

THE CHANGING SPIRITUAL CLIMATE, CATHOLIC IDENTITY AND 2023 SYNOD: BURNING ISSUES

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Abstract

The competition in the current spiritual climate beclouds any claims to any spiritual hegemony. There is evident deconstruction within the religious domain and collapse of denominationalism. Spirituality is now open to hybridization and the most hit religious sects are the conservative ones because the development touches the core of their identity. For those who are familiar with postmodernism, decentralization is just one of its many traits. From a Catholic religious perspective, this phenomenon has a lot of implications because it shakes the very foundations of the Catholic identity in a multi-variant spiritual sphere. This chapter engages the Catholic identity especially within the Nigerian context, identifying its inherent challenges amidst the changing spiritual climate of the time. Employing the exploratory method, the work discusses these challenges in line with the forthcoming 2023 Synod and calls the Universal Church to consider them as issues that pose grave danger to the Catholic spirituality in the nearest future. The work contends that the 2023 Synod is a timely opportunity to track new strategies of safeguarding the Catholic identity within the Nigerian context especially and the world at large.

Keywords: Spiritual, Climate, Catholic, Identity, Synod

Introduction

My conversation in this chapter hinges on the thoughts I have expressed in an earlier work which focused on the future of Catholicism.¹ The only difference here is that in the earlier work, the focus was on my Local Diocese of Ogoja. However, in this work, the concern goes beyond Ogoja to the entire Nigerian context and flows side-by-side with the forthcoming 2023 Synod. For me, there is no better concern than that of salvaging the Catholic identity from sinking in the current changing spiritual climate.

¹ The work is entitled: "The Changing Spiritual Climate, Christian Faith and the Future of Catholicism: Ogoja Diocese Discourse". It is to be published in a Festschrift in honour of Most Rev. Dr. Donatus Edet Akpan, the Bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Ogoja.

As it is clear to every observant and critical mind that is at home with the historical trajectory of the Catholic faith in Nigeria, the spiritual climate has not remained the same. For sure, it is no longer business as usual because a lot has happened since the Catholic faith took roots in Nigeria and a lot more is happening even to this time. This leaves the Church with the cumbersome challenge of rising to the occasion in order to save herself from being swept into insignificance by the tide of the time.

I am not discussing these issues as peculiar phenomena in the history of the Catholic faith because as it is evident, the Church has always been familiar with challenges in her history. These challenges have proven to be sharpening *razors* that have continued to make her identity unique in a spiritually multivalent world. One could comfortably consider those challenges as harbingers of identity reformation or reconstruction for the Church making her relevant to her times and society. This is the idea behind the conversation in this piece. It seems to suggest that one should not be perturbed in the face of these challenges. However, to flow with such a mindset will be a danger in its own terms because while the intrinsic identity of the Church may be unhindered, the carriers of the identity, people of God, may not be insulated from potential dangers. This is why it is a clarion call to consider these challenges as burning issues especially as the Church warms up for the 2023 Synod. It is my conviction that when these issues are taken seriously, Catholic identity in the Nigerian context will be safeguarded from impending doom in the nearest future. Thus, I shall channel my discourse under the following subheadings: the changing spiritual climate; the threats to the Catholic identity; critical concerns for the 2023 Synod; and suggestions for the future.

The Changing Spiritual Climate

It is true as Okere has observed that “... the present state of our Christianity is marked by a high level of confusion” (16). The Christian faith is changing by the day and it is coloured by vagaries of spirituality (ies). As impacting as these changes are, they also hit the cultural fabrics of societies, transvaluating their values. These changes can only be discerned when one looks back at what was the case in the past comparing it with the present. One common feature of today's Christian spirituality is the seeming break from denominationalism. By denominationalism here is meant sticking to one's denomination for spiritual nourishment or satisfaction. While many people within the mainstream discourse of ecumenism³ have seen this development as a positive step in the Christian faith and a seeming answer to Jesus' prayer that all may be one, underneath this lies another burden of embracing *syncretic* teachings concerning the Christian faith. One thing about being syncretic about beliefs is that it often leads to arbitrariness in the practice of the Christian faith. The consequence of

³ There are diverse interpretations of the term “ecumenism”. However, the underlying idea behind the concept is that attempt to seek unity among the different denominations in the Christian faith.

this arbitrariness is that it makes the choice of belief an exclusive reserve of the individual. By this is meant the individual chooses beliefs that are comfortable for him or her to practice to the disregard of the tasking and discomfiting ones. Such a phenomenon has resulted in the compromise of many Christian ethical principles as the Christian ethical principles are drowned in troubled waters.

Closely related to the above is the phenomenon of personalized Christianity or religion. By personalized Christianity or religion here is meant the ability for the individual to build personal religious convictions which sometimes may conflict with the mainstream teachings of the parent religion.⁴ This phenomenon has been galvanized by the mediatized spirituality⁵ of the time. The media have boosted this phenomenon a great deal. Thus, Hoover considers this as a new approach to faith, variously called “seeking” or “questing”, but highly individualistic (30). Concerning the role of the media in fuelling personalized religion, Nwankwo avers: “Significantly, it has been suggested that the media, among other factors, have played a very important role in supporting personalized religion” (19). White expresses the nature of this form of religion in these words:

The theses of major sociologists of religion... hold that many people now tend to pull loose from institutional religious systems and respond more to their own personal project of identity and self-construction. There is a less conscious process of identity building and more one of simply responding to what an individual enjoys, doing what makes him/her feel good or what makes sense in one's own personal life (14).

Hoover expresses the impact of personalized religion when he submits that it comes with “a decline in the authority of religious leaders, institutions and doctrines. For a variety of reasons, people today are taking more responsibility for their own faiths, spiritualities and religious identities” (5). In this setting, Christians determine the beliefs and practices that their spirit accepts without recourse to the teaching authority of their religious or spiritual leaders.

The preceding concern has been fuelled by the failure of many Christian leaders to be exemplary. It is typical of a spiritual situation where the sheep no longer trust their Shepherd. Christian religious leadership has failed in many climes. This failure has evolved corresponding disdain from followership. There are instances where Christian religious leaders have been engaged in financial crimes, concocted false

⁴ Jake O. Otonko. “Media Spirituality and the Manipulation of the Christian Faith in Africa”. A Paper Submitted for Publication in Festschrift in Honour of Rev. Fr. Dr. Kriss J. Owan, 2020.

⁵ The term “Mediatized Spirituality” as used by Aswell Okechukwu Nwankwo denotes the emergent tendency for the media to make religion an ubiquitous experience. In other words, mediatized spirituality denotes a spiritual experience that is delivered or practised through, and surrounded by, the media, especially when there is a manifest dependency of such experience on the media. (Cf. Aswell Okechukwu Nwankwo. “Mediatized Spirituality: A Critical Appraisal of the Media-Religion Nexus in Nigeria”. *Romanian Journal of Communication and Public Relations*, Vol. 19, No 3, Is. 42, 2017, p. 18).

prophecies, stage-managed miracles and engaged in sexually absurd acts. For fear of being misled, many Christians have preferred to manage themselves without recourse to false Christian leadership. The pursuit of wealth and ostentatious lifestyles by Christian religious leaders cannot be overemphasized. As I have remarked in one of my works, religious leaders "... are the ones who wear most expensive clothes, drive most expensive cars and own mansions. In short, they live most ostentatious lifestyles". (Otonko 99). The impact of this materialistic lifestyle is that "hampers the growth of the spiritual in the adherent and makes him or her lead a worldly life" (Otonko Remoulding Religious Leadership for Sustainable Development in Africa" 82). Most times this lifestyle of Christian religious leaders is pursued through the exploitation of the poor Christians struggling to survive. This is because most of these so called Christian religious/spiritual leaders employ the mechanism of deceit by all means possible to exploit their subjects. In view of this, Gwamna complains: "We have miracle merchants, magicians, magicians and charlatans who in the name of 'anointing' have cheated an unsuspecting public" (185). On a general note about religious leaders, but particularly those of the Christian fold, I have underscored that "there are cases where religious leaders have been found guilty of one crime or another ranging from financial crimes, sexual crimes, ritual killings to deception" (Otonko 99). These among others have made them lose spiritual authority over Christians; and this is not without dire consequences on the Christian faith in general.

Attention needs to be drawn to the emerging threat of the time which could be captured as a practice of Christian ethics without the Bible or Scripture. It is a common phenomenon among Christians today to promote practices that the Scripture condemns. This is what is seen in the sexual revolution of the times. For instance, sexual practices and relations that are blatantly condemned in the Scripture are promoted today. A perfect example is the case of homosexual relations. Unfortunately, some Christians who indulge in such relations against Scripture resort to defence mechanism by claiming that it only God that judges. Divorce is another common phenomenon among Christians today. Flimsy excuses are used to enforce divorce and this is done without remorse. Related to this is the unfaithfulness on the part of the married. The institution of marriage is no longer treated with the uniqueness and the sacredness it deserves. Many enter marriage with the intentions of maintaining sexual relations with third parties against the Christian teaching on sexual morality. These and many other ethical issues which are giving divergent interpretations by different Christian fold only plunge Christians into ethical waters.

The issue of dual belonging cannot be left out here. It has been observed that many Christians are relapsing to traditional rites that are incongruent with the Christian faith. Many have promoted this practice under the cover of inculturation. It is in the

light of this that “many clergy men and women and laity fear that what we call inculturation may turn out to be another form of what fetish priests, witchdoctors and fortunetellers do in African Traditional Religion” (Kanu 243). Others combine their Christianity with occult practices. Quite disturbing is the fact that this category of persons occupies sensitive positions in their churches or denominations. Onlookers are left baffling as to the kind of Christian spirituality being practised. Maybe it should be labelled syncretism. This is because it depicts the description of Ntrie-Akpabi about African Christianity that is true of the Nigerian situation such that “a man is divided into two halves; the right hand held a Bible pointing to the Church, and the left hand held a fowl pointing to the traditional shrine” (2). These days, it has become a practice that is not hidden and people are proud of.

Desacralisation is an evident feature in today's spirituality. What is meant here is the stripping of the sacred of its uniqueness. Sacred practices that we embraced with the mysteries imbued in them are today played down with conterminous ordinariness. Sacred places, utterances and persons are treated with disdain. The Church is a place where anything can happen these days; prophetic utterances have become tied up with the web emotionalism and seduction in human speech; and Church leaders have become every other person who uses the name of God for self-aggrandizement. These changes should not come as a surprise. They have been fuelled by a complex of factors including the Pentecostal wave that has made the proliferation of churches widespread. .

The Evident Threats to Catholic Identity in Nigeria

In the preceding session, an attempt was made to pinpoint the evident changes in the spiritual climate today. As true as these changes are, they pose serious threats to Catholicism today. Following these changes, concerned Catholics should be worried about the future. These changes in the current spiritual climate have also brought about changes in the Catholic identity. For people who have been ardent Catholics from the old dispensation, it is not difficult to underscore that the future of Catholicism is at stake. Old time Catholics worry about the legacies that will be bequeathed to the next generation of Catholics. Unfortunately, these threats are mostly from within, thus, confirming the words of Benedict XVI that “the biggest weight on the church doesn't come from the enemies outside, but is born from sin inside the church” (Burek). Discourse on the threats to Catholic identity will be devoid of substance if the key areas of threat are not identified. It will be discovered with dismay that most of the critical points that have been discussed in the preceding section on Christianity in general will still be touched on here. This should not be considered as mere repetition. Of course, Catholicism is a main bloc in the Christian faith, and the factors that affect the Christian faith generally, also impact of it.

To begin with, the threat arising from the Pentecostal wave will always be ever-present. In spite of the resistance that Catholicism has put against Pentecostalism right from its antecedents, it (Pentecostalism) has remained a force. The extent of this influence has made it pertinent to begin to consider the possibility of Catholic Pentecostals or Pentecostal Catholics as the case may be. The young generation of Catholics does not find anything wrong with patronizing the Pentecostal spirituality. In certain climes, the influence of Pentecostalism is already overshadowing the practice of true Catholicism. Aniagwu has confirmed the sweeping impact of Pentecostalism on Catholics when he notes: “The number of Catholics who have left the church due to Pentecostal influence in our country may not be alarming ⁶, but it does merit serious reflection. It is not rare to find a person who goes to Mass on Sunday morning and spends Sunday afternoon at a Pentecostal prayer service” (30-31).

Furthermore, “within families, it is common for young people brought up in the Catholic faith and a Catholic home to become Pentecostals or 'born again' and end up evaluating their Catholic upbringing as a little better than paganism” (32). In the view of Lukpata, “on account of Pentecostalism, ... many Catholic believers tend to shy away from the traditional practices of the Church such as the honour of the Blessed Virgin Mary, use of rosary, veneration of images, belief in the communion of saints, and purgatory. These are all considered idolatrous!” (318). I have also observed the extent of this influence from both the ideological ⁷ and liturgical ⁸ perspectives (Otonko “Is God in Troubled Waters?” 45) Shocking enough, Enang notes that this ideological (as well as liturgical influence cuts across all Catholic groupings: the clergy, seminarians and the laity (258). For me, the fact “that Pentecostalism has brought a lot of pressure on the Catholic identity is no longer a subject of debate” (Otonko “Pentecostalism and Us: A Dynamic Reality” 108). This is what the current spiritual climate has borne of Catholics. The point made here will be clearer when this challenge is viewed side-by-side with the break away from denominationalism that has been highlighted as one of the hallmarks of the changing spiritual climate today.

Another key threat that has been boosted by the foregoing threat is the lackadaisical attitude towards the Catholic sacraments. While the sacramental theology of the Pentecostals is borrowing a lot from the Catholic prototype and consolidating itself,

⁵ The happenings now can no longer hold on to the view that the number is no longer alarming because even among the clergy and the religious the exodus is alarming, indeed.

⁶ The ideological mind-frame of traditional Catholics before the advent of Pentecostalism was one characterized by a greater acceptance of suffering as normal, lesser emphasis on demons, lesser craze for material progress, success or financial “breakthrough” to mention but a few. All of this has changed with the coming of Pentecostalism.

⁷ The Catholic Church holds her liturgy in very high esteem. In fact, the liturgy constitutes the anchor of the Catholic Church's identity.

⁸ However, in recent times, the liturgical worship of the Church has been severely Pentecostalized on many fronts: homilies/sermons, songs/hymns, prayers of the faithful etc.

many Catholics are treating their sacraments with levity. The most affected sacraments today are the sacraments of Penance, Eucharist and Holy Matrimony.⁹ Although people have always had problems with the sacrament of Penance, Pentecostalism has helped to build a recalcitrant disposition towards it. The common arguments are that the death of Christ washed away all sins and Christ has given us a free access to God such that we could confess our sins directly to God. This strips the priest of the privilege of playing the ambassador for Christ at the confessional. Reflecting on the attitude of some Catholics towards this sacrament, Enang notes: “The Sacrament of Reconciliation has almost vanished from their vocabulary and vocabulary” (310). The Eucharist has been reduced to a common ritual which is very ordinary. This resonates the Protestant position of mere representation of Christ in the sacred species. Thus, the sacred disposition expected for the reception of the sacrament is no longer observed by many Catholics. One cannot ignore the concern associated with the decorum required during Eucharistic adoration.

Thus, Okafor observes: “It is unfortunate that in this era and because of the in-road of Pentecostalism within the Church, noisy prayer and choruses have gained much currency and ascendancy within our liturgical celebrations” (332). In terms of the sacrament of Matrimony, the Catholic Church has remained one of the most protective of the institution of marriage right from antiquity. True Catholicism abhors divorce and where it is granted (if at all it is granted), the Church has always done it with groans as the last resort. Nowadays, many Catholics find nothing wrong with divorce and seek it not as a last option after many other efforts, but as the last option. Commenting on this, Mose notes: “Christian marriages and families have unfortunately suffered greatly and bitterly from ... attacks ranging from the rise in civil divorce, attempts and successes at legalizing abortion... sterilization, homosexual unions, surrogate motherhood, the commercialization of sex, eugenics and artificial family planning etc.” (157). This attitude has been fuelled by the current spiritual climate that has evolved a Christian ethics without the Scripture.

The scourge of secularism has continued to threaten the Catholic faith as it did in the past. Mbefo is rightly noted that “it has been claimed that secularism, represented by the secular spirit marks the spirit of our age” (85). Within a secularist context, “reality is no longer transferred to the sacred, to the religious or to the divine sphere” (Amato 8). At the time this trait was dominant in the West, the hope of Catholic faith rested in Africa; and as Gwamna has observed, Africa is a key player to the global shift of Christianity to the South (151). One can understand why Diseko citing the US-based Pew Research Center observed: “Africa has the fastest growing Catholic

⁹ In addition to the above list of sacraments, Joseph Obok Lukpata has added baptism (Cf. Joseph Obok Lukpata. “Catholic Liturgy and the Influence of Pentecostalism”. *Testimony of Faith: A Centenary of Catholicism in Ogoja*. Ed. Kekong Bisong. (Onitsha, Nigeria: IHM Madonna Press, 2021), 318.

population in the world, while Western Europe, once regarded as the heartland of Christianity, has become one of the world's most secular regions". It seems difficult to promote this view today as the secular spirit has taken the better of the Catholics in Africa. On account of this disturbing development, Okere observes: "We are living in the hey-day of secularism, the age of the worship of material things, of a false sense of a coming of age, of the loss of a sense of sin and of the eclipse of God" (272). Although claims about the growth in number of Catholics may be made today especially when compared with the West, this growth has come with a Catholic population that is ever secularist. There is a seeming attitude of disdain among Catholics especially of the elite class regarding the sacred. Religious truths are no longer held sacred and sacrosanct, but manipulated to suit their people's whims and caprices. The voice of the clergy is no longer considered as prophetic and the tendency of manipulation is evident in relation to the things of the sacred. This secular attitude has bred individualism in matters of the Catholic faith. Okere prefers to call this attitude of the Catholic elite "the religious indifference of the elite".¹⁰ It shows forth in traits such as being put off by the authority structure of the Church, moral laziness which breeds antagonism against the Church in matters related to sex, confession and the like (Onuorah 112). Okere points to the negative impact of this secularist attitude when he writes: "The individual wants to be left alone to practise his religion if he wants to. The religious community, the Church fades away into irrelevance, unable to exert on its members the constraining and normative influence which hitherto ensued both orthodoxy and orthopraxis" (112). This secularist attitude has affected the much expected impact that the Catholic faith should have in matters that affect the country generally.

The re-emergence of traditional forms of beliefs and practices is another threat to Catholicism in Nigeria. This challenge can best be captured in the whole concept of dual belonging. Gavini D'Costa submits that the term "dual belonging" "is contested and there is a broad lexical array of terms denoting slightly different, but often related, phenomena" (105). Sometimes, concepts such as "dual belongs", "multiple belongs", "hyphenated belongs", "hybrid belongs" are used. The complexity in the use of these concepts is not the concern of this chapter. Within this discourse, the idea of dual belonging emphasises the practise of other beliefs in addition to Catholic beliefs. The relapse to traditional practices has fuelled this phenomenon among Christians. I have noted somewhere thus: "In the name of inculturation, many Christians have endorsed cultural practices that are unchristian" (Otonko "Beyond the Rhetoric of the 'Next Christendom'?" 7). Udoh paints a picture of this phenomenon among Catholic Christians as follows:

¹⁰This is the title of the lecture delivered by Monsignor Professor Theophilus Okere to the Nigerian Federation of the Catholic Students, Imo State University, Aba Campus, Saturday, January 19, 1985.

Thousands come to our churches. Our cathedrals and chapels are filled to capacity every Sunday and during important celebrations like harvest and bazaars. A lot of people also make huge donations for the upkeep of the church. Still many also avail themselves of the Sacraments.... But often, there are reports that practicing Christians are equally idol worshippers. They swear on idols, erect hidden shrines in their homes. They hide fetishes in their shades in the market stalls and in their workshops” (35).

The foregoing observation does not portray any authentic practice of the Christian faith nay Catholicism because it exemplifies maintaining double standard or identity. Unfortunately, this situation has become a fashion or style for many Catholics either openly or secretly.

Mention must be made of the threat arising from spiritual leadership. Spiritual leadership constitutes the front burner upon which the Church is looked at. This implies that Catholic spiritual leadership must not allow any room any actions that will be counteractive to the promotion of the faith. Whether we like it or not, the clergy remains the mirror of the Church in Nigeria and whatever comes from them impacts a lot on the image of the Church. Some scholars have observed a number of concerns with the spiritual leadership of the Catholic Church in Nigeria. Ahiokhai commenting on this pitched his discourse on tribalism, lack of accountability, clericalism and classism (16). He observed that the Church in Nigeria has become a vehicle of promoting tribalism. This could be tied to the happenings the church has had on recent years ranging from appointment of church leaders of dioceses, admission of candidates for the training to the priesthood, ordination of priests, appointment of the laity to positions in the church. This is fostered internal division in the church, wounding the universal character of the Church. Lack of accountability to the people has led to the misuse of the finances of the church and the condoning of scandals without accountability to the faithful of often feel scandalized when they get to know the truth. There is also the problem of materialism among church leaders which has made them targets to hoodlums whom before now could have a change of mind over their evil act at the encounter with the clergy. Clerical flamboyance portrays another side of the coin as the political class as the life of simplicity is jettisoned. These among others are the threats to the Catholic faith in Nigeria

Critical Areas of Concern and the 2023 Synod

The Holy Father, Pope Francis officially inaugurated a two-year process called *a synod on synodality*,” officially known as *Synod 2021-2023: For a Synodal Church* on the 10th of October, 2021 (Aneke). Obanure underscores that “this two-year process of Synod on Synodality is essentially part of the already existing organ of the Church, that is, the Synod of bishops but it is now designed to involve in a more

practical way every member of the Church” (1). He continues by stating the aim of the synod as follows: “Synod on Synodality, therefore, aims to invite every member of the Church to strengthen communion, participate actively in Church life, and become more active as agents in the mission of the Church through '*listening to one another*' (by encouraging one another and helping each other to grow)” (1) In the spirit of this Synod and its aim, it becomes pertinent to engage with the challenges that the Church in Nigeria faces in the effort at communicating the Catholic identity in spiritually divergent society. These challenges are tied to a plethora of factors.

First, the breakdown in family values is a great challenge. The diocese has continued to urbanise and this urbanisation has come with a lot of impact on the family values. As it were, the quest for greener pastures has driven many children away from their parents. Battered by the socio-economic and political situation of the country, many have interpreted their discomfiting situations with spiritual undertones. This has made them ready preys to other denominations who promise them emancipation from their predicaments. Often, these children return to their homes with the message of liberation that pits them against the dull and timid spiritualistic of the Catholic faith. Parents who have lost control over their children are unable to control their spiritual choices nowadays as children are left to fend on their own even when they have little understanding of the antics of the time. The implication is that today's parents have no one to bequeath their Catholic legacies. When can understand what danger this poses for the future.

There is also the catechetical challenge that must be reckoned with. One of the best ways to destroy a nation or people is to destroy their educational system. The evidence of this is clear in our Nigerian situation. When this is translated to the realm of faith, the challenge becomes more glaring. The Church is hanging today on a weak catechetical foundation. Part of the problem is that the catechesis has become a responsibility left to people who are not versed in the Catholic faith and her teachings. The much some of those instructors can give are basic catechism. Our age is the one that a lot of teachings are overturned to suit our idiosyncrasies to the neglect of the truth. There are many Catholics who are very ignorant about the Church's position regarding sexual morality such as the use of contraceptives and new reproductive techniques. In the face of challenges that come in these areas, many ignorant Catholics are nothing but preys before attractive teachings that are not founded in Scripture either explicitly or implicitly. This blameworthy ignorance should worry concerned Catholics about the future of the Church in Nigeria.

The emerging trend of syncretism is another important area of concern. This is tied to the double standard that many Christians maintain where Catholics profess Christ and pay allegiance to traditional deities at the same time. Mbefo prefers to call this

the phenomenon of resurgence and in his words he writes: “By 'resurgence', I mean what may be called double-dealing by Christians, something which, if uncontrolled, may result in neo-paganism....It has been noticed that some Christians ... do not see any contradiction between attending Christian service and worshipping at the shrines of the traditional deities. They carry holy water with the same zeal as they carry talisman and fetish” (114). In the name of inculturation, many Catholics have relapsed to traditional rituals that are opposed to the gospel values. “The explanation they give is that the practices (Christian and traditional) are complementary to each other and when one fails, the other replaces it. This is dual allegiance which the first commandment of God abhors” (Otonko “The Complexities of the Nigerian Nation” 90). Iroegbu acknowledges this when he writes: “In our local church here, the challenge of many falling back to African Traditional Religion or who never really left it in the first place is prevalent” (115). Unfortunately, most of those who pursue this kind of spirituality occupy leadership positions in the Church. Knowing that these persons pursue a spirituality that gives the impression of serving two masters at a time becomes a scandal to the Catholic faith. Quite appalling is the fact that these persons express this unwelcome spirituality without fear or shame. It goes back to confirm the suspicion of those who have been anti-Catholic that the Catholic is idolatrous.

Secularization is already eating deep into the mainstream of Catholicism in Nigeria. Desacralisation has become glaring to even non-Catholics. Amafilé views desacralisation as an attitude that “emphasizes a hostile attitude towards concrete forms of Christianity” (129). Desacralisation here is not used in its extreme sense, but in terms of the attempt to reduce that which is sacred to the ordinary. It is quite evident among practising Catholics today. For instance, before now, the Catholic Church was seen as a blessing wherever it was sited. Many saw it as a privilege to gift the Church worship spaces sometimes without asking for anything in return. This sacred conception of the Church blessed her with so much wherever she was established. Today, the reverse has become the case to the extent that Church members even charge the Church to court. On several occasions, the Church has had to engage in dialogue sessions to utilize pieces of land she had owned from time. This is because the acclaimed owners of the land have decided to make a *u-turn* over their land or demanded very exorbitant financial gains for the land. For every true Catholic, this should be a thing of concern because it portends a lot of danger for the Church in the nearest future.

The disappearing mystery surrounding the Catholic priesthood cannot be left out. It seems Catholic spiritual leadership is over-engaging with the laity. For sure, the priest is supposed to be close to his flock, but this closeness must be done within reasonable limits. When this is not the case, the brotherhood of the priesthood is

broken and this impacts negatively on the faith of the people. There are established occasions where priests team up with the laity to fight themselves. This is a scandal to the priestly brotherhood and a slap to the leadership of the faith. Such occasions only make the priests to look too ordinary, and the more ordinary the priests become, the more the Catholic faith is steeped in danger. The priests, though humans, must be extraordinary in many aspects of life. This makes them more suiting to the spiritual leadership position they occupy in the Catholic faith.

Last but not least is the issue of insecurity that is rocking the Catholic faith today. While insecurity is a general problem in the Nigerian setting, it is not difficult to figure out how it impacts on the practise of the Catholic faith in Nigeria. Over the years, the Catholic Church in Nigeria has witnessed persecutions in both mild and severe forms ranging from doctrinal attacks from other Christian denominations, though kidnapping of her ministers (Priests and Bishops), to bombing of Catholics during worship. The incident at St. Francis Xavier Catholic Church in Owo, Ondo State, in southwestern Nigeria where worshippers were attacked during Mass with at least 40 people were confirmed dead, with more than 60 injured people still in the hospital (McKeown), and the kidnapping and immediate slaughter of Frs. Vitus Borogo (Kaduna Archdiocese) and Christopher Odia (Auchi Diocese) are still fresh. The lackadaisical attitude of the government in responding to these security challenges has made it abundantly clear how unsafe it is to practise faith in Nigeria. This challenge of insecurity has driven many Catholics to find more pragmatic security covers for themselves making them go syncretistic by relapsing to traditional means of security that are run counter to the true Catholic identity they should represent.

Suggesting the Way Forward

From the unfolding of recent global indices, the signs of the time do not portend a good future for the Catholic faith and identity. This implies that serious action must be taken to prevent the undesirable. The Church in Nigeria must confront these challenges to severe Catholic identity from receding among the denominations within the Christian fold and the overall religious experience within the country. Among many other steps the Church needs to take, the following needs to be done, namely, revitalizing catechesis, revisiting spiritual leadership, rethinking responsible parenthood and rethinking security.

Revitalizing Catechesis: The observation of Okere concerning the evident challenges faced by Catholics in the face of confused Christianity must be taken seriously because as he underscores about them “... their preparation to resist the temptation to succumb to these allures has been minimal” (17). In the light of this, the need for the revitalizing of catechesis in Nigeria cannot be overemphasized. Doing

this must transcend the services of lay catechists and involve the ordained ministers. One can understand why the John Paul II has called the bishops “Catechists par excellence” (“Catechesis Tradendae”No. 63.53). The priests are not exempted from this call to be Catechists because as John Paul II further notes:

The Council has called you instructors in the faith; there is no better way for you to be such instructors than by devoting your best efforts to the growth of your communities in the faith. Whether you are in charge of a parish, or are chaplains to primary or secondary schools or universities, or have responsibility for pastoral activity at any level, or are leaders of large or small communities, especially youth groups, the Church expects you to neglect nothing with a view to a well-organised and well-oriented catechetical effort (“Catechesis Tradendae”No. 64.54).

Indeed, this catechetical revitalization must employ new strategies that are suitable for the time. Beyond that this catechesis must be deep and wide; it must go beyond the periphery of mere recital of prayers and the like. Quite pertinent is the need for this catechesis to consider the contemporary means that secular ideologies are plaguing the Catholic faith and devise ways to frustrate them. Contending teachings that have the victims of arbitrary interpretations should be given special attention. When the catechesis is deep and wide, the threats of Pentecostalism and ethical arbitrariness would be checked. The suggestion of Ogabo that the Church should revitalize catechesis with strategies that are akin to the spirit of the time is important here 25). Thus, this catechesis should be process-driven, content-driven; develop a culture of solidarity and subsidiarity; develop a culture of apprenticeship; there should be increased passion for catechesis; there should be training/retraining of catechists; and improvement in method(s) of catechesis (25).

Re-engineering Responsible Parenthood: The need to re-engineer responsible parenting according to the teaching of the Catholic Church is pertinent. A comparison of the present situation with the past will be of help. It will not be too tasking to organize a synod on responsible parenting. The importance of this should be put side-by-side with the role of the family in safeguarding the Catholic identity and faith. Future Catholicism cannot depend on mere catechesis without responsible parenting as far as the future is concerned. The future generation must be properly *Catholicized* by the parents of today. This parenting will cover all dimensions of the child's growth; spiritual, moral, social, educational etc. Pope Paul VI understood the role of responsible parenting when he called Christian parents to cater for the spiritual and material good of the children, taking into account the interests of the family, the society and the Church (No.49). In the light of this, Edi avers with regards to the parents that they should ensure that “...what they do corresponds to the will of God the Creator” (152).

Responsible Leadership: Catholic leadership should have an introspective look at itself and make necessary adjustments. It must make its prophetic voice louder by being a sign of contradiction in a complex society. The vows of chastity, obedience and poverty should be saved from parochial interpretations. Catholic Church leaders should strive in the challenging spiritual climate to live true to their calling. When they assume the exemplary position in all ramifications, the laity would have in them models of the faith that would exemplify the good shepherds. Pertinent to observe here too in the consideration of the role of leadership in sustaining the Catholic faith is the training of candidates for the priesthood. Would-be priest should come with a mindset that guarantees true witnessing to the Christian faith according to Catholic traditional norms and practices. Leadership training should also extend to the laity occupying key positions within the church in terms of training and administration. They must understand the dividing line between secular and ecclesiastical leadership. This is not to assume that leadership in the secular setting is supposed to be different from that in the Church because the Catholic Social Teaching calls all Christians to translate the gospel values in their social milieu. However, the secular climate of our society today makes it clear that its values are different by its indifference to Christian teachings. This counteractive disposition must be understood and necessary steps taken to avoid its influences.

Rethinking Security: The current security situation in the country and especially as it relates to the Catholic Church requires proper rethinking. Maybe a research into how the early Church fought insecurity will help a great deal. While the Church continues to promote the gospel of peace and reconciliation, current happenings show that enemies of the Church are capitalizing on this disposition of the Church to do her harm. Thus, the Church should evolve a security apparatus that will make her feared by impending attackers. Of course, we have Catholic soldiers, police and other security outfits. Their services should be seriously employed to protect church premises and members during worship. The Knights should revisit their original function of protecting the Church and her ministers. There is need to emphasise the gospel of self-defence to ensure that Catholics are not insecure. Catholic public officers should make their impact felt in addressing security issues concerning their fold. When these efforts are not put in place, the Catholic faith may be losing its significance and Cathedrals and churches may become empty tombs without worshippers.

Towards a Conclusion

The Christian spiritual terrain will continue to be influenced by forces from within the fold and outside it. Different spiritual experiences will continue to surface as well. Many of these influences will continue to impact the identity of the Catholic

faith. This calls the Catholic Church to build better resilience in order to ensure that her identity is kept intact in the face of the changes within the current spiritual climate. Ensuring that the integrity of the Catholic faith is maintained will require the efforts of all and sundry, that is, both the clergy and the laity. The Catholic heritage is always intergenerational and that fact must always be respected and maintained. As the Christian spiritual terrain keeps changing, the strategies of the Church in adjusting to these changes without tempering with its identity must be evolved. This should be done considering that “the Catholic Church, true to its cherished tradition, rejects nothing of what is true and holy even in the non-Christian religions. Indeed, Catholics must recognize, preserve, and promote all the good, spiritual and moral, as well as socio-cultural values that they find in their midst” (“Decree on Non-Christian Religions” No.2). The generation of current Nigerian Catholics must put all hands on deck to ensure that it is not a failure to Catholicism or a threat/danger to her future. This can only be averted when frantic efforts are galvanized now to be sure that the legacy that is bequeathed to the future Church is worthwhile. When the necessary precautions are taken and appropriate/adequate strategies employed, the Catholic faith and identity would continue to soar into the future.

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