

Catholicism in Benin City: A Socio- Religious Perspective

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Abstract

This paper covers the early history and development of the Catholic Mission in Benin City. The use of visual aids, and the role of lay societies in evangelization was discussed. The methods adopted in the data collection are historical and sociological analysis. The Colonial Government protected the Missionaries with their soldiers and police force. The 1900s was the beginning of civilization or modernization in pre-Nigeria.

Introduction

Historical authorities are unanimous in crediting the advent of Christian Missionaries to Benin to the Portuguese Catholic priests in the 15th-16th centuries. A.F.C.Ryder (1969), J. Kenny (1983) and the New Catholic Encyclopedia credited, Pope Pius 11 with entrusting evangelization of the Guinea coast to the Franciscans in 1462 led by Alfonso de Bolano. The Guinea mission depended upon that of Cape Verde where a bishopric was eventually created in 1553.

At the request of the king of Benin, who had come into contact with the Portuguese in 1485, the Church was invited and the missionaries planted some seeds in the kingdom. However, no great results were achieved. The mission in Benin, was served only intermittently from Sao Tome which was made a bishopric in 1534 by Pope Pius 11, simply vegetated (Synod of Bishops,1990).

After the Portuguese missionaries, in 1648 the Sacra Congregazione de Propaganda Fide assigned the Benin mission to the French Capuchin priests of Valencia and Aragon. The French priests taught the Edo people how to communicate with them and catechism particularly to children in the palace and some palace chiefs. This was why Fafunwa (1974) stated that serious missionary activities was in Benin as far back as 1515 and the missionaries obtained permission from the Oba of Benin to teach children the rudiments of Christian faith, how to read and write.

The 15th century missionaries were said to have had operational base at Akpakpava road, Idumwerie, Idumwebo and Ogbelaka (Egharevba, 1968). The major problem at this period was poor accommodation, unhealthy environmental condition, sea sickness, fever, exquisite scenery, unfamiliar customs, and high death rate, poor supply of provisions from Sao Tome. The expeditionist of 1854 dosed themselves with quinine and there was no loss of life from malaria (Ogbu Kalu, 1978).

The second phase of the Roman Catholic Missionary activities began with the Society of African Mission (SMA) IN 1884. The SMA given permission by the Holy See on May 2rd, 1884 to establish the Roman Catholic faith in the Bight of Benin. Benin and virtually all areas under its rule remained closed to missionary endeavour until after the British expedition of 1897 (Tasie,1978). This was the era the Colonial masters were trying to establish their hegemony on the natives. The chiefs in Benin were aware that for the past six years the white men took chief Nana of Itsekiri and they took precausionary measure to protect their king (Oba Ovonramwen N'Ogbaisi, 2007). At this period both the missionaries and the colonialists were viewed with suspicion.

The Colonialists occupied Benin in 1898, and the missionaries were encouraged to move in and settle under their protection (Tasie,1978). The belief of the Europeans was a state without the Church was nothing. Just as the spirit animated the body, so the Church ultimately determined the motions of the society (Johnson, 1979). In response to the appeal of the Colonial government, the SMA priests came to Benin led by Rev.Father

Jules Poirier. The first Church built by SMA priests was the Holy Cross Church. Record from Monsignor Joseph P. Omesa said, a huge metal cross was dug up in the site when the foundation of the church was being laid. This point to the fact that the Portuguese probably built a church at this spot (Omesa,1988).

The Roman Catholic Missionary activities took off successfully this time, many priests came and converts were made especially among the non-indigenes. The first baptism at Holy Cross was conducted on 4th November 1928. Among the people baptized were Anthonius Umokwe, born in Ihiala, Alphonsus Oke, born 1913 in Benin and Andrew Ameachi, baptized at the age of 28 years, a native of Inaii. The first catechist was Peter O. Ayobahan, a Bini, who lived in Ogula Street. He died on 11th November 1998 at the of 99 years. He married one wife and gave birth to six children (Edial, S.O. Secretary to Holy Cross Cathedral, interviewed 9/4/2002).

The first Vicar Apostolic who served in Holy Cross was Thomas Broderick (d.1933), his spirituality was Eucharist centered. The SMA Bishop was Patrick Joseph Kelly, the first resident Catholic bishop of Benin City. He became bishop in 1950 and retired 1973. He was born 1894, arrived Nigeria 1921 as a young priest. He died in Cork Ireland in August 18, 1991. In his life time, both in Ireland and in Nigeria, he gained a reputation for his holiness. He developed a great love for Eucharistic devotions and prayer before the Blessed Sacrament. Mass at this period was conducted in Latin Language but the people were encouraged to pray and sing in the vernacular especially before and after Mass (O'shea,2006:47).

The Missionaries trained catechists, the catechists looked after half a dozen outstations, not only instructing, organizing, and leading prayers but, when occasion demanded, defending 'his flock' against chiefs who wished to punish converts for not taking part in fetish worship or other practices forbidden to Christians (O'shea,2006:45). Most of the catechists were men of integrity and gave very good example. At times they had to bear the brunt of the hostility and resentment of chiefs, fetish priests or Protestant Church leaders. The catechists having some training, were given

salaries. Each parish priest had at least one good catechist to help him (O'shea,p.47).

The SMA build small churches and opened schools. At the beginning all they needed for a school was a blackboard and a piece of chalk. Teachers were paid very little, not much more than seven shillings and six pence a month. They started a seminary for the training of priests. In 1932 the Diocese of Benin, then known as Vicariate had 131 schools and employed 296 teachers, eleven (11) of whom were women. The missionaries received grants from Government. The pupils population was 6,051 boys and 755 girls. Teachers training college was opened at Ibusa in 1928, with 58 students (O'shea, p.87).

Prior to the retirement of Bishop P.J. Kelly two parishes were in Benin City and many local priests had been ordained. Among the parishes in Benin City were Holy Cross and Saint Joseph. Benin Diocese then covered the whole Mid Western region (later Bendel State) with twelve parishes. The Diocese of Issele uku and Warri were created before Bishop P.J.Kelly retired. Many local priests were already ordained before 1973, among who were Father Patrick Ebosele Ekpu, Stephen Ogbeide, Patrick Usenbor and Thomas Obozuwa. After retirement of Bishop P.J.Kelly, Father Patrick Ebosele Ekpu became the co-adjutor bishop and later the first indigenous bishop of the Catholic Diocese of Benin (Archdiocese of Benin City, Directory).

Bishop Patrick Ebosele Ekpu

He took over the Holy Cross Cathedral at his installation as bishop in 1973. He transferred the seat of governance from Holy Cross Church to Airport road where the bishops residence resides till today. Father O.T.Obozuwa was the first local administrator of Holy Cross Cathedral. He took over from Father Healy in 1974 (Catholic Directory, 1999). During the first few decades of contact with the Missionaries, most of those who embrace Christianity were content to have been brought into the faith without feeling compelled to become channels of evangelization. Most of

the support needed for the local church came from outside, and material gifts such as Holy Rosary and statues were distributed widely among the church members. The resources needed for the work of the church had initially been obtained, precisely through the initiative of those same missionaries who knew how and where to find the needed aid (Kalilombe,1978). Few of the laity at the time supported the church more in kind than in cash. In erecting church buildings and schools buildings the laity were required to supply the labour and constructional materials. Those who could afford to subscribe money in addition were encouraged to do so (Makozi, 1982).

In the 1970s with the takeover of mission schools, which the church previously relied on for evangelization Bishop P.E.Ekpu said 'it was like the ground was cut off someone, creating the necessity to devise other means to evangelize' (Ekpu, 1988). With the takeover of schools it became difficult to reach the young ones. After the takeover of schools, emphasis shifted from schools to parishes. The Roman Catholic Leadership has introduced in almost all parishes various projects which generated a good deal of interest (Tuma, 1978).

With the increase in petroleum business at this period, many of the laity were drawn into group involvement in apostolate work through church societies and associations to which they belonged. Through the activities of these societies lay persons contributed towards the growth of the church. Some of the international laity apostolate movements that have become established in various dioceses in Nigeria, such as Legion of Mary, Catholic Mothers, Knights, Women organizations and youth organizations contributed to the evangelization through lay apostolic work (Makozi, 1982).

During Bishop P.E.Ekpu the Catholic Diocese of Benin City was elevated to the status of an Archdiocese in 1994 and he became the first metropolitan (Episcopal Installation of most Rev. Dr. Augustine Obiora Akubeze 28th April, 2011:13). New Churches and rectory buildings were erected, new mass centers and two new dioceses were created, the diocese of Auchi

created in 2003 and the diocese of Uromi created in 2006 (Ogbonmwan, 2011). In the 1980s, he opened new Nursery, primary, secondary and vocational schools. These schools remained models for sound academic, moral and religious education. The purpose of the Catholic education is to integrate the totality of the human person. His other policy was, the introduction of central fund system. This system provides the same allowances for priests in the diocese. This system has been in operation since 1988, its aim was to stream line the remuneration of priests so that those who are working in the suburban areas will not see their posting as punitive (Ogbonmwan, 2011).

The Missionaries translated West minister penny catechism with some modifications into native languages for instruction to the new converts (Ozigboh, 1985). Catechists were employed in each parish, they assist the priests and taught the new-converts. Parish councils was established in each parish, they function as advisory rather than decision-making committees. However, their existence gives the laity- at least a section of it- a sense of participation in the affairs of their church. This may well be helping to consolidate the loyalty of some of the laity to their church.

A Bishop is not merely a pious churchman and shepherd of his flock, he is an administrator and sometimes a politician. Though one need to point out that he ought never to allow his spiritual obligations to be overshadowed by the latter occupation (Kurtz, 1986). The Parish Council has been set up to put into practice what the second Vatican Council had said about the need for consultation and co-responsibility in the church. The priests and lay officers saw the role of the parish council; as facilitating consultation between priests and laity, so that while the council could make recommendations and proffer advice it was the prerogative of the parish priest to make the final decisions. Thus it would be up to the priest to decide whether any proposals the parish council might make about building a centre were in his words 'realistic, feasible and likely to further the purpose for which the parish exists' (Lovell and Widdicombe, 1986).

Religious Contribution to Evangelisation

Bishop P.E.Ekpu invited Religious orders to assist in the evangelization of the Diocese. The first in the list to arrive the diocese were Jesuits, who established a Novitiate (Centre for the training of priests) in Upper Sokponba road Benin City. The Jesuits took over the administration of St. Joseph's Catholic Church, first East Circular road in 1981. However in May 1973, Rev. Father Robert Dundon (SJ) took up appointment as a lecturer at the University of Benin and started Mass Centre at Ugbowo Campus (now St. Albert's Catholic Church). With the arrival of the Jesuit priests the number of Masses offered on Sunday increased to four. They also functioned in St. Maria Goretti Church and Holy Trinity Catholic Church, Oka. The priests offered services in some other areas such as: prisons, Ossiomo Leprosium, and the different zones in St. Joseph's Church. They organized the homeless through a group known as St. Vincent de Paul to prepare soup kitchen project. This kitchen provided regular two nourishing meals each day for 25 persons.

The Jesuits embarked on building projects both in St Joseph and the other stations. In St Joseph's was built St. Ignatius Hall and the infant Jesus shrine chapel. St Joseph's Catholic Church was expounded on both sides and St Mulumba Mass Centre was erected. The parish pastoral council was re-organized to be more functional and this also included laity associations and over 31 associations were organized in the Church (Ezehi, 1999:146).

The second religious priests are Benedictine Order, they are based in Ewu. They assist in Parish work and other engagements, they are a contemplative order. The third religious order are the Augustinian. In 1978, St Augustine's Church was put in the care of the Augustinian Fathers, who were then in charge of St. Paul's Parish where they had been since 12th October 1977. They were the first priests to reside in this Church, their first project was to build a rectory. They began a plan for a new church in 1984 and the final stage of construction was embarked upon in December 1986. It seats about 1,500 members on Sunday. They also function in a Mass centre

called St. Monica at Ogida area. The parish has a laity council and many lay organizations (Ezehi, 1999:37).

The women religious founded by Bishop P.E. EKpu are the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, this was established on April 6th 1975. The Congregations major apostolate are collaboration in pastoral ministry, organizing schools/Education and community development through Hospitals, and counseling (Ezehi, 1999:11).

Visual Evangelism

If a person works into a Roman Catholic Church premises, the first thing that attracts him is the aesthetic beauty. A person entering a temple seeks release from self. He wishes to humble his pride, to confess his unworthiness and to beg forgiveness. Catholics knelt before the Blessed Sacrament (Kurtz 1986:15). The visual images and statues identify the specific culture of the Roman Catholics. A message is communicated through the application of the principles and elements of art, in the drawings, paintings, sculptures and designs. Through these works of arts, the culture of the Roman Catholics are identified, developed, preserved and appreciated (Unoh, 1986). The symbol of the Cross is found inside and outside RCM Churches and Catholics make sign of the Cross as they pray.

A symbol

Is some form or figure that is not a likeness but represents and calls to mind the unseen reality. An artist's portrayal of Christ's crucifixion is an image, while a cross is a symbol of Christ's sacrifice and man's redemption.

In the ancient time world deification was common, individuals with strange experiences after death were deified, and images, statues or sculptures were raised in their honour. The idea of calling on the spirit for protection immediately followed. Symbols is cultural, it is the society that determine its symbols. Religious symbols provide information about the object of belief. Symbols were used to represent images in dreams in the seventeenth century (Firth, 1973).

Telepathic apparitions has been associated with a number of images, especially when considering discarnate experiences. Telepathic apparition. Would have to be recognizably similar to the physical body which that person had when he was still alive (Price, 1973). In the ancient time some people went through initiation before images, undergoing ordeal which involved symbolic death and rebirth. King Kelson had problem, and went to the shrine of Saint Camber. He was initiated before the statue. He imagined the image come to life and speak, visualizing the arms lowering. He fell into a trance. When he woke up, he thought it was silly talking to a statue. When he had problem, an impending was, there was apparition of Saint Camber. He won the war and directed his citizens to accept the Catholic faith (Kurtz, 1986).

The Churches wears modern designs with terrazzo floors and altars in the 1980s. In the 2008 to 2020 churches wears tiles in the floors with different designs. Some churches have been expounded on both sides, knocked down and replaced. The building are of different designs, gothic, dome and rectangular (Basilica). These are the sign of modern time. Marian Statues are found inside Catholic Churches and grottos are kept outside for sight and adoration. Emotan shrine has been in Oba market, she watches over the women trading. Mary is seating in the grottos watching Catholic women.

Images and symbols demonstrate man's ability to use his hands and eyes for the making of things. Primitive cultures and early civilization were aware of the unity of all forms of life, and the importance of the activities and images which symbolized this. The concept of the "fallen man" was graphically and symbolically represented in the story of Adam and Eve (Wheeler, 1969). Images and symbols are visual materials which arouse and sustain interest. In the Acts of Apostles 19:23-36 the early Christians met a great opposition as they preach against the work of art and culture found in the temple. The deity Artemis, was the sacred stone that fell from the sky, highly venerated by the Ephesians. This is how the non-Catholics also find it difficult to accept the Roman Catholic position on sculptures. John of

Damascus (d. 750 AD) was a strong defender of images in religious worship in the Churches of Eastern Europe during Iconoclastic controversy in 8th and 9th centuries (Hoyt, 1957).

The Monstrance is symbolic instrument in Eucharistic theology. The use of this instrument developed in response to an increased theological and devotional focus on the bread and the desire of the people to see the host. Reflecting this trend was the introduction of the elevation of the bread during Mass, the emergence of feasts such as Corpus Christi (the body of Christ) and the growing number of processions with the sacrament. All of these developed during the thirteenth century (Foley, 1991).

According to Ozigboh (1985) there are excess use of obscure ritual terminologies and symbols among Igbo Catholics in Liturgy. Examples of such are "Lamb of GOD" (Nwatulu Chineke), "Kissing of the Cross" (on Good Friday), "genuflections" to the bishop, to "holy pictures" or even to bare walls (at stations of the Cross) (Ozigboh, 1985). In Roman Catholic tradition images, (statues and pictures of Christ and the Saints, medals, scapulars) are essentially symbolic (Ozigboh, 1985:56). The Catholic viewpoint was summarized in the thirteenth century by St. Thomas Aquinas. Thomas taught that images instruct the uneducated, remind people of the mystery of the Incarnation and of the example of the saints, and inspire devotion. When Passion tide begins, for example, the images in Churches are veiled as a reminder that it is a period of mourning (Ogunu, 2019).

Charismatic Movement

The Charismatic Renewal Movement began in Nigeria in the early 1970s. Prayer groups were formed by the Dominicans at Ibadan, Ife and Lagos in 1972-73. The arrival in the country of a team of Americans led by Father Francis Macnutt (O.P) revitalized the renewal through holding retreats and seminars focused on the Holy Spirit. The team arrived Ibadan in 1974 and father Francis lead meetings that emphasized the gift of healing (Ogu, 1985). He spoke of healing, prophecy, speaking in tongues and laying

of hands. He prayed for the sick and people testified to the healing they received as a result of prayers (Ogu,1985).

The CRM began in Benin City in 1971 at Holy Cross Cathedral with a few Legionary members. The initial name was "Pentecostal Movement and Bible Society", the foundation members were few Legionaries, catechumen and new converts met during Legionary evangelism. The members were longing to know what the new fellowship will offer them, they were thirsty for God. This information was hand written and presented to this author by Rev L.O.D. Ajayi who was the first president of Saint Paul's Catholic Church branch 1974-79. As the body grew they introduced Bible studies classes on Sunday. Later some tracts were introduced to the members.

The first priest to associate with the fellowship was Father Dr. R.B.Dundon (SJ) an American. He assisted the fellowship along with some non-Catholic brethren. The name of the group was later changed to Catholic Charismatic Renewal Movement. The first local clergy to associate with the group was Father Gregory Abiebhode who previously associated with the movement as major seminarian in Ibadan. The movement grew fast as many were willing to be touched by the Holy Spirit and increase the Holy Spirit gifts in their Life (Ajayi L.O.D). Charismatic Renewal Movement have branches in the Catholic Churches.

As was observed by Ozigboh (1985) people easily get bored after sitting in for barely a single hour watching and listening to a mass pattern that is 'déjà vu'. The very same people would participate for many hours at a time in a Catholic Charismatic gathering or in a Prayer House, without fatigue. This is an indication that the people prefer active forms of participation than solemn service (Ozigboh, 1985:58).

Conclusion

The era of the Portuguese and French missionaries will simply be referred to as a failed mission. The period of successful missionary activities came after the abolishment of slave trade and the settlement of ex-slaves in Serra Leone and Liberia. The ex-slaves came to Nigeria especially among

the Protestants but among the Roman Catholics it was religious orders. The Missionaries were protected by the Colonial Government, this was the beginning of civilization or modernization.

Schools was the nursery of the infant church, the missionaries could not easily convert the elderly people, so they taught the young ones how to read and write, and catechism. Local language and songs was encouraged even though Latin was initially the official language of the Catholic Church. Some members have attended Roman Catholic Church for 50 years, they know the worship inside and out (Foley, 1991:64). Sunday morning services had always been soothing, a little "R" and "R" for the spirit, the serenity and beauty, the traditional words and music and the good and decent people around on Sunday save one soul. Some have been married in the Church almost thirty years ago, happy memories still dwelt there (Buchanan, 1990). Some attend church simply as a habit, others attend for different reasons such as mental derangement, widows coming to seat on front pew. Some characters want to still from Sunday collection, hence ushers are forced to hold on to the collection.

The Church is the upholder of morality but there are evidence that the misfits and criminals now own more rights than the law-abiding, long-suffering tax payers. The SMA prefer to called 'society', the SJ also prefer to called 'society' while the Benedictine are order including Augustinian. These are priestly religious groups in Catholic Mission.

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