

SOCIAL RESPONSIBILITY OF THE CHURCH IN DEEPENING DEMOCRATIC IDEALS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

The making of any great society is the responsibility of every part of the society. Social justice demands that all who are members of a given society should justly make contributions towards the welfare of the society. Democracy as a system of government with its ideals has been widely accepted in the world over for its human face. It has not been a hitch-free process in developing countries like Nigeria which returned to the system in 1999. Using functionalist theory, this work examines the responsibility of the Church in Nigeria, with particular reference to the Catholic Church towards building and sustaining democracy in Nigeria. The data used are from secondary source of information including Church documents. The work holds that the active participation of the church in democratic processes is paramount. This, the Church should do by conscientizing her members, remaining voice to the voiceless, promoting good virtues, encouraging those doing well in political offices. The paper recommends that the Church should always engage her members who are into political offices to guide them on their expected responsibilities which would promote democracy in Nigeria.

Keywords: Social Responsibility; Church; Deepening; Democracy, Catholic Church

Introduction

Democracy had been adjudged the most widely acceptable system of government in most countries of the world. This acceptance is in line with democratic ideals which place the people at the centre of decision-making, where powers flow from the people to the leader and not from the leader to the people. The tenets of democracy which give credence to fundamental human rights, the rule of law, popular sovereignty, popular participation, majority rule and so on account for the acceptability of the system as the best for human persons. Many countries have embraced democracy including countries in Africa. However, it is regrettable that in most of the African countries, the system is not deep-rooted as most of the democratic ideals are far-fetched. Nigeria which returned to democratic rule in 1999 after years of military rule, marking her fourth republic is not an exemption as it has been clear that democratic ideals are not yet the way they should be.

Religion as a striking factor in every human society has ways of influencing the attitudes and behaviours of members of the society. Eneflo (2019) observes that in matters like politics, some have argued that religion should have nothing in common with politics while others argue that religion as part of the society has much to offer in political processes. It becomes imperative to argue that since religion is a part of the society and members of the society are adherents of religion, it then follows that what affects the people politically, has a way of affecting the people in religion and *vice versa*. Nigeria, being a country that is pluralistic both in religion and culture, it is important to involve every part of the pluralistic country for the common good.

In line with the above, this work is set to make a case for deepening democratic ideals in Nigeria by emphasizing on the social responsibility of the Church in Nigeria. The Church as a part of the nation is rightly positioned to make sound contributions to the State by being alive to her social

responsibilities. This is so because what affects the political scene of the country, affects the Church. It is not therefore a case that the Church should remain aloof in matters of politics especially in promotion of democratic ideals which of course are not inimical to the teachings of the Church. This work is basically on the social responsibilities of the Catholic Church in deepening democratic ideals in Nigeria.

Conceptual clarifications

Social Responsibility: Social responsibility is an ethical concept which entails duties and obligations of one in working towards progress of a community or state. They are those contributions expected of members of a given group in building the group. In the current research, social responsibility is seen as the duties of the church in making sure that the ideals of democracy in Nigeria are well deep-rooted for the good of all.

The Church: The (Catholic) Church is described as the people of God. Defensio Fidei (cited in Atta, 2011) states that;

The one and true church is the community of men (and women) brought together by the profession of the same faith, and participates in the same sacraments under the authentic of legitimate pastors and especially of the Vicar of Christ on earth, the Roman Pontiff. (p. 35).

The Catholic Church is therefore made up of individuals that profess the same faith under the Roman Pontiff. Chiegboka and Izuegbu (2012) state that “the church involves humans who are categorised as the priests, the religious and the laity” (p.199). However, the researcher accepts the description by the Defensio Fidei.

Democracy: Democracy literally means people rule. It is a type of government where the ultimate power of the state rests with the people. It is that government in accordance with the principles of popular sovereignty, political participation, popular consultation and majority rule. It then follows that in democracy, it is the rule of the majority and people are allowed full participation in the process of government. In other words, the people are at the heart of democracy.

Democratic Ideals: Democratic ideals are personal qualities or standards of government behaviour that are felt to be essential for the continuation of democratic policy. Democratic ideals entail having in action all the principles and practices that make up democracy. These ideals that sustain democracy include: popular sovereignty which implies that the supreme power of a state resides with the people; republicanism which implies that the people reserve the right to choose their leaders and not leaders choosing themselves or chosen by a few; supremacy of the law which presents the law (constitution) above both the leader and the led. This is described as the rule of law; individual rights and freedoms which imply that the fundamental rights of the people are to be fully observed as basics for the survival of the people; separation of powers as well as checks and balances among the three arms of government which call for efficiency and elimination of illegality or arbitrary use of power in the process of governing. These ideals are what sustain democracy. Absence of the ideals entails extinction of democracy.

Democratic Experience in Nigeria: A cursory Look

From 1960 till the end of first republic in Nigeria, democracy has not been fully practiced in line with the ideals of democracy. The reasons are not far-fetched. Apart from selfishness of the political class, ethnicity and religious issues are part of the reasons. Oti (2023) observes that “the political space in Nigeria is dynamic and often characterized by intense competition and power struggles” (p.320). These struggles are in most cases based on ethnic or religious affiliations. The 1964 general elections in Nigeria that were contested by two political alliances, the Nigeria National Alliance (NNA) and the United Progressive Grand Alliance (UPGA) witnessed accusations of irregularities.

Visibly among the issues was the boycotting of elections in the entire Eastern Region of the country. Such evidence indicates lack of proper democratic ideals which serve as bedrock for the survival of democracy. The 1964 general elections was one of the reasons for the subsequent military intervention in 1966.

The second republic of the country saw five political parties contesting the elections of 1979 and six contesting in 1983. Though, the elections conducted by the Federal Electoral Commission were carried out in all the areas of Nigeria, however, the elections were not adjudged free, fair and credible. The abrogated third republic saw a kind of kidnap of democracy as the people who came out in their numbers to vote were robbed by the June 12, 1993 annulment of the presidential election. Such experience is one of the worst to be witnessed in an environment where people claim a return to democracy. In the current republic (fourth republic), elections have been held at various times: 1999, 2003, 2007, 2011, 2015, 2019, and 2023. These are outside off-shore elections including bye elections. Nigerians joyfully welcomed democratic government in 1999 as a way of ending military government. However, judging from the ideals of democracy already mentioned in this work, one sees serious lacuna in various areas of the practice. Elections have been manipulated which were proven by some judgments delivered by the law courts after elections. Again, one has witnessed low involvement of the people in electoral processes. This is attributed to the uncertainties that people insinuate during electioneering. The judiciary has not also helped matters in recent electoral judgments as evidences are ignored and technicalities prioritized. Using the 2023 presidential election as example, one sees that the judiciary concentrated more on technicalities, leaving Nigerians astonished with her judgment. Transparency and accountability are not fully witnessed in a democratic Nigeria which makes democracy looks like a worst form of government. The fundamental rights of the people are jeopardized ranging from unlawful detentions to harsh economic environment. The point is that judging from democratic ideals, Nigeria democracy still has a long way to go.

Democratic Governance and Catholic Social Teaching

It is important at this point to look into what the Church holds about democracy and good governance. What is the Church's position on democracy as regards realization of the common good- the basis for good governance? Citing Leo XIII's encyclical addressed to the Bishops in France in 1892, Greenwell (2012) quotes part of the encyclical to say:

In truth it may be affirmed that each of (the forms of government) is good, provided it lead straight to the end- the common good, for which social authority is constituted, -and finally, it may be added that from the relative point of view, such and such a form government may be preferable because of being better adapted to the character and customs of such and such a nation. In this order of speculative ideas, Catholics, like all other citizens, are free to prefer one form of government to another, precisely because no one form of these, is in itself, opposed to the principles of sound reason or to the maxims of Christian doctrine. (p. 4).

Choice of form of government is a matter of decision by the people involved. Since Nigeria at present has chosen democracy as her form of government, it is important to know the stand of the Church on democracy for the realization of good governance which is the concern of this work. The Catholic Church has not hesitated to point out the benefits of a democratic government, while yet pointing out the dangers of such a system. John Paul II's *Centissimus Annus* (cited in Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, 2005) is of great importance here in what the Compendium described as "an explicit articulate judgment with regard to democracy" (n. 406). The Church values the democratic system inasmuch as it ensures the participation of citizens in making political choices, guarantees to the governed the possibility both of electing and holding accountable those who

govern them, and of replacing them through peaceful means when appropriate. Thus, she cannot encourage the formation of narrow ruling groups which usurp the power of the state for individual interests or for ideological ends. (n. 406).

The Church embraces democracy on the condition of principle of participation of the people in governance. The ground for which the Church embraces democracy is where the ruling class does not think for themselves but for all. This understanding is very important as this work has discovered self-serving to be a challenge to democratic governance in Nigeria. The Document continues as contained in *Centissimus Annus*:

Authentic democracy is possible only in a state ruled by law, and on the basis of a correct conception of human person. It requires that the necessary conditions be present for the advancement both of the individual through education and formation in true ideals, and of the 'subjectivity' of society through the creation of structures of participation and shared responsibility. (n. 406).

The Church vouches for authentic democracy. This is what the researcher calls high quality democracy. Democracy which the Church advocates is not nomenclatural but practical as is the case in the contemporary Nigeria following the maladies that bedevilled the 2023 general elections. The Church distinguishes between 'authentic democracy' and one that is not authentic (as in Nigeria). The most significant difference between an “authentic democracy” and an unauthentic democracy relates to the substance of good governance: does it promote the common good, the rule of law, the dignity of the human person properly understood? Does it advance the good life based upon a proper understanding of man? Greenwell (2012) in his view says that if democracy is just a mere procedure, devoid of the substance, it is more of a hindrance to the good life than a benefit to it. To further buttress this, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace warns:

An authentic democracy is not merely the result of a formal observation of a set of rules but is the fruit of a convinced acceptance of the values that inspire democratic procedures: the dignity of every human person, the respect of human rights, commitment to the common good as the purpose and guiding criterion for political life. If there is no general consensus on these values, the deepest meaning of democracy is lost and its stability is compromised. (n. 407).

This paragraph is clear to every right thinking Nigeria that democracy is just as a form of government is not a panacea to good governance. It is more dangerous to use democracy as a cover-up and problems of a nation continue. No wonder Greenwell submits that “if democracy is built upon a people who have rejected an objective order-so that all morality is conventional, a matter of agreement only-then there is great danger of a form of tyranny”. (p. 4). Democracy by the name does not guarantee common good which democratic ideals help to sustain and improve, such the Church holds. In fact, the Church observes that if not properly understood and practised, it is a dangerous factor in a state. John Paul still in Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace writes in relation to moral relativism:

Nowadays there is a tendency to claim that agnosticism and sceptical relativism are the philosophy and the basic attitude which correspond to democratic forms of political life. Those who are convinced that they know the truth and firmly adhere to it are considered unreliable from a democratic point of view, since they do not accept that truth is determined by the majority, or that it is subject to variation according to different political trends. It must be observed in this regard that if there is no ultimate truth to guide and direct political action, then ideas and convictions can easily be manipulated for reasons of power. As history demonstrates, a democracy without values easily turns into open or thinly disguised

totalitarianism. (n. 407).

Democracy has values. Where the values are neglected, the actual meaning of democracy is defeated. Democracy is a means not an end. So, that a nation adopts democratic system like Nigeria has not made that nation a practitioner of democratic ideals. The position of the Church is glaringly clear. It is only when the values of democracy are practised that authentic democracy is established. This position of the Church becomes apt in Nigeria where the ideals of democracy have not been fully experienced by Nigerians.

Social Responsibilities of the Church in Deepening Democratic Ideals in Nigeria Effective Catechesis and Proper Understanding of the Teachings

Paying attention to the members of the Church by the researcher discloses that some members of the Church still find it unclear about why the Church should involve in governance. These set of members see it inimical for the Church to address issues concerning governance of the state in her gathering. In most cases, even when the priest tries to correct the ills of the society, it becomes an abnormal phenomenon from the priest. Owing to this background, one finds out that some people in the Church are not aware of the teachings of the Church. But it is not possible for them to know properly because many read their catechism just to be admitted into one sacrament or the other. The idea of teaching the people properly and not just for cramming sake has not been fully utilized. In many occasions, the Popes issued their encyclicals for the Church. It is obvious that most times the members of the Church were not aware of the content of such encyclicals which would have been very beneficial to the Church towards understanding of the teachings of the Church as regards her social teaching remains a serious problem. Ignorance is capable of causing lots of problems in any given society. Where the Church means to take proactive action on governance, it is of utmost importance that the people should learn their faith and society properly. This is one of the reasons some members of the Church still see Christian politicians as evil men because for them such is not in tandem with the teachings of the Church. Duty therefore calls for the Church to start proper teaching of her doctrine to the people. The Church should not for any reason assume that they (the members) know through their early years of catechism; that is not true. It is the submission of the researcher that the social teachings of the Church have to be incorporated into the catechism at all levels not for cramming but explanation matters. The people who are going to political offices should understand the faith-base root of what they are doing. Without that, it may not be possible to produce the quality individuals needed for good governance which can promote democratic ideals. The encyclicals should be explained to the people since in most cases, the citations there remain so difficult for some individuals to understand. The areas of the Church in the modern world of Vatican II should come to the fore. The issue is that for achieving this trend in democratic governance, the Church needs to make her members understand the teachings of the Church so as to eliminate misconceptions cum misinterpretation. Better understanding will enhance better involvement and better involvement will produce better governance; for “my people perish from lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4.6).

Leadership Training

The Church can make her influence in democratic governance through leadership training of her members. Leadership is a powerful tool that determines whether governance would be responsible or irresponsible. According to Siaka (cited in Akpogena, 2012), “it is not enough to make policies, structures and systems, unless the mind that makes the policies, structures and systems changes” (p.1). The Church's leadership training is not based on how day to day activities of the government is run on a bureaucratic setting but it is that which is basically on the training of the mind. Organizing leadership training for her members based on the above is capable of preparing her members efficiently for the task of governance. The Church should be braver to organize such leadership training for her members from time to time, for those who have secured either an elective political

position or appointed to ministerial work. Equipping such individuals with the teachings of the Church which they should uphold as they discharge their duties will go a long way in achieving the much sought good democratic governance in Nigeria. Institutes for the training if well established in each Diocese and it is functional will always be of more advantage to the people. The researcher therefore holds that in order to achieve her purpose in Nigeria, the Church has to organize leadership training for the people especially her members who are opportune to be in leadership stool of the state.

Improved Means of Social Communication

One of the innovations from technology is mass media. These include; radio, television, magazines, journals as well as internets. Today, social media platforms are equally available. One major benefits of this is that it has the capacity of reaching out to many individuals in a shortest possible time. The Church can therefore make use of this gift of nature through human hands to spread her position about democratic governance. The Church has to use the opportunities provided by the social media to enlighten both the leaders and the led to task them on good governance. The Church in her wisdom through the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council expressed this in the Pastoral Constitution on the means of social communication (1971)

As representative of the Church Bishops, Priests, religious and laity are increasingly asked to write in the press or appear on radio and television, or to collaborate in filming. They are warmly urged to undertake this work, which has consequences that are far more important than is usually imagined. (n. 106).

The Church was urged to utilize the service of social media to reach out to people. One cannot claim ignorant that the Church has hearkened to this call. However, different programmes on the social media have not witnessed much in the area of democratic ideals. It will be of great advantage if the Church in each Diocese in Nigeria should have programmes weekly on the issue of governance in Nigeria. Through this, people can even get the knowledge in their homes since everybody does not go to Church. This will even be more effective if such programmes would consider the immediate language of the people so that they could assimilate all for the good of the nation. The researcher therefore calls on the Church to engage on programmes that would help to transform governance in Nigeria through the means of social media.

Use of the Pulpit

Without being partisan, the Church can make use of the pulpit during sermon to correct the ills of governance in Nigeria. Faith comes from hearing likewise; change can also come from hearing. The Church leaders (priests) should be able to relate the scriptures to the social lives of the people so that individuals can apply such in their daily lives. One thing about the pulpit is that members of the Church accept most of the things said by the preacher to be authentic. It is not partisanship if a priest preaches for or against what happens in governance of a state. The Church ought to bear in mind at all times that a person in the Church is a citizen who receives the same treatment as others. If such is true, it is not improper to talk about governance of Nigeria, preacher of the gospel should not try to isolate governance from the pulpit. No doubt, such preaching must definitely attract different views but that notwithstanding, the message just as the word of God says, must accomplish its purpose. Some priests have distinguished themselves in this area. However, such preaching must have the purpose of pursuing only but the truth and not to undermine an individual. Once the purpose carries the truth, the pulpit should be used to advance good governance in Nigeria.

Seminars and Conferences

The issue of governance is very critical. Its critical position calls for a rethink of ways to always get it right. The possibility of getting it right could be achieved when people come together to share their

views on bordering issues of governance. The Church is part of the society as has been repeatedly affirmed, with that, she can organise seminars and conferences to give opportunities for wider view. Taking cognizance of the CBCN, the researcher commends their efforts but that is not yet enough, there has to be from time to time and all-encompassing gathering where the cleric, the laity and the political leaders especially those of the Christian faith would gather to strike a balance. Governance is a serious matter and once the government is got right, the society moves forward. In this work, there is advocacy for the Church to stand and organise seminars not only for the priests, not only for the laity but for both and the political leaders. If such a move is made in every diocese in Nigeria, change that is worthwhile will be maintainable in the area of governance.

The Families and Schools

For good governance through democratic ideals to be effectively observed there is need for proper education of the child. Proper education of the child provides the child with prerequisite knowledge that if properly utilized should benefit the entire society. The family and the school therefore have great role to play in the quest for good governance. The Catholic families should be repositioned to be a place for adequate moral education in line with the Catholic social doctrine. The parents whose duty it is to provide education to the child should be equipped with adequate knowledge of the doctrine of the Church. The saying that charity begins at home is not obsolete because a child well trained is a pride of the society. The Church should take decisive steps in forming parents to form their children. This is true because many of those who misuse political or public offices lacked adequate family training anchored on the Church's teaching especially on the common good. As the smallest unit of the society as well as the domestic church, families have role to play in the quest for good governance. The researcher upholds that if such formation is anchored on the Catholic social teaching, Nigeria would experience leaders who could make good governance a reality not a fantasy.

The schools especially those under the control of the Church should be a place to train leaders. It is on record that most of the people trained in good Catholic schools have distinguished themselves in various fields of their chosen career. One sees that once the Church goes back to the way those people were formed, the society would begin to experience men of conscience that would work towards achieving the common good for all. Many writers have agreed that things began to fall apart since the forceful takeover of schools in Nigeria from the Church by the government. Okeke (2014) in his pastoral letter mentioned this but was happy that in Anambra State of Nigeria, those schools were returned to their original owners by the then Governor Peter Obi. Okeke articulated that education of children should achieve physical, moral, and intellectual development; sense of responsibility; participation in the life of the society; openness to dialogue; promotion of common good; development of sound moral character; knowledge and love of God.

The above areas are all indices that could promote good governance. Okeke (2014) maintained that Catholic education especially is more interested in them. It is important that the present education system recognizes that especially where the Church is involved. For Okeke:

Catholic education recognizes that human being is physical and mental; he is material and spiritual. He is a moral being; a psychological being; an economic, social, political and religious being. To neglect any of these dimensions in education is to short-change the whole being; to pay attention to only a part or some parts of his being. (n. 75).

Schools where education is given are therefore of paramount importance if good governance is to be achieved. It is a call for the Church to revisit the basic for her education and devise means of achieving it because such is capable of guaranteeing good governance which gives basis for common good. As Okeke states:

The ultimate aim of all human actions, including striving for proper education is full happiness. Given that real and lasting happiness cannot be found here on earth, there is strong logical conviction that our quest for more in terms of happiness cannot be fulfilled by temporal and earthly. Education that is sound must therefore necessarily lead its subject to God Sound education is a responsibility that should never be ignored for any reason. (n. 77).

Be that as it may, there is a serious concern on education received in schools recently. The Catholic Church therefore is expected to embark on remedying the situation at all levels of education. There is urgent need to have better leaders in Nigeria and it is what a person has that he would give. On that principle, the Church has to make it a point of urgency to form leaders through sound teaching in schools. It is time to teach people using schools that one can still be a saint by promoting the common good. The researcher's thesis is that in addition to other means through which Church could achieve her vision of good governance, schools should be seen as avenue for proper formation of leaders of Nigeria. The Church has all it takes to do that.

Active Participation in Democratic Process and Governance of State

Another vital role expected of the Church toward achieving good governance by deepening democratic ideals in Nigeria is partnership with the government of the state. The participation which has been discussed above can also take place by the partnership. The Church should be ready to judiciously accept any partnership as may be demanded by the government. The Church in order to make governance responsible has to open her hands to accept any government in power whose intention is to work hand in hand with the Church. This is in way no politicization of the Church; if one looks at Anambra state of Nigeria, where the former Governor Mr. Peter Obi chose to have partnership with the Church basically in two areas: school and healthcare, one sees a clear evidence of improvement. It is to be noted that in the said state, the government handed over the administration of many primary and secondary schools to the missions who were the original owners of the institutions. With the government issuing the Church grant-in-aid for the reconstruction of the schools which were mismanaged by the government, the schools at the time of this research have improved significantly and healthy competition being witnessed. This is what partnership can provide. In the health sector, one can witness innovations with the presence of the Church in that field. In one of his speeches during the direct handover of cheque to the Catholic Archbishop of Onitsha, the Governor expressed happiness that the state government through the Church could achieve much rehabilitations and constructions at minimal cost because of the Church's involvement. He expressed that the Church is more honest than the government officials. This is not far-fetched because the Church has ethics which one is prudence. The researcher observes that this is one of the powerful means through which good governance could be entrenched. The Church in the state is to be commended for taking such social responsibility from the government. The Church should continue in such direction. In other states of the federation, the researcher advocates for such partnership. If the partnership would continue, there is no doubt, in near future; good governance would have been entrenched in the country. It is therefore one of the urgently needed role of the Church to accept responsibility from the government as partners in progress. Not only in the areas of schools and health care, other sectors need the presence of the Church. The Church and her members should see it as one of the phases of her apostolate to change the lives of the people-the common good.

In line with the above facts, with the proper understanding of democratic ideals which give rise to good governance, the Christian political leaders in Nigeria have great challenges of advancing the common good by providing good governance through commitment. The Christians who are in political stool of the state of Nigeria as a matter of urgent importance are challenged to carry on this herculean task of promoting common good as opposed to selfish interests which can only thrive

when democratic ideals are observed.

Nigeria is a difficult state to govern owing to the mindset of the citizens especially the political class. In a culture of consumption-oriented politics, it may not be an easy task for anyone to promote production-oriented politics. The Christian Political leaders must know this and then brace up for action through frugality, probity, honesty and above all the will power to salvage the state from the political demons that have held the nation hostage for years. It is time to show that Christian ethics must remain the watchword among the political leaders who are Christians by profession of faith.

Conclusion

Democratic ideals remain the only way to have full participation of the people in governance process of a country. The 2023 General Elections in Nigeria were marred by irregularities and such were observed by both local and international observers. The truth that led to such observations is that democratic ideals were jettisoned by those at the helm of affairs. Comparing Nigeria's 2023 General Elections with the United States General Elections of November, 2024, one sees a sharp difference in the two elections. The participation and peaceful cum quick conduct of the US elections are eloquent evidence of a country where democratic ideals are at play. In the same way, the 2024 elections in Ghana was very swift as well as the one of Canada. The Church as a part of the Nigerian nation has great responsibilities in promoting democratic ideals. The Church as a matter of urgency should be more proactive in discharging her social responsibilities by engaging more in activities that may promote democratic ideals in Nigeria which would lead to good governance-the realization of the common good.

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