

1

THE NONAGON OF REVEREND FATHER PROFESSOR BONIFACE ANTHONY CHIJIJOKE OBIEFUNA

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Abstract

The Nonagon of Rev Fr Prof BAC Obiefuna simply x-rayed the nine sides of his life. The objective was to examine the geometric progression in his life, the good, the bad and the ugly. Data were collected through personal longitudinal observations and primary information sourced from friends and colleagues. The result from the data showed that BAC saw and conquered.

Introduction

This short profile was built on the nonagon of Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna. The nonagon was based on the spiritual and mystical traditions associated with the number 9. The number 9, as pertains to this priest of the Holy Catholic and Apostolic Church, is considered a symbol of spiritual enlightenment, higher consciousness, selflessness, compassion, spiritual creativity, divine love, universal love, inborn natural talents, and completion. These, indeed, sum up all the elements one can see in a lifetime to say: “Yes, ‘THIS IS THE MAN.’” The reader is requested to find out the extent to which the symbolic 9 is reflected in BAC Obiefuna’s profile as contained in his names, his early years, his beliefs, academics, his priesthood, his pains and gains, a jolly good fellow, his challenges; his completion.

His Names

BAC Obiefuna is a man with many names and many people know him for that. They choose to call him the one that suits the occasion at the time. His baptismal name is Boniface. His confirmation name is Anthony. His parents gave him the traditional name, Chijioke. These names are significant in his life.

Chijioke! What a name, as if the parents foresaw the future. Indeed, only God holds a man’s destiny. What is pre-ordained can never be disordered. It was destined that their son would be a priest; it came to reality, though, the people who gave the name did not live to see it materialize. *Boniface*, named after his patron Saint, which means fortunate, good face, auspiciously signals the promise of God being fulfilled in his life, trust in the destiny designed by God and, strongly following the manifestations of that destiny. His name *Anthony*, is equally likened to being endowed with the gifts of St Anthony which include preaching, teaching, knowledge and faith. What a lucky man!

To commemorate the native name, Chijioke, BAC believes that there is the *afọ mulu fada* (womb that gave birth to the Priest of God). He came up with another name, *Nnwa Ozoaku*. To identify which of the *Ozoaku*, he added *na Nkitaku* (in Nkitaku, his village). And to still make it clearer his primary locale, he added Agulu, his home town. Hence, he is also called *Nnwaozoaku na Nkitaku Agulu* by admirers. He so promotes his mother, definitely not to the neglect of his father, Nwokoye that he appears not to see the envy of those whose mothers are alive. However, they began to see the need to appreciate and celebrate mothers, dead or alive.

To identify with customs and traditions, every male adult must have a title, the name he is identified with. BAC tailored his title name to show his belief in his religion, his custom and tradition; hence his name once again is *Ihe Chukwu amaghi anaghi eme* (literally: what God does not know does not happen; nothing happens outside the knowledge and permission of God). Biological fathers often choose such names for their sons and perform the *Ifejioku* (basic title taking ceremony) to affirm the name. Young Chijioke did not have such opportunity as the parents died early in his life. He personally chose his title name which was also chosen out of life experiences associated with orphans. The name has helped him in life, when things looked rough and impossible, assistance came from the least expected quarters. This name has been a source of inspiration and also serves as a guiding principle for him and those who appreciate trust in divine providence.

Fr. BAC identifies with the title the Church knows him for: Rev. Fr., shortened for all priests *Fada*. The children, the young, and the aged call him *Fada*. He has close similar physical features with his immediate elder brother, Prof. Julius Chiedozi Obiefuna, my late husband, that most times many people mistake the one for the other. Many times, one could hear people call the elder brother *Fada*. When the response elicited does not resemble that of *Fada*, they would shudder. The most spectacular was at a burial ceremony where the brother went in first and the master of ceremonies was announcing the arrival of Rev. Fr. Obiefuna only to see the Fr. Obiefuna coming in dressed in his priestly wear, the soutane. Another was at the University of Nigeria, Nsukka (UNN), when one of the drivers at the Federal University of Technology, Owerri (FUTO) where the brother was, saw *Fada* and ran greeted him with the title, Prof., with all the excitement. And *Fada* was only a student at UNN then (though already a priest)!

BAC's nephews and nieces all call him 'Uncle Fada'. One exciting thing about this name is that Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna, though the last among his siblings sees his position as *Fada* as the father to all of them. If they want to take a photograph during an occasion, and they want him to take his position as the youngest, he would cut in: No one is senior to *Fada* (*mmadu anaghi amadede*). So, he assumes the role of a father. This can be attested to his position in the photograph where he stood behind and above *all* his siblings with his Chasuble like a guardian angel giving them the protection a biological father would. That was on November 21, 1991, when his eldest brother, the late Ichie Matthew Anene Obiefuna, was installed the Ichie of Nkitaku village, Agulu, with the title name, Ichie Nwachinemelu. The claim goes to attest to the adage, a priest can never be a baby in his parish. (*Fada anaghi abu nwata na parish*) because of his role as a priest in charge of the young and the old, provided you are a member of the parish.

His Early Life

The early life of BAC prepared him for the eventualities of life. His stronghold on ever being himself has led him far in life. He knew his parents were not there, he utilized every opportunity available to develop himself. He went to primary school at a record time, though he needed to combine schooling with part time job in the farm to raise little stipend for his upkeep. He lived with his uncle, Augustine Nwankwo Obiefuna; and his aunt, Mgbafor Ofojebe Ogbe, married to Umunnoku village, Agulu. They were not easy days. Be that as it may, their impacts in his life remain undeniable. It is on record that through his primary school days at the St. Mary's Practising School, Agulu, he always took the first position in his examinations. That endeared him to many of his teachers. His eldest sister, Mrs. Victoria

Nwonye Ugha (nee Obiefuna) drilled him in real hard work and tenacity to purpose. His eldest brother, Matthew, made significant financial contributions.

He proceeded to the seminary in 1969, the heart of the Nigerian – Biafra war. As at the time, All Hallows Seminary, Onitsha, was taking cover at the St. Peter Claver's Parish, Umunuko, Ukpok. It was on one occasion during the school days, that his eldest brother, Nwachinemelu, called his attention with the immediate elder brother, Julius, titled Amandianaeze, on who would volunteer to give up school because the burden was much on him. When the question was directed to BAC, as young as he was, he used a short story – like narrative to answer the question: *Who will be in front of a termite's hole and allow his hole to be blocked?*

Termite-trapping was a skill in those days where children went out to fetch termites (*akika*) for their mothers to cook. It involved inserting ropes/broomsticks into a hole and once the termites have a grip on the rope, they file on the rope until the rope is gradually pulled out. The expertise will determine the quantity of termites caught. It will determine the richness of the soup or the amount one can realize if sold in the market. Four or five people can discover the holes in the termite colony. Once one has taken possession, the hole is guarded with every amount of carefulness. The slightest mistake can lead to the blockage of the hole, and that would be the end of the adventure.

The termite adventure story will not make young BAC wish away the golden opportunity of going to school. The termite narrative was enough for Nwachinemelu to understand that he, BAC, was not ready to give up. He had no alternative than to continue with their training. That narrative, a show of resilience, led him to what he is today. Again, the proof that what God does not know does not really happen. Fortune at work!

His Beliefs

BAC Obiefuna weaved his spiritual enlightenment into the culture of his people. He has a strong belief in his kindred (*Umunna Umuejeaju*), and his Age Grade (*Igwebuike*). His integration into the communal life of his people is shown during conversations. His title name, *Ihe Chukwu amaghi*, is generally used for exchange of greetings and pleasantries with him from members of his community. The pleasantries ignite communication or discussions. When exchanging greetings with his late elder brothers especially on meeting for the first time in the day, one can hear them thus:

BAC: *Nwachinemelu; Amanidianeze*

Both brothers will respond simultaneously: *Ihe Chukwu amaghi*

BAC: *Onaghi eme.*

The same goes for all his extended relations, his age mates and members of the community. He knows their title names one after the other; where he appears to have forgotten, he will quickly say: *Kpalum aka* (Remind me). Discussions then ensue. His strong belief in community relations was exhibited during his ordination when members of his age grade, *Igwebuike* (Unity is strength) trooped to Awka to identify with him. That was on July 2, 1983. He perfectly dances the age grade *Igba* (musical instruments/dance troupe), that one would hardly believe he could considering how 'lofty' the priesthood is placed. He believes that Christianity sanctifies cultures and as such consistent in differentiating culture and religion.

At the Fr. Obiefuna's nuclear and extended families, he is an ardent believer of/in The OBIEFUNA DYNASTY. tries to connect with family members in any town he visits.

He must first find out if any of his uncle's or aunt's children and/or grandchildren live in that town. Even if they are only three, he tries to pull them together. If they are more, that calls for merry making. His visit to Lagos merry-merry-making though on a different mission, was an eye-opener. He announced his presence and told relations to inform others (*onulu kaalu nwanne ya*). The tell-one-tell-the-other communication system gathered eighty-four (84) family members of the Obiefuna dynasty resident in Lagos. The lesson he tries to draw from this belief/ ideology is that there is the need for brothers and sisters aether immediate or extended to know one another. He believes that, in his exact words: ***In love we gain; In hate we lose*** (*Uto ka at,oolu totaa ihe, esee okwu, esesasia ihe niile*). There will be no gainsaying that seeing such a number of persons, he would quickly entone the song: *Lee ka osi di nmaintoneeko ndi bu umu nne* (How beautifully it gladdens the heart to be in the mist of brothers and sisters, cf. *midst133:1*). The same holds for those in Abuja. It is hopeful it happens in the UH, (UK), will happen in the States of America (USA) and Canada. Home front is the base though with the home visible challenges possibly arising from 'familiar spirit' virus.

It has been his dream and aspiration to have an idea of the population in Obiefuna dynasty, a project initiated with his elder brother, by J.C Obiefuna, worked assiduously to see the project completed. Circumstances associated with deaths hindered the completion. Though the brother never saw it come true, BAC has constantly talked about this family tree project. It is yet to materialize because of lack of reliable information occasioned by deaths and, more importantly, births, on keeping and updating family records. This is the time for his more digitalized nephews and nieces to help him actualize the project. He started by having a rough estimate of those who live in Lagos. He has created a WhatsApp platform which is called OBIEFUNA CONNECT LAGOS BRANCH.

Rev. Fr. Obiefuna believes that there must be births, baptisms, marriages, and deaths. It would appear he has the exclusive prerogative of performing the rites associated with these ceremonies for the members of the Obiefuna family. Any member of the family he fails to extend any of these services to, either lives "outside the globe" or he was not available. The accessible family survey polls shows that he has to his credit to have baptized one hundred and eighty-seven (187) people, wedded seventy five (75) couples, and buried an estimated number of fifty-seven (57) persons as at the time of writing this paper.

One shocking feeling he exhibited on one of such deaths, was when his immediate elder brother, Amandianeze died. He came into the mortuary, knelt, and placed his chest against that of his late brother, and possibly prayed and/or sobbed for more than five minutes. What a love for a brother even in the mortuary! He weaves creativity into everything he does. During Amandianeze's burial ceremony on January 4, 2019, he sang a traditional departure song for him, which can be compared to what happens in the University Senate for a fallen staff, where the attendance Register is called, the silence of the staff indicates that he or she is no more and the name struck off. The same he did to wish his dear brother farewell. It was a song both shared in happy moments!

Academics

The academic voyage was as a result of his early silence to continue after the termite episode. The opportunity he had took him to The St. Mary's Practicing School (PS), Agulu, where he started from *nwii* (nursery) through primary six. Like St. Anthony, his role model in teaching and preaching, he proceeded to All Hallows Seminary, Onitsha, then sojourning

at Ukpok in 1969; to Bigard Memorial Seminary, Ikot Ekpene campus (now St. Joseph's Major Seminary) in 1975/76 for the study of Philosophy; to the Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu, for the study of theology in 1979; and to the University of Nigeria, Nsukka, for the post ordination studies. There, he got Masters Degrees in Political Science and International Relations) and in Religion (Religion and Society) where he capped his studies with a Doctorate degree in 2008. He was writing and publishing as a student. His professorship came almost immediately after he got his Doctor of Philosophy (Ph.D.) degree to the amazement of people who thought the Ph.D. was taking time. One important lesson, he is a great academic mentor. He has co-authored articles with his colleagues and students. He believes in making his critical input before a paper is published. He is not comfortable if it is otherwise depicting include-my-name syndrome which appears the order of the day in some institutions. He has a good number of publications to his credit and he has not stopped writing.

Rev. Fr. Prof. Obiefuna is not only a teacher and a preacher, he is also an astute administrator. He serves in various capacities in his home town, in the Church, university and in the alumni and professional bodies he belongs to.

Priesthood

To dream of becoming a priest is one thing; becoming a priest is another. Most seminarians dread reports to the Bishop by the priest in charge of where they do their apostolic work. As such, they are very careful as such reports could make or mar their dream to priesthood. Unfortunately, the experience of then seminarian Chijioke was from a choir master. Recall that he was a choirmaster in the seminary. What an irony of life, *AMANDIANEZE*. What transpired? According to BAC, he had a very cordial relationship with the parish community in Enugwu Ukwu where he did an apostolic work (there was only one parish in Enugwu Ukwu). There was this particular Choir master who led a group of choristers to disregard the directives of the then parish priest, Msgr. Martin Maduka. The parish priest was in love with Igbo songs. The young seminarian took to the precepts of his master. The choir master wrote against the seminarian Chijioke (as they called him). The tone of the letter suggested expulsion from the seminary. Well, man is not God and *ihe Chukwu amaghii anaghi eme*. Though the report/letter was sent directly to the Bishop, the Bishop discountenanced it. It is not even clear whether the Bishop asked the parish priest anything about it after reading the report of the parish priest that extolled the undeniably starry qualities of the young seminarian. But, who expects that a seminarian on apostolic work would be on the side of a group disobedient to the directives of the parish priest? That would nail the dream to the sacred Catholic priesthood. The journey to the Catholic priesthood, as I saw in the seminary days of Fr. Obiefuna, is not easy. His persistence saw him through. On July 2, 1983, he was ordained a priest in the order of Melkizedek.

Rev. Fr. Obiefuna's liturgical reflections most often center on corrections, predictions and prophecy. He has always insisted on desisting from what is bad as doing what is right always pays in the end. He drives his homilies home through his personal methodology. He makes use of songs, poetic chants (*ima mbem*), proverbs, and riddles. He leaves the pulpit with rhetorical questions that are often soul searching for the congregation. These methodologies made a lot of impact on the persons that had the opportunity to listen to him. They are to be emulated, given more life, and never be allowed to die.

Through his liturgy, he predicts and prophesies possibilities of things that can happen in the future. He often tells the young ones to take advantage of opportunities given to them to improve on talents and skills. He predicted that one day, people will need academic qualifications to become babysitters (*ohe nwa*), grave diggers and even palm wine tappers. Today, taking care of children either in homes or in schools is not the same as when did *nwii* in the Practicing School, Agulu. Today, one needs a first degree, to teach in many Private Schools, and Masters or Doctorate Degrees in Early Childhood Education to be qualified to teach children in the nursery and primary schools. Those to babysit in homes need at least a school certificate and must be digitally literate to operate the baby's computerized gadgets. The era of putting the baby on the back and singing lullaby is gone. The child has so many lullabies at his disposal from his computer. Today, the undertakers (grave managers) are no longer simply the kindred, *Umunna*, but graduates who know the dimensions of a grave, how to carry the corpse, lower it in the grave, and cover it. As a matter of fact, the time the *Umunna* punish people by refusing to dig graves is becoming a thing of the past. Certified undertakers are available for funeral arrangements from the time of death to the outing service. In fact, in some cases, they have deprived the *Umunna* of the little benefits the bereaved family would have given them. Their availability is also curbing some of the excesses of, and demands from, the *Umunna*. Today, there are also machines to clean houses.

Fr. Obiefuna was asked about the gains in the priesthood. His response was:

The gains are enormous: the awareness of the transient nature of the material world and the consequent need for detachment even in the midst of plenty; closeness to God, counselling people into spiritual and psychological freedom, free human interactions, joy of handling disputes, knowing people and sometimes getting sponsorship from them; effective human and public relations. It is not difficult to relate these gains to higher consciousness, selflessness, compassion, spiritual creativity, divine universal love. If one is unconscious, he cannot be close to God, selflessness leads to free human interactions, compassion gives the zeal for counselling, spiritual creativity helps to handle disputes while divine universal love is exhibited in public relations.

There are pains also. The pains shared include, among others:

Sometimes not meeting up with both priestly and academic demands; problems of people that could not be addressed; limited effective public relations in the church that contributes to conflict in some parishes; seeming poor top- bottom relationship in the church; lack of family cohesion; the most painful being effort to convert outsiders to Christianity while one has people going back to ancestral religion in one's own family. This makes the task of evangelization a difficult one, rendering preaching relatively difficult and almost ineffective among those who have optimal respect for the priesthood. That is the greatest challenge to the ministry and an excruciatingly PAINFUL experience. Be it as it may, with God all things are possible. I pray and hope for a better tomorrow.

These observations truly touch the heart, mind and soul. They call for research by the new generation priests. *Fada* Bonny has written the introduction and body of the essay and has made suggestions for further research.

Prof., the Jolly Good Fellow

Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna is a jolly good fellow, a man of peace and decorum with good sense of humour; a man without a dull moment. His academic research is creatively weaved into his daily conversations. If Prof is called on the phone, he opens the conversation with an infectious laughter that can consume up to five-hundred-naira (500) worth of an airtime; or a Haloooo... of two-hundred-naira (200) worth of credit. In the midst of the discussion which can serve as the literature review part of the paper, the next thing one can hear is Fr. Cos (Ebebe) is here, salute him. The phone is handed over to Fr. Cos, after you finish with Fr. Cos, you hear Fr. Jude Ezeokanna is here, the phone is handed to Fr. Jude. Again, you will hear Fr. Jesu Nwanna is here, as soon as the phone gets to this Fr's hand, he will start singing Pericoma's song. Okay, the last but not the least, Mrs Ntukogu is here, and you greet also. After the discussions with the people around, you hear his mantra that "he who started the introduction will write the conclusion" (*Onye delu introduction ga-eke conclusion*). The phone goes back to Prof for the conclusion which might again take some time. To call him means one has enough credit. If he calls you, do not be much in a hurry. He is convinced that one spends less in call than travelling to the place. He would argue thus: *If I were to come to Owerri, have I reached Ekwulobia?* Allow me to talk!

Fr. Prof. does not joke with anything called celebrations. His birthdays, priestly ordination anniversaries, his professorship, name it. In fact, anything that elicits happiness automatically turns to celebrations. He can be better described as the real "Commissioner for Happiness." He uses such occasions to project his public relations prowess. So, joining the Nigerian Institute of Public Relations, NIPR, is not accidental. He is overly and exceedingly happy to have succeeded in introducing Human Relations dimension of the Department of Religion and Human Relations of Nnamdi Azikiwe University, Awka. This is evident in any discussions with him regarding his engagements in the university.

Amidst these celebrations, if Prof calls on any member of the family to make a budget, his elder brother, Nwachnemelu, will say, *if he says fifty (50) people, it is better you make a budget for one hundred (100) persons*. True to Nwachinemelu's predictions, one can later hear Prof saying, *Ndi Obeledu (his cousins) said they are coming; in fact I don't know how this information escalated, A, B, Chave indicated interest*. Lo and behold, on the day of the event, one is overwhelmed with the crowd. In the family house, Prof lives on the last floor of a three-storey building. If one is fortunate/unfortunate to be serving on that day, one may not be able to count the kilometers covered from his kitchen to his living room. It is worse if the person is to go down the staircase to bring more drinks or food, the height of the house looks as if it has increased as a result of exhaustion. Prof has no wife, though we are all his "wives," but he entertains people more than the married ones.

One good thing, just like he mentioned in his gains as a priest was his public/human relations with people. It really salvaged such situations. Many people don't look back offering their assistance when it concerns Nwaozoaku. It might be surprising to note that this chief entertainer does not eat much, but he finds joy in putting smiles on the faces of vulnerable people. During his 40th priestly ordination anniversary, he spent it with people who cannot walk without a walking stick, the bedridden, and those of 70 years and above, in preparation that he will soon join their platform. There is a need at this stage to acknowledge people like Mrs. Theresa Ngozi Ntukogu (nee Obiefuna of Ogidi), a wonderful family friend and others too numerous to mention that have stood by him and indeed all of us.

Challenges

Fr. Prof. is human. Like any other human being, he has his challenges, ranging from health, family issues, church issues, academics, politics, marriage squabbles of the new generation and many more.

Health issues are very touchy when it concerns a priest. No wife to observe the general condition of things; no sister around to ask, *are you okay today?* These are managed by the persons in the Fathers' House or the neighbourhood, whether competent or not. There are no medical facilities in place that put the priest on a regular check, recent insurance policies notwithstanding. The priest moves on. Nwonye and Ogbu, his only sisters, are sincerely commended for occasionally sending local foods like *ede nmachu* (cocoyam) and *ona* (water yam) delicacies which he cherishes.

Sometimes when he tries to correct things that are not going well in the family, he may be reminded that his homestead is in Awka. He can only heave a sigh but insist that the correct thing be done. No doubt, the prophet is not recognized among his own but the message of redemption is for all. So, he continues to give the encouragement needed in a rapidly changing world, accepted or not. In the church, and the demands of the priesthood, it takes the grace of God to trudge on. His loyalty to the constituted authority in the Church is unquestionable even when visibly painful. Interestingly, obedience pays. He keeps telling people that he is a "professor out of obedience." He believes in and preaches truth which is ever alive, setting people free. In the academic setting, when politics sets in, the priest-academic stands on the line. Depending on how he swings, even his faithful could openly oppose him. Be that as it may, Fr. Prof. Obiefuna has the wisdom to navigate, in all honesty, troubled waters in organizations. It is not surprising, as he says with appreciation to God and the academics of the Faculty of Arts that he had a hundred percent vote to be the Dean of the Faculty in 2014. He makes out time to attend to students who have lost faith in academics, disillusioned with the Church and society and are looking for a place to find solace. This disillusionment could be one of the problems associated with young people leaving their roots - the family and the church - and seeking help where it does not exist. Marriages are so difficult in contemporary times. The man is right, the woman is right. They don't care if children are involved. The priest is challenged with all these issues. Little survey shows that Fr. Prof. is a man of all circumstances; he has toning remedy for every situation be it death or life issues. After every admonition and counselling, he would always end up with: *Ilee anya, lee anya, ilee anya* (literally, if you look, you look, then you look; that is, Look well before you leap).

Completion

A festschrift is a collection of writings or academic essays written in honor of an academic scholar who has produced something to be written on. Prof. Obiefuna has produced something to be written about him by his associates, students, and contemporaries. He is being celebrated with these essays. He will be happy to read them while he is alive. This is the greatest way to complete a cycle. He is handing the baton to the younger academia, young priests and a whole lot of persons he has touched their lives in one way or another.

Having x-rayed the nine sides of him from a lay writer's perceptions of him and fusing them into a spiritual enlightenment, higher consciousness, selflessness, compassion, spiritual creativity, divine love, universal love, inborn natural talent, completion, and indeed

all these elements fused in one man, Rev. Fr. Prof. B. A. C. Obiefuna, I can truly say: YES, THIS IS THE MAN.