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## **THE PROSPECTS AND CHALLENGES OF DOING MISSIONARY WORK IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN SOCIETY**

### **THE CONCEPT OF MISSION AND THE TEACHING OF THE CHURCH**

From the Latin verb ‘Mittere’, the concept of “Mission” involves “sending” or “witnessing”, with a clear message to a place or territory<sup>1</sup>. Throughout history, God has often called persons to specific missions as recorded in Sacred Scripture.

Beginning from the Old Testament, Abraham in Genesis 12 was summoned to leave his homeland rather unexpectedly for an unknown destination and he left in absolute obedience. In the book of Jer. 1:4-9, the prophet, though young and inexperienced, was empowered by the Lord to be a prophet among his people. Jonah was also sent as a messenger of God to Nineveh (1:2)<sup>2</sup>.

In the New Testament, the practical claim for missioning calls us to listen to the command of Jesus, “As the Father has sent me, even so I send you” (Jn. 20:21), “Go therefore and make disciples of all nations,

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<sup>1</sup> Dagin Sylvester. Lecture Notes on “Missiology”. St. Augustine’s Major Seminary, Jos. 2016 p.1

<sup>2</sup> *Holy Bible, (The New Revised Standard Version Catholic Edition)*, Thomas Nelson Inc., India, 1990

baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit” (Mt. 28:18-20). “God desires that all people be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth” (1Tim. 2:4). St. Paul asks the question in Romans 10:14-15 saying, “How are they to call upon the name of the Lord and believe in Him and hear about Him if no one sends preachers<sup>3</sup>. So faith comes from what is heard, and what is heard comes from preaching Christ.

From the theological perspective, Paul VI in his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* states, “For the Church, evangelizing means bringing the good news into all the strata of humanity and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new”<sup>4</sup>. In the same vein, Benedict XVI speaks of, “the need to rediscover the journey of faith to shed ever clearer light on the joy and renewed enthusiasm of the encounter with Christ”<sup>5</sup>. In our changed and changing cultures, the mission of the Church must affect and transform the newly emerging cultures of our time. Therefore, the Church must muster its spiritual energy to bear witness to the gospel of Christ in contemporary times.

### THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA: ITS PROSPECTS

The church in Nigeria can be assumed to correspond territorially to the geographical entity called Nigeria which is situated in the western part of the continent of Africa with an estimated population of over 200 million people<sup>6</sup>. The country has 36 states including the Federal Capital Territory, with beautiful scenery, rich cultural heritage and a favourable climatic condition. English is its official language but its three major indigenous languages are Hausa, Igbo and Yoruba. Its major resources are crude oil and Natural Gas. The populace are adherents of three major religions: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion

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<sup>3</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>4</sup> Paul VI. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, 1975. no. 18

<sup>5</sup> Benedict XVI. Apostolic Letter, *Porta-fidei*, October 11, 2011. no. 2

<sup>6</sup> J.F. Ade Ajayi, Anthony Hamilton et al. “Nigeria”. <https://www.britannica.com/place/Nigeria>. Assessed 15/09/2024.

(ATR)<sup>7</sup>. Since Nigeria's independence on 1st October 1960, the country has witnessed successive governments, both of democratic and military nature. The civil war that broke out and lasted for three years, between 1967-1970 served as one of the very difficult and defining moments for the country's peace, unity, stability and progress<sup>8</sup>. The prospects of missionary work in Nigeria today are seen in the aspects of vocation boom, human development, providing education, delivering healthcare services, offering aid to the needy, and carrying out various development projects.

1. The activities of early missionaries from around the fifteenth century could be said to be the beginning of formal Catholic missionary work in Nigeria<sup>9</sup>. Since then Church in Nigeria has made significant growth and remarkable progress in both spiritual and humanitarian aspects. Thanks to the indefatigable, unrelenting and heroic efforts of the early missionaries. The tremendous impact and support of foreign faith-based institutions such as Propaganda Fidei, Pontifical Mission Societies (PMS), Missio, Misereor, Aid to the Church in Need (ACN), Catholic Agency for Overseas Development (CAFOD), Catholic Relief Services (CRS) and many others agencies cannot be under-estimated or over-emphasized. Available shreds of evidence at present show that the church in Nigeria has 9 provinces, 60 dioceses, 4 cardinals (serving and retired), 70 bishops, 4,256 priests and an estimated population of about 50 million Catholics<sup>10</sup>.
2. The Promotion of Indigenous Clergy and Religious in Nigeria has contributed in no small measure to the growth of the mission in Nigeria. The yearly ordination of priests in the different dioceses in Nigeria and the final profession of vows in the Religious Institutes has helped in bridging the gap of ethnic, linguistic and cultural variation.

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<sup>7</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>8</sup> Ibidem.

<sup>9</sup> Dagin Sylvester. Lecture Notes on "Missiology". St. Augustine's Major Seminary, Jos. 2016 p. 15

<sup>10</sup> David M. Cheney, 1996-2024. Nigeria: Current Dioceses <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/country/dng2.html> accessed 15/09/2024

If the gospel must be preached to and embraced by the people, it must appeal to their cultural sentimentality<sup>11</sup>. The missionary activities taking place at present, has place the church in Nigeria on the world map of history. According to the 2023 global Catholic statistical data released by the Vatican, “the Catholic population worldwide increased from 1.358 billion to 1.375 billion, an increase of 16.2 million from 2022, the continent of Africa experienced the biggest increase with 8.3 million embracing the Catholic faith between 2022 and 2023, Africa had an increase of 1,518 priests, interestingly, three countries with significant Mass attendance are Nigeria, Kenya, and Lebanon, Nigeria tops the list in percentage of Nigerian Catholics that attend Mass weekly at 94%<sup>12</sup>.”

3. The aspect of human promotion also has remained one outstanding mark of the church in Nigeria as it has consistently showed commitment in upholding the dignity of the human person. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria in its communiques since 1960 has stood out as a fervent promoter of dignity through their interventions in the process of National Policy formulations. They speak out against all forms of “injustices” and “inequalities” to end social evils and ensure the development of peoples which Paul VI aptly captures: “If you want peace, work for justice”<sup>13</sup>. Through the Justice Development and Peace (Caritas) Commission (JDPC), the church in Nigeria carries out its apostolate of charity to flood victims, orphanages, prisons, IDP camps and homes of the sick and physically challenged, offering them both spiritual services and material support.
4. In the field of Education, the Church in Nigeria has continued to make profound contributions to societal development by providing holistic and quality education. The primary schools, secondary schools,

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<sup>11</sup> Umoh Valentine, A Critical Assessment of Mission Approach in Nigeria, NA-CATHS Journal of African Theology vol. 23, March 2023 p.102.

<sup>12</sup> Nina Benedictka Krapic. Global Catholic Statistical Data (20 October 2023) <https://www.vaticannews.va/en/church/news/2023-10/fides-catholic-church-statistics-world-mission-sunday.html> (Accessed 3/1/2024)

<sup>13</sup> Paul VI. Message for the celebration of world day of peace. Vatican. 1972

universities and other institutions, set up and run by the church and its dedicated teachers, drawn from the Clergy, the Religious, and the Lay Faithful, have greatly improved the quality and standard of education<sup>14</sup>. The presence and impact of Catholic Education in Nigeria is helping to significantly reduce the level of ignorance among the populace and granting individuals the opportunity to contribute meaningfully to national development.

5. Missionary work has been greatly enhanced through the use of the available means of social communications. The Church in Nigeria, more than ever before, has come to an appreciation, promotion, and utilization of the modern means of communications in achieving its evangelizing mission. Today the media both print and electronic play a major role in the evangelizing mission of the church in Nigeria. With the presence of the Catholic Television of Nigeria (CTV), Radio Maria, Catholic Newspapers/Newsletters, Journals and Magazines produced in Nigeria, Diocesan Websites, Facebook Pages, and Twitter Handles, a wide range of information is made available to the faithful and many of them are conversant with current situations concerning the faith. Catechesis and other faith programs are also taught using these various media<sup>15</sup>. The menace of the Covid19 pandemic has further created the need to explore deeper into maximizing the social media space as a veritable means of evangelization.

### **THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA: ITS CHALLENGES**

At the basis of the shift in the approach to religion in contemporary times, is the ongoing negative manifestations occasioned by the influence of modern ideologies which poses some challenges to missionary work. Despite its missionary prospects, the church in Nigeria is still faced with numerous challenges. Among them are:

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<sup>14</sup> Umoh Valentine, a critical assessment of mission approach in nigeria, NACATHS journal of African theology vol. 23, March 2023 p.106.

<sup>15</sup> Ibidem pp. 104-105

1. Escalating Insecurity: For over two decades, Insecurity has been a persisting problem in many parts of the country as insurgents, herdsmen militia, bandits, and the so-called unknown gunmen have continued to unleash terror in different parts of Nigeria<sup>16</sup>. The Boko Haram sect since its inception in 2002 has consistently carried out a series of attacks on worship centres, public places, schools and homes of individuals resulting in the killing of many people including priests, religious, and seminarians. On September 7, 2010, over 50 gunmen alleged to be members of the sect freed over 700 inmates from a prison in Bauchi state<sup>17</sup> to mention but a few. Kidnapping for ransom has continued with 1,056 people killed in 1,130 reported kidnap incidents from July 2023 – June 2024. On the average, someone is killed each time there is an attempted kidnap<sup>18</sup>. The result is that many have fled their homes, abandoned their farms, shops, businesses and other sources of livelihood. The number of internally-displaced persons in Nigeria is ever-growing, with many children out of school, making them easy prey to human traffickers<sup>19</sup>.
2. Staggering Economic Situation: The failing and worsening economic situation in Nigeria has contributed in making life difficult for the citizens. Nigerians have been subjected to a life of poverty, hunger, hardship and suffering. The condition has been aggravated by the removal of fuel subsidy which has led to high cost of food items, transportation and meeting up with other essential needs. More so, the hike in school fees has made it difficult for the children of the poor to continue their education. Many unemployed young

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<sup>16</sup> Communique of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, Religion, Civic Responsibility and the building of a Better Nigeria. Abuja. 2023. P. 2

<sup>17</sup> The Guardian, Online News September, 7, 2010. <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2010/sep/08/muslim-extremists-escape-nigeria-prison>

<sup>18</sup> Various media reports, SBM Violence Tracker. Nigeria's kidnapping epidemic by numbers July 2023-June 2024.

<sup>19</sup> Communique of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, Religion, Civic Responsibility and the building of a Better Nigeria. Abuja. 2023. P. 2

- people are indulging in dangerous social vices such as drug addiction, cultism, rape, prostitution, scamming (Yahoo-yahoo) etc.
3. **Syncretism and Mixed Identity of Inculturation:** In the face of suffering, sickness, poverty, violent attacks, and childlessness, some Christian faithful who have received baptism and have been bought over by the blood of Christ, still make recourse to certain syncretistic practices that are deeply rooted in the African Traditional Religion (ATR), such as consultation of dibias, sorcerers, palm readers, fortune-tellers and native doctors<sup>20</sup>, for answers to some unresolved riddles of their existence as humans. These practices pose a threat to inculturation as some incompatible cultural elements find their way into the church. In a statement by the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria on abuses during liturgical celebrations, they rightly observed an alarming increase in aberrations during worship across the country. These abuses include, “irreverent handling of the Eucharist, inappropriate music including the importation of secular dance, commercialization of the liturgy, incorporation of local customs that are inconsistent with the faith under the umbrella of inculturation, the invention of rites, and the blessing of items not approved by the church as sacramental. These grave violations are not only a direct affront to the sanctity of the liturgy but also a source of scandal and embarrassment to the church in Nigeria”<sup>21</sup>.
  4. **The Wave of Pentecostalism and the Emergence of the Gospel of Prosperity:** One of the fastest rising Christian groups around the world are the evangelicals or as it is commonly called the Pentecostals. This movement has over the years sought to drain many people including Catholics who are ignorant or not firmly rooted in their faith. Though Pentecostal churches use methods that are aggressive; often it settles for merely verbal or sensational

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<sup>20</sup> Umoh Valentine, a critical assessment of mission approach in Nigeria, NACATHS journal of African theology vol. 23, March 2023 p. 108

<sup>21</sup> Lucius Ugorji. Statement by the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria on “Abuses During Liturgical Celebrations”. Abuja. 2024. P. 1

responses in which people profess that they accept Christ as their personal Lord and saviour. The Pentecostal movement poses a threat to the growth of the church in Nigeria with its strain of sola fide, sola scriptura, sola gratia, and private revelation, parading a religion of the spirit without discernment, a pneumatology without ecclesiology<sup>22</sup>.

5. Modernism: With advancement in science and technology, people easily turn to them as a new religion to get answer their questions concerning truth and meaning. This ideology first begins with doubts, slides into the decay of the faith, then attempts to rewrite or ignore the doctrines of Christianity (dogmas, sacraments, authenticity of scriptures), and finally ends up getting rid of the worship of God and morality. The answers provided by sciences even though partial and unsatisfying, constitute a crisis of faith.
6. Materialism: The materialistic spirit finds its expression in its grasping mentality. Such is the force of this spirit that many today even in carrying out the work of mission do not do so for the sake of the salvation it brings to the soul of the individual, but rather for the material benefits that can accrue to them for doing the work. Aside the materialism that finds expression in the possession of things, there is also information materialism. Addiction to Twitter, Facebook, WhatsApp and other forms of social media are the new forms of contemporary materialism which leads to the purchase of expensive phones, I-pads, and other sophisticated gadgets that keep pastoral agents glued to the internet to the detriment of the time that should be invested in mission work. What physical or tangible materialism does to the missionary agent is what information materialism does as well<sup>23</sup>.

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<sup>22</sup> Akinwale Anthony. The Global Church. Symposium Edition of First Things. American Magazine on Religion and Public Life. August 2024. np.  
<https://insidethevatican.com/news/newsflash/letter-25-2024-thurs-jul-18-a-symposium/>

<sup>23</sup> Peter Jonah. Paper Presentation. "Doing Pastoral Work in Fast Changing Societal Values Driven by Modern Day Ideologies: The Demands of New Evangelization on the Ministry of Priests in Nigeria" St. Augustine's Major Seminary, Jos. 2006 p. 9



## RECOMMENDATIONS

Having discussed the prospects and challenges of doing missionary work in contemporary Nigerian society, I make the following recommendations:

- **Inter-Religious Dialogue:** The Church officially encourages us to enter into dialogue with other religions to accept what is true and holy in other religious traditions (cf. *Lumen Gentium* no. 16, *Gaudium et Spes* no. 22). The church in Nigeria must engage in Christian/Muslim dialogue to promote social integration, peaceful co-existence, and the common good.
- **On-going Catechesis:** The priests and all catechetical instructors are as a matter of great urgency be fully involved and committed to offering catechetical instructions to the people employing more effective methods of teaching catechism that will keep the faithful firmly rooted in their faith in the face of rising Pentecostalism.
- **Media literacy and positive use of the various means of communication** can foster missionary enterprise in Nigeria, especially in areas with electricity and internet network
- **Collaboration between the Priests, the Religious and the Laity** is essential for bringing growth to the church in Nigeria. Rather than being mere spectators, the laity by reason of their baptism are called to participate in the work of evangelization in the spirit of communion, participation and mission which the ongoing synod on synodality stresses<sup>24</sup>.
- **The Nigerian church and Catholics in government** must learn to speak up against laws, regulations and policies that infringes on the ideals of the Christian faith.
- **Preferential option for the poor:** The church in its evangelizing stride must constantly undertake a mission to provide support to the poor,

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<sup>24</sup> Official Handbook for Listening and Discernment in Local Churches, Published by Secretary General of the Synod of Bishops Via della Conciliazione 34, Vatican City, September 2021. No. 1.4.

the marginalized, the migrants, and the refugees by empowering them to start up small and medium scale businesses.

- Prayer: No great missionary enterprise thrives without prayer. The mission and ministry of Christ on earth was successful because it began and ended with prayer. In addition to prayer, the Word of God and the Sacraments remain important elements for family, parish and community animation.

## **CONCLUSION**

The indices of missionary work in the Nigerian Church is a testament of the vibrancy of the faith of the people. However, this religiosity does not find so much expression in the living experiences of the people as a result of the many challenges they church in Nigeria is currently facing, thereby making the people easy prey to the negative influences of modern society.

However, the church in Nigeria still presents a fertile ground for the spreading and propagation of the Christian faith, despite the seemingly overwhelming elements that seem to bring it to its knees. Yes, the Church may go on its knees, not in defeat, but in prayer.

## **Abstract**

The culture of the contemporary time is undoubtedly a technologically and scientifically based culture. Now and again, we witness a growing dynamism characterized by societal sophistication leading to an excessive emphasis on rationality with a distinct lack of faith. There seems to be a paradigm shift in the notion, understanding, and practice of religion today as it is gradually being eased out in many parts of the world. Religion, once a 'teacher', is now a 'student' contending for a seat in the 'classroom of human affairs'.

In the face of these social changes, the Catholic Church has remained a sign and a sacrament to the world. It is the moral voice that refuses to conform to worldly standards. Its mission has consistently remained the same, following the eternal plan of the Father, that the Church on earth is missionary by its very nature and has its

origin in the mission of the Son and the Holy Spirit<sup>25</sup>. If the mission of the Church in the world is to attain full realization<sup>26</sup>, evangelization must constitute its truest and deepest identity<sup>27</sup>.

The church in Nigeria in union with the Universal Church has that important mission of spreading the gospel of Christ. Like any other institution, the Nigerian church faces multi-dimensional and multi-faceted challenges such as religious tensions, ethnic conflicts, insecurity and poor governance, youth underdevelopment and unemployment, syncretism, hedonism and so on. However, its growing receptiveness to the gospel of Christ as laid by the early evangelizers has provided a veritable roadmap for attaining the Church's overall mission: the salvation of souls<sup>28</sup>.

This presentation seeks to underscore the prospects and challenges of doing missionary work in contemporary Nigerian society with particular reference to the proclamation and propagation of the Christian faith to guarantee its steady growth and future expansion. This paper shall as well proffer some practical recommendations which can aid the Nigerian church maintain its relevance and identity amidst conflicting values and societal sophistication.

**Keywords:** Prospects, Challenges, Missionary work, Nigerian Society, Catholic Church.

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<sup>25</sup> Second Vatican Council, Degree on the Missionary Activity of the Church, *Ad Gentes*, December 7, 1965, no. 2

<sup>26</sup> John Paul II, Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, December 7, 1990, no. 1

<sup>27</sup> Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, December 8, 1975, no.13

<sup>28</sup> *Code of Canon Law*. India: Theological Publication, 1983, can. 1752

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