

PRIESTS AND PARTY POLITICS: REVIEWING A PERSISTENT ILLUSION

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Abstract

The letter of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria on the prohibition of Catholic priests from engaging in party politics raises afresh the pristine question of priests and politics. What easily comes to mind from the bishops' admonition is the last gubernatorial election in Benue State where a priest was elected as governor making the state first and second state in which a priest was elected as governor. This essay inquires whether the nature of the priesthood runs contrary to party politics. It also explores the socioeconomic circumstances that seem to compel the quest for priests in politics as well as the history of this participation. While concluding that the theology of the priesthood does not contradict partisan politics, the history of priests' involvement has generally not been without serious problems. It argues that the outright prohibition of priests from partisan politics is a pragmatic decision that takes account of the possible discomfort of politics to the ministry of priests in the human community and notes that so long as the socioeconomic situation in Nigeria is not ameliorated, the quest for possible messiah will continue to lead to the quest for priests' involvement in partisan politics.

Keywords: Priests, Party Politics, Illusion, Catholic Church

1. Introduction

In October 2024 the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria issued a stern and public communication to Nigerian Catholic priests reminding them of the prohibition of the Church of their involvement in partisan politics, warning of dire consequences of the breach of the directive. That widely publicized letter calls attention to quite a number of issues concerning the involvement of Catholic priests in politics and raises afresh the question of the practical wisdom of the age-old prohibition. On the historical and more deeply theological plane, it raises the question whether the nature of Catholic priesthood contradicts active political involvement. This essay

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discusses the role of Catholic priests in politics. It explores the circumstances specific to Nigeria that very likely generated the reissue of the directive; the historical and social circumstances around the involvement of priests in politics; the theological basis of this involvement and the practical considerations that underlie the firm position of the Church on the involvement of priests in politics.

2. Some Necessary Clarifications

Aristotle states in the *Politics* that human being is by nature a political animal.² This conviction is based on two natural endowments, the human's social inclination and his ability to speak and make moral calculations. Because the human is naturally social, and through his ability to communicate especially by speech, political institutions also arise naturally wherever there are human beings. That is the origin of various theories of the primordial state of nature which spring from the imaginary situation without politics, its institutions and actions. According to contractualist philosophers in such imagined absence of politics, the life of man is 'solitary, poor, nasty brutish and short.'³ For Thomas Hobbes, order is a natural creation of human rationality and each human being is a co-creator and sustainer of that natural order. It is such that his Leviathan must be obeyed by all irrespective of his/her religion or else 'go with Christ to martyrdom.' It is therefore incomprehensible philosophically to envisage human beings without politics. Thus, prohibiting priests from politics is like a *modus loquendi*, what is really referred to in formal terms is partisan and politics. Politics is partisan when participation is based on adherence to political parties, often marked by opposition to and unwillingness to agree with the basic tenet of the opponent. That was why in his speech to priests on the field of Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu in 1982 Pope John Paul II intoned: 'Partisan politics is not for you,' and stated the advisory role of priests to the lay people whose proper sphere is partisan politics. John Paul II was always most vocal in emphasizing the separation

² See Chyryl Abbate, 'Higher' and 'Lower' Political Animals: A Critical Analysis of Aristotle's Account of the Political Animal.' *Journal of Animal Ethics* 6 (2016) pp. 54 – 66. Abbate argues that what led Aristotle to designate the human as political animal can equally be application to the so-called lower animals, given the tendency to living in community and evident ability to communicate even when not described as speech.

³ Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, William Benton, Chicago, Encyclopaedia Britannica, vol. 23, 1952, p. 85.

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of priests from partisan politics or anything akin to it. Earlier in 1979, while addressing an international conference of members of religious orders he stated ‘you are priests and members of religious orders. You are not social directors, political leaders or functionaries of temporal powers.’⁴ The justification for this order is the divisiveness of temporal leadership which contradicts the priest’s role as an agent of unity. Speaking shortly again to priests of Congo Democratic Republic (then Zaire) he returned fully to the same theme:

Leave political responsibilities to those who are charged with them. You have another part, a magnificent part, you are ‘leaders’ by another right and in another manner, participating in the priesthood of Christ, as his ministers. Your sphere of interventions, is that of faith and morals, where it is expected that you preach at the same time by a courageous word and by the example of your life.⁵

While John Paul II is quite clear about the type of engagement he rejects for priests, there is also quite a sliver of uncertainty concerning the specific prohibition of Catholic clerics in political matters. Canon 285. 2 states that ‘Clerics are forbidden to assume public offices which entail a participation in the exercise of civil power.’ Civil power here can mean the enforcement of law and order. It can also refer to the ability to influence the actions, beliefs and conduct of people. In this wider and later sense, there is no way priests can be prohibited from exercising civil power. The canonical provisions of Canon 285; 3 is therefore better understood if read in conjunction with Canon 287; 2:

Clerics are not to have an active role in political parties and in the direction of labour unions unless the need to protect the rights of the Church or to promote the common good requires it in the judgment of the competent ecclesiastical authority.

This canon specifically names party politics but must be understood to include political involvement where the basic activities of political parties are in question. An independent presidential candidate in the United State, for instance, cannot claim to be acting outside the ambit of party politics.

⁴ *Origins* 8 (Feb. 15, 1979), 548 - 549.

⁵ *Origins* 19 (May 22, 1980), 11.

It is observable, however, that this canon is not absolute. Whatever is forbidden is allowable where the rights of the Church and the common good are at stake. This implies that intrinsically political involvement does not contradict the nature of the priesthood. However, competent ecclesiastical authority must judge how appropriate this involvement is, again making it very dependent on individual judgment. But in general, what the Catholic Church frowns at is the participation of priest in openly partisan politics where belonging to a group or even to an ideology predetermines positions and actions usually aimed against contrary positions and generally intent on obtaining and exercising civil or political power.

3. The Context of Nigeria

The letter of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria is naturally prompted by the specific Nigerian context. That context is that of continuing and demoralizing decay of the social, economic, cultural and political fabric of the nation. Nigeria is a country which at independence was imbued with hope and confidence and which, five years after independence was performing well ahead of China, Malaysia, Indonesia, Singapore, etc. From that lofty height the Nation has gradually and relentlessly fallen to the morass of hopelessness; a country whose youthful population prefer to be in any other place than their native land.

As far back as 1983, late Chinua Achebe penned a slim volume where he argued that the foundational problem of Nigeria was that of leadership, and went on to ex-ray how the operating concept of leadership was inimical to positive development. Achebe went on to talk about indiscipline; injustice; corruption; sectionalism and tribalism; the enthronement of mediocrity; the absence of inspiring political insight among the best of the nation's leaders, and the shining example of Mallam Aminu Kano.⁶ Needless to say, the voice of Achebe was never heard. He went on to reject two high national honours from the Nigerian government and published his famous book *There was a Country*⁷ before his death in 2013. The disappointment of Achebe with his country is echoed by some foreigners who have worked in or researched on Nigeria. Let us make do with a brief presentation of the

⁶ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Fourth Dimension, Enugu, 1983.

⁷ Chinua Achebe, *There was a Country: A Personal History of Biafra*, Penguin, London, 2012.

views of Karl Maier and Daniel Jordan Smith. Karl Maier takes the title of his book from a statement of Chinua Achebe: ‘This is an example of a country that has fallen down; it has collapsed. This house has fallen.’ Maier, like Achebe, also pins the cause of the fall of Nigeria to its crop of leaders:

In Nigeria the blame for its lost generation falls squarely on the shoulders of its people’s leaders - corrupt military dictators and their civilian accomplices - who over the past quarter of a century have humbled a once proud nation through outright incompetence and greed.⁸ Incompetence and greed are two characteristics of the Nigerian leadership which have had a terrible consequence on the people. For Maier these disruptive qualities give vent to terrible corruption which has brought the country on its knees economically and socially:

Colonial Nigeria was designed in 1914 to serve the British Empire, and the independent state serves as a tool of plunder by the country’s modern rulers. Nigerians spend a good part of their lives trying to get the better of the government for their own benefit or that of their family, their village or their region. Rare is the head of state who acts on behalf of the entire nation. The people are not so much governed as ruled. It is as if they live in criminally manage corporation where the bosses are armed and have barricaded themselves inside the company safe. Nigeria’s leaders, like the colonialists before them, have sucked out billions of dollars and stashed them in Western banks.⁹

The anomy that has bedeviled Nigeria is really what has given rise to rampant corruption which is arguably the most intractable issue in the Nigerian socio-political sphere. The anthropologist Daniel Smith titled his book *The Culture of Corruption*. Smith sees corruption like Achebe and Maier as reactions or response to various socio-political ills. First and foremost, the experience of Nigerians in corruption and their participation in it can be viewed as ambivalent. Secondly many other social phenomena: ‘urban vigilantism, spectacular witchcraft allegations, resurgent ethnic nationalism, and the dramatic rise of born-again Christianity are in part

⁸ Karl Maier, *This House Has Fallen: Nigeria in Crisis*, Penguin Books, London, 2000, p. xxiii - xxiv.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. xxiii

fueled by discontent about corruption.’ All these social phenomena and more are properly so-called reactions against corruption, but very significantly their emergence may not necessarily lead to the amelioration of corruption. It is therefore most telling that: ‘The people, institutions, and ideas to which Nigerians resort in their frustration over corruption can themselves become instruments of 419.’¹⁰

The above scenario smacks of despondency and the unconscious search for a form of anchor. This in a way can explain the desire for priests’ involvement in partisan politics. Nigeria has been disappointed by its past leaders and governors, the military as well as civilians. Can the active involvement of priests not be a way out? Will the priest not be less corrupt and more conscientious than the past leaders that have virtually brought the country to its knees? In this regard one recalls Prof. S. N. N. Iwe who in the eighties in public debates argued that because priests are schooled in the meaning and practice of justice, they are very well suited to assume political leadership in the country. Msgr Prof Theophilus Okere was his arch opponent and argued that the fact that one can cook better than his official cook does not automatically entail that he should take over the function of cooking in the family. It is notable that in spite of such debates and discussions, the active and open involvement of priests in partisan politics in Nigeria has been rather limited. During the 1970s when military government was in vogue in Nigeria, Fr. Dr. Ifeanyi Anozie was appointed a commissioner (state minister) in the government of Col Anthony Aboki Ochefu in East Central State. When Imo State was carved out of East Central State, he continued to serve as Commissioner in the newly created state under late Governor Godwin Ndubisi Kanu. Some years later another priest, Fr. Dr. Sylvester Sabo Nagba, was also appointed a commissioner in the civilian government of Mr. Solomon Lar in Plateau State. There was hardly any other prominent involvement of Catholic priests in active partisan politics for the two decades spanning from 1970 to the end of the 1980s.

Fr. Moses Adasu’s contest of the governorship of Benue State under the then Social Democratic Party was a landmark in the involvement of Catholic priests in partisan and elective politics. It was the time when

¹⁰ Daneil Jordan Smith, *A Culture of Corruption: Everyday Deception and Popular Discontent in Nigeria*, Princeton University Press, Princeton, 2007, p. 25.

General Babaginda allowed elected governors to operate with him as military president. Adasu won the election in a landslide in January 1992. While he was suspended from priestly ministry, many priests were rather happy over his resounding victory. Adasu ceased to be governor in November 1993 when Sani Abasha came to power as military ruler after pushing Ernest Shonekan aside. But his two-year governorship was significant enough. Adasu did not believe that politics is a dirty game and those who believe so are those who are in politics for their selfish ends: 'I am in politics to baptise politics and make it pure.'¹¹ Even though he was governor for approximately two year, among his many achievements is the founding of Benue State University. He also reactivated the College of Education, Oju, started the Tarka Foundation and built a few manufacturing industries before his exit. Notwithstanding the short period under which he was governor, Fr. Moses Adasu remains cherished in the annals of Benue State till date. This may be perhaps due to his courage in commencing some significant projects like a state university. It is significant that the next Catholic priest who became governor in Nigeria is also from Benue State. The Igbo people say that when a road is good, one uses it two time (*Uzo di mma, a gaa ya ugboro abua*). In April 2023, Fr. Hyacinth Alia won election as the governor of Benue State when he contested under the APC. It may still be too soon to judge a four-year term for achievements recorded in little more than two years. However, the significance of the mandate of Fr. Alia for our purpose is not necessarily dependent on his performance.

4. Priests in Politics in other Climes: Historical Perspective

It goes without saying that other regions of the world have also enough brush with the issue of Catholic priests in party politics. It will be recalled that prince-bishops and archbishops were common features of the Medieval period especially within the ambit of the Holy Roman Empire. From early times, clerics belonged to the most educated slivers of the society. This coupled with their undoubted influence made it a convenient historical fact that they were allowed to exercises both civil and ecclesiastical authority. The practices were not uniform all over the Holy Roman Empire but it continued down the centuries generating conflict and animosity in many cases. In chapter four of his book on power, Bertrand

¹¹ M. Adasu, 'I have come to Baptise Politics,' *This Day Newspaper*, 31st March, 2023.

Russell discourses priestly power including civil or political power.¹² He refers to Nicholo Machiavelli who was awed by the firmness of the civil powers of these priestly princes:

It only remains now to speak of ecclesiastical principalities, touching which all difficulties are prior to getting possession, because they are acquired either by their capacity or good fortune, and they can be held without either; for they are sustained by the ancient ordinances of religion, which are so all-powerful, and of such a character, that the principalities may be held no matter how their princes behave and live. These princes alone have states and do not defend them, they have subjects and do not rule them; and the states, though unguarded, are not taken from them, and the subjects, though not ruled, do not care, and they have neither the desire nor the ability to alienate themselves. Such principalities only are secure and happy. But being upheld by power to which the human mind cannot reach, I shall speak no more of them, because, being exalted and maintained by God, it would be the act of a presumptuous and rash man to discuss them.¹³

Centuries later the Prince-Bishops and Archbishops lost much of their secular jurisdictions. But the tradition of their secular powers continued to be transmitted and recognized in their titles. The Church banned this practise definitively in 1951.¹⁴ In more modern times, there has been some incidents of involvement of priest in secular politics. One very prominent instance is Archbishop Makarios, a Greek Orthodox priest who became the first president of the Island of Cyprus; a country which since his demise (1977) ceased to be a single country, having been divided between the Greek Cypriots and Turkish Cypriots.

In Africa, Fr. Fulbert Youlou became the Prime Minister of Congo Brazzaville in 1958. Shortly after he became the first president of independent Congo Brazzaville. Youlou is known for many shenanigans

¹² Bertrand Russell, *Power*, George Allen and Unwin, London, 1975, pp. 35 - 50.

¹³ *The Prince*, William Benton, Encyclopedia Britanica, vol. 23, Chicago, 1952, pp. 16 - 17.

¹⁴ The single exception is the Bishop of Urgell in Catalonia, Spain who remains with the Head of State if France the two princes of Andora even though this is today mainly ceremonial.

including his sympathy for indigenous messianic movements in his Congolese region. Shortly after independence a motion of no confidence was proposed in the national assembly. Highly offended he pulled up an AK 47 from his cassock in the National Assembly, and forced the members of the assembly to retract the motion. Later he reached an agreement with the assembly which divested from them the power to remove the president and from the president the power to dissolve the assembly. In 1961 Youlou stood for another presidential election in which he was the only candidate and was declared winner incredibly with 100% of the votes cast.¹⁵ He was later exiled to Spain after a national uprising against his government.¹⁶

In Gabon, Fr. Paul Mba Abessole was ordained a priest in 1968. He was a fierce critique of late President Omar Bongo and his single party regime. Fr. Abessole was exiled in France but later returned in the era of multi-party democratization in Africa to contest against Bongo. He was elected Mayor of Libreville in 1996. Before then he contested the presidency against Bongo in 1993 and was placed second with 26.5% of the votes. He rejected the result and declared himself president. His house in Libreville and his opposition radio station were destroyed by the military and he returned to exile in Paris in 1994. He contested the presidency again in 1998 and came third this time with little more than 13%. He later joined the government and the party of President Bongo. When Omar Bongo died he again tried to contest against his son Ali Bongo in 2009. Later he and others decided to back another independent candidate. Mba Abessole remains till date one of the most consistent political figures in the Republic of Gabon.

In Nicaragua, the overthrow of dictator Anastasio Somoza witnessed the ascendancy of the Sandinista government and the involvement of at least four Catholic priests as ministers in the first government of Daniel Ortega. Fr. Fernando Cardenal was education minister from 1984 to 1990. Before then he had overseen a nationwide literacy campaign in early 1980s. Fr. Miguel d'Escoto was foreign minister from 1979 to 1990. From 1979 to 1987 Ernesto Cardenal was minister of culture and Fr. Edgard Parrales was

¹⁵ Fulbert Youlou, en.m. wikipedia.org.

¹⁶ Trois Glorieuses (1963), wikipedia.org. This was the three-day uprising organized by the Congolese Trade Union Movement and the Congolese Youth Movement that ended the rule of Fr. Fulbert Youlou.

permanent United Nations representative as well as minister of social welfare.¹⁷ This closeness between Ortega and priests did not endure. Today Daniel Ortega is the harshest persecutor of the Catholic Church in Latin America and some observers see the persecution as an outcrop of the closeness of yesteryears.¹⁸

In Paraguay Fernando Armino Lugo Mendez the former Bishop of San Pedro served as the president of the country from 2008 to 2012. Lugo was said to have asked for laicization in order to enable him run for public office but this was not granted. When however, he was elected as the president of his country the laicization was granted. Lugo was removed from office by what many considered a coup d'etat, but he later won election and became president of the senate of the country.

5. Theology versus Politics

Without going into any detailed expose of the theology of the priesthood, it is good to inquire whether there is conceivably a fundamental conflict between the priesthood and partisan politics. The conflict being referred to will be such that will annul the essential nature of the priesthood if it is combined with politics. From what we have seen so far, it appears that there is no strict contradiction between the priesthood as such and partisan politics. This is clear from the brief historical perspective we have explored. Prince-Bishops were officially secular and ecclesiastical rulers thus putting paid to any conception that the nature or the ontology of the priesthood stands against politics of any type. Their priesthood would not remain valid with their political engagement if such a contradiction exists. Again, the fact that most of the prohibitions are not absolute and that they can be lifted when competent ecclesiastical authorities consider doing so expedient for the good of the Church or the society makes the prohibition from politics less than absolute. It appears far-fetched to think that the Church could have given Bishop and President Lugo of Paraguay the permission to contest the presidency while remaining the Bishop of San Pedro. But the fact that the law leaves open the possibility of granting such

¹⁷ Brendan Van Dyck, 'Ortega and the Church: A Cautionary Tale,' *Catholicism, Christianity, Politics*, 30th October, 2023.

¹⁸ Robert W. Shaffern, 'The Jesuit Roots of Nicaragua's War on the Church,' *The Catholic Thing*, 8th December, 2023.

permission is a clear indication that the prohibition of partisan politics is not founded on theology or on ontology.

6. The Wisdom of Prohibition from Partisan Politics

Still, there are enough practical and beneficial grounds that recommend prohibiting priests from party politics. It is to be noted that the Church has the capacity and the responsibility to consider such factors and make decisions that serve as guide for its priests. One reason why priests are forbidden to engage in party politics is the very nature of their calling. The priest should be a man of all the people. His mission to mediate Christ to the people of God makes him ever ready to welcome and be of service to all who need his service. This entails that anything that can constitute a hindrance to this openness is inimical to his most important mission. Party politics is almost inevitably marked by such acrimony that cannot be helpful to the mission of the priest among his people. While this is a very general consideration it is obvious that it applies more particularly to priests serving in communities. A parish priest who uses the pulpit to preach in favour of one political party is by that very fact alienating the members of other parties who are psychologically and emotionally attached to their parties. Although this is more acute in a multi-party situation it is to a large extent also applicable where there are no political parties since there is always difference in opinion and ideology.

The need to give different political convictions a fair space to flower recalls the prophetic role of the priest. To what extent should the priest criticize incompetent and corrupt government? What is the dividing line between a priest's prophetic role and his obligation to avoid party politics? This is a rather difficult decision and very often criticism of the political order is taken to be partisan. On the other hand, avoiding casting critical glance on the numerous evils of the political order appears to be a dereliction of the prophetic role of the priest. It is difficult to outline strict and reasonable rules or guidelines in this matter and to a large extent each priest is bound in conscience to arrive at a personal and mature decision which respects the sensitivity of the people in general and protects the interest of the Church and the well-being of the people of God.

The experience of the Church through history is an important factor in prohibiting priests from partisan politics. It is obvious that it has not always been a happy end in the few cases where priests are wholly involved in

active and partisan politics. The few examples we over-viewed above indicate that the experience is not always golden. While the possible negative consequences of involvement may not be a compelling reason for the prohibition, the interest of the Church is weighty enough consideration. The example of Nicaragua is a typical case in point. While Daniel Ortega worked with so many priests when he first came to power, his second coming as a full-blown dictator has meant terrible persecution of the Catholic Church in his country. The case of Henry VIII of England is another bitter experience of the involvement of priests in politics. The life of Cardinal Wolsey ended in disgrace because of his enormous political powers and the quagmire of his inability to secure marriage annulment for the king.¹⁹ The negative consequences of that historical event reverberate against the Church till date.

7. Conclusion

Though party politics is not contrary to the very nature of the Catholic priesthood canonical regulations prohibit priests from active involvement in party politics. This regulation is supported by practical and human reason backed up by the enormous historical experience of the Church. The letter of Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria against the involvement of priests in politics may have been made necessary by the historical fact that a Catholic priest became a state governor for the second time in Benue State. However, the groundswell that led to that history is the increasing social and political decadence in the country. Unless this decadence is curbed the hankering for messiahs will continue creating more possibility of priests getting involved in active party politics. From what we have seen above this hankering appears to be like an illusion generated by the desire for better socio-political and economic condition; and like every illusion is bound to ultimately end in disappointment.

¹⁹ See Will Durant, *The Reformation, The Story of Civilization*, vol. 6, Simon and Schuster, New York, 1957, pp. 523 ff.