiqués condemning government action or inaction but hardly takes concrete action to oppose the government.

²⁷ Walter van de Putte and James Collery, eds. and trans.: *The Spiritual Letters of The Venerable Francis Libermann, Vol. 3: Letters to Clergy and Religious* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1963, 167; *Notes et Documents*, [hereafter cited as *ND*], 7:159.

missionary in conflict with the government, urging his missionaries to always defer to government officials and to be gentle and prudent²⁸ in all their dealings with them. He went so far as to caution his missionaries never to attack the authority of government officials by words, even when they happen to be wrong, advising that the proper way to deal with government officials “consists in never hurting their feelings.”²⁹ Libermann’s primary goal in so advising his missionaries was for the good of the mission, for as he sees it, “We can match without the government, but we cannot match against it. If the Government is against us, the mission will soon be ruined.”³⁰

The context of the Spiritan missionaries to whom Libermann gave the counsels above are different from the context of the Nigerian Spiritans today. Libermann was speaking in the colonial context in which the colonial administrators were lord and master and the missionaries were expatriates whose permission to be in the missions could be terminated by such officials at any time. Nigerian Spiritans are citizens of an independent Nigeria who have rights and freedoms that are protected by the Nigerian constitution and by international agreements to which Nigeria is signatory. The power of the government to derail the work of evangelization is much less in present-day Nigeria than it was in 19th century colonial Guinea. I do not believe that Libermann would offer quite the same counsels to present-day Nigerian Spiritans if he were addressing them today. I believe that

²⁸ Gentleness and prudence are the two watch words that Libermann recommends to his missionaries in their dealings with government officials. See Putte and Collery, *Spiritual Letters*, 5:333.

²⁹ Putte and Collery, *Spiritual Letters*, 5:333.

³⁰ Putte and Collery, *Spiritual Letters*, 5:260; ND 8: 142.

Libermann would still recommend prudence and gentleness in dealing with government officials, but I doubt that he would counsel Nigerian Spiritans ‘never to attack the authority of government officials even when they are wrong.’

Conclusion

The Spiritans have a proud missionary legacy in Africa. From very humble beginnings the Spiritans have grown like the biblical mustard seed to where they can now boast of membership in 58 countries from almost all the continents of the world. Nigerians currently number the most in this worldwide Spiritan membership. Nigeria contributes the most personnel annually to the worldwide Spiritan workforce. This means that what Nigerian Spiritans do or not do have significant implications for the missionary life of the congregation. The congregation has in recent times been emphasizing the social gospel through its office of Justice, Peace and Integrity of Creation (JPIC) as an integral part of its mission. This essay highlighted some achievements of Nigerian Spiritans in this area, but submits that they still have much more to do to carry forward this message. It is therefore important to see to it that Nigerian Spiritans receive this message, internalize and practice it in their own homeland of Nigeria so as to be able to carry it forward in the many missions of the congregation across the world in which they are engaged. Nigerian Spiritans must have the courage to speak out and act to challenge the unjust structures of the Nigerian society, which hold the poor down and militate against their human flourishing.