

A CHRISTIAN RESPONSE TO VIOLENCE AND INSECURITY IN NIGERIA: INSIGHTS FROM GAUDIUM ET SPES

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Abstract

This study examines Nigeria's security challenges using the ethical framework of *Gaudium et Spes*. Despite ongoing efforts, violence and insecurity persist in Nigeria, due to the activities of insurgents, bandit groups, armed militias, and criminal organisations. This has significantly affected social living, cohesion, and order. While authorities rely heavily on military force and law enforcement, it is evident that such methods overlook the human, social, and moral aspects of the crisis. By employing a qualitative approach, the article examines *Gaudium et Spes*, security data, and Christian peacebuilding documents, and considers how Christian social thought might support more holistic responses. The findings show that *Gaudium et Spes* offers an ethical framework that emphasises human dignity, the common good, responsible public authority, justice, and the moral limits of force. Weighed against these principles, there are gaps in Nigeria's current strategies, which support the need for people-centred solutions. The research also examines the Church's involvement in pastoral care, humanitarian support, youth empowerment, and peacebuilding. It concludes that *Gaudium et Spes* provides a strong moral foundation for effective peace initiatives. It further calls for closer cooperation among Church organisations, government, and the wider society.

Keywords: Nigeria, insecurity, peacebuilding, *Gaudium et Spes*, Christian social teaching.

Introduction

Nigeria is currently confronting some of the most severe security challenges on the African continent. Organisations and groups monitoring conflicts report that across different regions of the country, there is a high frequency of armed attacks, militancy, kidnappings, mass abductions (including students, pupils, and their teachers), banditry, intercommunal clashes, and extensive destruction of homes and property. This results in the deaths of thousands of people each year (Agbajileke, 2025; Venley, 2025; Amnesty International, 2025). According to an ACLED (2024) Conflict Index update, data from December 2023 to November 2024 showed that Nigeria ranked 5th, with the country's

index level described as extreme. The report further stated that, as of the time of writing, Nigeria was the sixth deadliest country in the world and the 7th most dangerous for civilians. The situation underscores a national crisis with significant social, political, and moral consequences.

These overlapping situations of insecurity have adverse effects on the citizenry, resulting in widespread suffering across regions, including loss of trust in the government, disruption of education and medical services, large-scale displacement, and trauma (Olanrewaju & Sekore, 2024; UNOCHA, 2024; Internal Displacement Monitoring Centre, 2025). The typical way the Nigerian government responds is through military operations, new security policies, and tighter border controls, all of which focus on force, surveillance, and containment (Akhogbai, E.M., 2025; Adetayo, 2025). However, as some researchers have pointed out, insecurity in Nigeria is not merely a political and criminal problem; it also has deep social and moral dimensions (Eke & Adaka, 2019; Yahaya, 2020; Ugwu et al., 2023). Therefore, it requires more than a militarised response, which is limited in addressing the ethical and communal dimensions of peace. This context creates space for theological and ethical reflection that can guide a more holistic understanding of and approach to security and peace.

This article, therefore, aims to examine the issue of insecurity in Nigeria using the ethical lens of *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council's Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World. The concepts of human dignity, the common good, public authority, and peace, which the document reflects on, provide a moral foundation for understanding violence and formulating responses that promote justice and respect for life. The paper also examines the various ways Christian groups work towards peace and how these efforts can contribute to security and unity in the country.

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, descriptive method based on document analysis. The analysis uses three categories of sources:

1. *Gaudium et Spes* serves as the primary reference, particularly the sections on human dignity, the common good, public authority, and peace.
2. Existing research on insecurity and violence in Nigeria, including data from ACLED, the International Crisis Group, Human Rights Watch, UNICEF, and

other scholarly works.

3. Statements and reports, such as pastoral letters, communiqués, and documents from bodies such as the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria and other Christian groups involved in peacebuilding.

The study highlights ethical themes from *Gaudium et Spes*, such as human dignity, justice, the common good, and the moral obligations of public authority. It compares them with current security patterns and trends in Nigeria. The goal is not to establish causation or factors that cause violence and insecurity, but to explore how ethical principles can be used to evaluate government responses and the involvement of Christians in situations of insecurity.

Theological Framework: Ethical Themes in *Gaudium et Spes*

Human Dignity

In *Gaudium et Spes*, the Second Vatican Council extensively discusses the dignity of the human person (Vatican II, 1965, nn. 12-22). It reiterates that the human person is created in the image of God, and as such, is the centre and summit of all things on earth. It, therefore, states that the human person is the foundation of social life. Society should be organized in such a way that individuals are respected as persons, and not used for other purposes (Vatican II, 1965, n.26). It further condemns actions that treat people as disposable or as tools for political or economic gain (Vatican II, 1965, n.27). Violence, torture, displacement, and deprivation are attacks on this dignity. In Nigeria, the very acts that result in the loss of the dignity promoted by the conciliar document, such as mass abductions, targeted killings, and destruction of livelihoods, have become almost daily occurrences. Therefore, protecting life and restoring broken communities must be the priority of any security measures to be implemented.

The Common Good

According to *Gaudium et Spes*, the common good is the totality of social conditions that make it possible for individuals and groups to thrive fully and easily (Vatican II, 1965, n. 26). When insecurity disrupts education, agriculture, medical services, and communal life, it means that these conditions have been undermined and may become nonexistent. Studies show that insecurity and violence in Nigeria have led to limited access to education, disrupted stable food supplies, and disintegrated local communities in many parts of the country (Bertoni et al., 2019; Famine Early Warning Systems Network, 2020; Olanrewaju&Balana, 2023). If the government and citizens aim to prioritise the common good, they must work together to address the structural causes of conflict and create conditions that enable individuals to attain fulfilment.

Public Authority and Moral Responsibility

Gaudium et Spes establishes the purpose of political authority as serving the human

person. This authority must operate within the boundaries of the moral order, respect human rights, and be accountable to justice (Vatican II, 1965, GSnn. 73-75). The statement here is significant when evaluating Nigeria's response to security issues. While military operations are undoubtedly necessary to combat armed violence, there are reports and allegations of unlawful, arbitrary, or extrajudicial killings, human rights abuses, excessive force, torture, enforced disappearances, and failures in accountability (International Crisis Group, 2016; U.S. Department of State, 2020; Amnesty International, 2024; National Human Rights Commission, 2024). All of these actions contradict the ethical demands outlined in *Gaudium et Spes*. While those in authority are obliged to protect citizens, they also have a moral duty to respect the dignity of suspects, accused persons, or those in custody and to ensure justice.

Peace Rooted in Justice

Gaudium et Spes extends the concept of peace beyond the absence of war. It describes peace as the result of justice, the proper ordering of social relations, based on respect for the dignity of the human person. (Vatican II, 1965, GS, n.78). It identifies violence as resulting from injustice, inequality, and unhealthy political ambition. It characterises peace as a challenging moral task that requires individuals, communities, and political authorities to exercise moral responsibility. Lasting peace cannot be achieved through a security approach that relies on force and neglects justice and human dignity. This highlights the social roots of Nigeria's insecurity and underscores the need for responses that foster relationships based on fairness and truth.

Overview of Violence and Insecurity in Nigeria

Insurgency in the Northeast

Boko Haram and the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP) are the major perpetrators of violence and insecurity in the north-eastern part of Nigeria. The emergence of Boko Haram has been attributed to several factors, including governance failures, social and economic marginalisation, and the mobilisation of radical religious ideology (Onuoha, 2014; Pérouse de Montclos, 2014; Walker, 2016; Zenn, 2020; Onuoha et al., 2024). ISWAP later emerged from internal divisions within Boko Haram and alignment with transnational jihadist networks (Foucher, 2024; ACLED, 2025). For years, these insurgent and terrorist groups have continued to inflict heavy damage on the northeastern part of the country by attacking villages, schools, markets, healthcare facilities, and security agencies. This has resulted in a large number of internally displaced people, damaged local economies, interrupted education, and limited access to medical services (UNICEF, 2019; Education in Emergencies Working Group, 2023; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Umar et al., 2025). This context highlights the need for strategies that combine security operations with human rights, rehabilitation, and community reconstruction.

Banditry and Kidnapping in the Northwest

A situation not significantly different from that in the northeast exists in the northwest. The northwestern states of Nigeria have become a playground for bandit gangs and networks who carry out killings, mass kidnappings (including abduction of school children and teachers), cattle rustling, and raids of communities. These dastardly acts have destroyed farms and other means of livelihood, caused food shortages, led to displacement, and caused widespread fear (SBM Intelligence, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2025; Human Rights Watch, 2025; Alkali & Putter, 2025). Scholars have linked their continuity and spread to the proliferation of small arms (SALWs), climate change, ungoverned spaces, youth unemployment, and institutional governance lapses, among others (Yunusa&Tofa, 2024; Rufus &Ogbe, 2025). Addressing banditry requires more than military action. Measures that tackle poverty, strengthen local governance, and rebuild rural economies must also be put in place.

Farmer-herder Conflict in the Middle Belt

Long-standing conflicts between farmers and herders, driven by competition for limited arable land, worsening environmental conditions, the availability of modern weapons, Nigeria's porous borders, and weak dispute resolution systems, have characterised the north-central region of Nigeria, also known as the Middle Belt (Orunbon, 2021; Tari, 2021; Obikaeze et al., 2023; Jaiyesimi, 2025; Afunugo et al., 2025; Vande& Aka-Ajani, 2025). These conflicts often escalate into cycles of violent revenge, leading to severe consequences. Reforms in land management, mediation systems, and rural security arrangements will significantly help resolve the ongoing conflicts.

Separatist Agitation in the Southeast

In the Southeast, the agitation and renewed calls for an independent Biafra have introduced new layers of insecurity. These come in the form of attacks on infrastructure, security establishments, and the violent enforcement of the so-called sit-at-home orders that paralyse economic, educational, social, and other activities, leading to targeted killings, kidnapping for ransom, and other forms of insecurity in the region (Nnodim et. al., 2024; Alphaeus et. al., 2025). Although the agitation may have initially arisen as a legitimate expression of grievances and a protest against marginalisation and the lack of social justice and equality in that part of the country, it has been sustained by greed, government military responses, proliferation of arms, and opportunistic criminals who exploit it to pursue their economic ambitions (Adeforiti &Abang, 2024; Akaose &Onuoha, 2025). Akaose and Onuoha (2025), therefore, claim that the problem has become intractable. This underscores the need for dialogue and political engagement.

Niger Delta Militancy

The Niger Delta region of Nigeria has long suffered from militancy. It originated as a response to grievances by the people of the oil-rich area against the Nigerian

government and multinational oil companies involved in oil exploration, due to the neglect of the region despite the significant wealth Nigeria and the companies benefited from there (Dimas, 2017; Raji& Yusuf, 2022). Initially, it was non-violent, but it later escalated into deadly militancy in the 1990s (Dimas, 2017), and has taken various forms such as hostage-taking, sea piracy, political hooliganism, terrorism, and pipeline vandalism (Ojo, 2015). Dimas (2017) also noted that its resurgence in 2005 and 2016 resulted from greed and frustration among the militants. This has had dire consequences for the region and the country as a whole. These include environmental degradation linked to militancy, which has destroyed traditional means of livelihood and deepened poverty (Odoemene, 2008); declining student enrollment, higher illiteracy, and youth restiveness (Olori et al., 2022); stalled community development and economic deterioration (Eze, 2020); deterrence of foreign direct investment and disruption of oil production (Nwogwugwu et al., 2012); threats to food and environmental security (Okon et al., 2022); and increased insecurity and socio-political instability (Bassey, 2012), among others. Like in the other cases, a militarised response treats violence as a technical problem rather than a moral failure rooted in injustice, exclusion, and denial of human dignity, and which should be addressed through justice and dialogue.

Urban Crime and Political Violence

Many cities and towns in Nigeria are experiencing an upsurge in robbery, kidnapping, gang and cult activities, and politically motivated violence, linked to poverty, “godfatherism”, and an increasing number of jobless young adults (Human Rights Watch, 2007; Oditia et al., 2021; Anyanwu, 2024). Research shows that urban crime impacts negatively on Nigerian cities and their residents. It leads to loss of life and livelihood, breakdown of law and order, fear and anxiety among residents, economic disruption, and weak community security (Akinwale&Aderinto, 2011; Yusuf &Ojewale, 2023; Samuel, 2024). Similarly, political violence has its consequences; it scares investors, undermines national development, and weakens governance and social cohesion (Ibok&Ogar, 2018; Okonkwo &Akanji, 2025).

From the foregoing, it is clear that violence and insecurity in Nigeria are primarily caused by governance failures, marginalisation, dwindling land resources, the proliferation of arms, joblessness, and weak institutions, all of which have significantly and negatively affected citizens. The persistence of these crises is evidence that military responses alone are not adequate. This points to the need for alternative strategies grounded in justice, dialogue, social inclusion, and institutional reforms.

Christian Responses to Insecurity in Nigeria

Pastoral and Humanitarian Support

Church communities in Nigeria form networks and organisations to provide relief to victims of violence and insecurity. The relief comes in the form of food, shelter,

and reinterpreting aspects of Igbo traditional religion, often incorporating elements such as ancestral veneration, the revitalisation of various deities linked to different natural elements, seasonal festivals, and rites of passage (birth, marriage, death), sometimes adapted to modern contexts to accommodate contemporary life and perspectives (Isiani et al., 2022). Another significant feature is the veneration of Mother Earth, illustrated in the worship of the earth goddess. In traditional Igbo society, the earth goddess (*Ala*) occupies such a central role in the people's beliefs that any modern practice or revival of the pristine Igbo religion without reference to her seems illusory.

Neopaganism in Igbo society can be described as rooted in nature. Followers are convinced of *Ala*'s potency, and many avoid actions that might offend her designs (Onwuatiegwu & Mmadudiri, 2020). Although adherents believe in the transcendence of the sacred, which exists beyond every living creature in spiritual entities such as gods and goddesses, deities, and spirits, they also maintain that the sacred is present in every living being. They often perceive nature as sacred and interconnected with the divine. In their rituals, they utilise natural objects, animals, and living beings to connect with life, nature, and otherworldly entities. Rituals are, therefore, not merely performances but highly transformative events that can influence an individual through the power they are believed to invoke when performed.

There is significantly more involvement of the youth than the elders in Igbo Neopaganism. This can be attributed to factors ranging from their ease of adapting to change to the quest for exploring alternative spiritualities and the prevailing get-rich-quick syndrome within Igbo society, which is championed by the youth. Unlike their forebears, who showed genuine devotion to the gods, many of today's Igbo youth are attracted to Neopaganism due to promises of a brighter future and greater material wealth.

An offshoot of these beliefs is the infamous *Oke-ite* ("significant pot") ritual, which is believed to make someone who engages in it instantly rich. Here, traditional cultural practices of sacrifice and blood rituals, along with their potency, combine with the modern quest for quick wealth among Igbo youths. It is crucial to understand that this is not a traditional or accepted part of mainstream Igbo culture or religion (*Odinani*), but rather a dangerous and often criminal deviation within the current Neopaganism in society. The ritual consists of a charm or concoction prepared in an earthenware pot ("ite") using various ingredients. These ingredients are often reported to include bitter herbs, animal parts (such as dogs, elephants, monkeys, and bats), and, alarmingly, human body parts, sometimes specifically those of virgins or individuals who have not given birth (Nnatuanya, 2022; Mefor, 2025). The purported aim of the *Oke-ite* ritual is to bring sudden and immense wealth to the person who performs it, often without requiring hard work or legitimate means.

The *Oke-ite* ritual has been portrayed as an evil, barbaric, and satanic practice

counselling, trauma healing, and spiritual care (Emmanuel & Tanton, 2019; Efobi, 2025). This is a kind of first aid, before formal aid arrives or the only support when formal aid is scarce or unavailable. Evidence shows that the assistance provided by these church organisations, especially spiritual care, prayer, and counselling, is a significant resource for psychological recovery and healing from trauma in crises (Goodwin & Kraft, 2022; Ubong, 2024; Chidozie, 2025).

Liturgical and Spiritual Initiatives

Liturgical practices play a significant role in how Christians in Nigeria respond to violence and insecurity. Such acts as prayer vigils, prayer processions, and special Masses for victims of violence are ways they express their sorrows and hope, which help affected communities and individuals heal from their grief and overcome their fear. At various times, especially during periods of heightened insecurity, church leaders have organised national days of fasting and prayer, calling on parishes, religious associations, and families to pray for peace, justice, and healing (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, 2025; Atamanke, 2025; Ojugbana, 2025). The Church's liturgical engagement promotes communal solidarity and intercedes for peace in Nigeria.

Social and Developmental Interventions.

One of the reasons for the persistence of insecurity in Nigeria is that its structural drivers, such as poverty, unemployment, and governance failures, are often not factored into the search for solutions. Thus, Christian organisations also respond to insecurity by implementing measures that tackle its social and economic roots. Church-based agencies work to break the cycle of insecurity in communities that have been affected by violence through education, livelihood support, and youth empowerment. Studies show that the Church, directly or through its development arms like Justice, Development and Peace/Caritas (JDPC) and other faith-based organisations, has structures and programmes that strengthen local resilience and pave the way for social stability. These programmes include vocational training schemes, community sensitisation campaigns, and small-scale empowerment projects, agricultural schemes, poverty alleviation strategies, etc. (Olarinmoye, 2012; Ogbe, 2017; Ojo & Abdul, 2024; Caritas Nigeria, 2025; Nwafenna & Ayika, 2025; JDPC, Abuja, 2025). These programmes address the structural roots of insecurity, and nip them in the bud by providing livelihood support and social protection, especially where government presence is limited or unavailable.

Advocacy and Public Witness

Over time, Christian leaders in Nigeria have become a public moral voice that has consistently reminded government authorities of their sworn obligation to preserve the lives and dignity of citizens. This voice has spoken out against violence, corruption, and

the government's failure to protect its citizens. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), for instance, has on various occasions, through its communiqués, spoken out against violence, corruption, insecurity, human rights abuses, the wanton killing of innocent people, and the persistent hardship and suffering in various communities (CBCN, 2018a; CBCN, 2018b; Ndoma, 2025; Mayaki, 2020; Ezigbo, 2025). The bishops have also linked insecurity to government failures and have called for reforms which include, among other things, transparent leadership, respect for fundamental human rights, improved intelligence gathering, and prudent use of technology by security agencies (Samasumo, 2024; Isenjia, 2025). The public denunciation of the sorry state of affairs in the country by the bishops and other church leaders has undoubtedly influenced national discussions on governance and security. It has also challenged the complacency of the political leaders and exposed the structural weaknesses that have undermined peace and security in Nigeria.

Peacebuilding and Dialogue Efforts

Another Christian response to insecurity in Nigeria is through church institutions' contributions to peace building, including promoting interfaith dialogue, mediation training, and establishing grassroots peace mechanisms. For instance, at the core of the Kukah Centre's programmes is the promotion of dialogue among religious leaders, security agencies, and local actors to build trust and reduce conflict. The Centre also provides security tips to vulnerable persons in crisis-ridden areas (Kukah Centre, 2021). The Interfaith Mediation Centre in Kaduna operates similarly and has, alone and in partnership with other organisations, offered mediation training to Christian, Muslim, and traditional leaders and fostered interreligious cooperation in areas plagued by conflict (Interfaith Mediation Centre, n.d.; International Dialogue Centre, 2017). Research has shown that Christian institutions in Nigeria have the potential to, and have actually contributed to, bridging the divisions that create conflicts in the country (Shaibu&Nwadiakor, 2025).

Discussion: Linking *Gaudium et Spes* with Nigeria's Security Challenges

The ethical teachings in *Gaudium et Spes* provide a basis for examining Nigeria's current security challenges and strategies. A human-centred approach, as articulated in the conciliar document, challenges responses that rely solely on the use of force and ignore the trauma and social fragmentation resulting from violence. The document emphasises justice, which points to the need for reforms in policing, accountability, and governance. The concept of peace, as articulated in the document, envisions strategies that address grievances, encourage dialogue, and rebuild trust. Using these principles, Christian institutions and organisations can play a significant role in resolving conflicts and ensuring security through peace education, mediation, and advocacy.

Recommendations

1. Expand Pastoral Care on Trauma Awareness

One vital way to deepen pastoral care is to equip both clergy and lay workers with a strong understanding of trauma and psychological first aid. This enables them to deliver effective outreach programmes and provide better support to survivors.

2. Strengthen Peace Education

Peace education should be incorporated into the catechesis and curricula of churches and church-owned schools. This can promote nonviolent communication and reduce prejudice. Research shows that peace education can play a vital role in addressing some of the challenges relating to violence among young people, who “continue to constitute the largest percentage of perpetrators” (West Africa Network for Peacebuilding, 2012, p. 5).

3. Enhance Collaboration between the Church, State and Civil Society

Cooperation between these groups makes humanitarian efforts smoother and more effective, improves information sharing, and strengthens the early warning system.

4. Increase in Youth Development Programmes

The tendency and temptation among young people to join armed groups can be significantly reduced if they are offered vocational training, entrepreneurship support, and digital literacy programmes.

5. Promote Civic Education

Churches should promote and support programmes that teach citizens about their rights and duties, foster voter awareness, and promote human rights advocacy. This can play a significant role in building public trust.

6. Support Community-based Peace Committees

Grassroots efforts go a long way towards sustaining peace and preventing the escalation of conflict. Efforts should be made to support this through training, resources, and sustained accompaniment.

Conclusion

It can be said without fear of contradiction that Nigeria's insecurity cannot be resolved solely through military action. There is grief, loss, fear, and other scars that families, groups, and communities carry, which a response like the above often ignores. Indeed, the violence has inflicted deep human and social wounds on citizens and their communities. Therefore, any worthwhile strategy must address these wounds. To this end, *Gaudium et Spes* offers a moral framework grounded in human dignity, justice, and the common good. It thus provides an ethical basis that can be used to evaluate government responses and guide Christian efforts. Apart from their spiritual role,

churches lean into meaningful work through pastoral care, advocacy, and peacebuilding. Sustainable peace and security require the cooperation of the government, civil society, and religious institutions. This collaboration must be guided by principles that safeguard human life, promote justice, and uphold the dignity of every human being.

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