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Catholicism and Its Nigerian Intellectuals.

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Nigerian Institute of Social
and Economic Research.

University College.

Ibadan, Nigeria.

Mr. Richard Nolte

Institute of Current World Affairs

366 Madison Avenue

New York 17, New York

Dear Mr. Nolte:

In 1571 Pius V addressed a papal Bull to King Sebastian of Portugal. In it he declared: " It is impossible in all cases to send from afar those who are to bring the light of the Faith to such persons; but, as in the days of the Church's infancy the Apostles used to choose from those who had received the Christian Faith the men most apt and capable to minister to their brethren, so also today it is needful that our whole effort be directed to so spreading and deeply implanting the Christian Faith among those peoples, that it shall not vanish even when those who brought it are gone or are dead, and that when they are no longer there native preachers be found at once by whose pious labors and care it can grow and prosper".

This perception of four centuries ago, conceived in the specific context of the Portuguese colonization of Africa, " so also today" is exigent in the Catholic Church's dedication to " spreading and deeply implanting the Christian Faith". Reports from the current Ecumenical Council indicate that the African bishops of the Church are not only an assurance that the Faith will not vanish from Africa, but are also important instruments in the " religious decolonization " of Africa. The efficacy of their works and presence has been demonstrated by the creation of a new Pan-Africa Episcopal Secretariat that is expected to become a permanent agency of the Catholic Church. This newly coordinated group of Bishops of Africa including sixty-one Africans out of an approximate total of three hundred, has been discussing many issues coming before the Ecumenical Council with a view toward presenting a common front.

Four such issues are of particular pertinence to the continued longevity of Catholicism in Africa. First there is the need for the Church to closely search the " African way of life " and give careful consideration as to how its tradition and protocol-ridden organization can better adapt itself to peculiarly African modes of living.

Second, the hierarchy must assess anew the African customs and traditional rites, hitherto dismissed as idolatrous, to determine if these ancient attributes of Africa are necessarily offensive to the teachings of the Church. Third, there might well be an investigation of specific African customs and rites with a view toward adopting them in places where they would neither be inconsistent, inconvenient, nor a source of opportunistic charges against the Church.

Fourth and last, the African Bishops have raised the question of language. While Latin is the official language of Roman Catholicism, it is far from being the language of Africa. Certainly to be Nigerian the Church needs to make it possible for desires and views to be expressed in such Nigerian mother tongues as Ibo, Hausa, or Yoruba. In this effort the Protestants have preceded the Catholics.

While the great Ecumenical Council can only turn a fraction of its massive and ponderous attention to the "decolonization" of the Catholic Church in Africa, the priests and lay followers of the African diocesans, must daily face the horrendous mistakes of their missionary-cum-colonial past, the overawing siren call of secular success and development, and the still warm and vibrant grasp of traditional "Mother Africa".

In his novel, Blade Among the Boys, Nigerian author Onuora Nzekwu, described by one priest as a "good Catholic", characterizes the sandy soil of the past in which today's African Catholic Church has to flourish. His protagonist is Patrick Ikenga, an Ibo boy, who, in spite of all the harsh opposition from his family and village, pursues his determination to become a priest. Nzekwu lines out the conflict between African tradition and Western ways when he speaks of an illness that befalls Patrick as a young boy.

"It was significant that all those who suggested taking Patrick to the hospital had had education at the mission schools where they learnt (who cared about practise?) the rudiments of Christianity and had been baptized. But while the mission authorities looked upon education as a useful guide to baptism, synonymous with conversion, the converts regarded the attendance at church service, catechism classes, and baptism as conditions they must fulfil if the mission authorities were to teach them the three R's, their primary objective. In other words, the quest for education had made necessary their accepting the Christian faith. Their desire to demonstrate that they belonged to the new gen-

eration of literate gentlemen had made them attend schools and hospitals, by-products of Christianity, and speak..... words of wisdom in which they themselves had little faith, for the old order still had a firm grip on them".

Weakening further the depth of Christian adherence is the remembrance that " A considerable amount of force had been used to make him and thousands of other children at the mission school..... and elsewhere practise their religion, perhaps by the clergy, certainly by the schoolmasters. When therefore these children left school, and there was no longer anyone to threaten them with the rod or force them into going to worship, they generally took a respite from their religious observances: later growing indifferent to them and in the end completely abandoning them, some to return to the faith of their fathers".

This apostasy was not true of Nzekwu's Patrick, who followed his dedication to an unfulfilled and disappointing end, nor is it true of hundreds of Nigerian Catholic intellectuals (university trained people to be found in the government administration or who teach in universities and secondary schools.) Certainly those Catholic priests, European and African, I have interviewed here in Nigeria have been able to offer reasonably solid evidence that highly educated Nigerians are able to accept the Faith without reservations. My informants argue that Nigerian intellectuals appreciate Catholicism's ability to rest its claims on an appeal to " the intervention of God in history "; that they know the value of an intellectual approach that can " stand up to and assimilate modern inquiry " in a way that the pre-Newtonian African religious forms had no hope of doing; and that the intellectuals appreciate the superb sacramental system that meets the deepest needs of African tradition and hearts.

While keeping of the Faith is a dominant set among many highly educated Nigerians, some Catholic priests are quite conscious of those weaknesses set forth in Blade Among the Boys. They know that too many of their converts have had to learn " Christian truths " in the school rather than at home. One of Nzekwu's village elders is also aware of this.

" We were made. They discovered they couldn't change us and so they decided to turn their attention to our children, who were yet unformed and pliable, and who would be the fathers of tomorrow. They introduced schools and made them a cover under which Christianity would operate. To my mind the essential thing to them was not the teaching

of reading, writing and arithmetic, which we have now learned to value as the passport to future wealth and power, but the spread of the foreign faith".

Still, there are Catholic priests who know that Nigerian Catholics, particularly those of intellectual stature, are not all "made". These priests see that religious knowledge seldom keeps pace with secular developments, and that even the knowledge once held erodes with time. They see this as especially true in that area Catholics regard as "family morality". Further, one African priest observed that while the spontaneous reactions of "pagan" Europeans are Christian, the spontaneous reactions of Christian Africans are "pagan". He contended that this was a fact often made clear in times of stress.

If success attends the way of the African Bishops at the Ecumenical Council, the Faith will have moved a little closer to maintaining its grip on Nigerian Catholic intellectuals and making the religion a thing for spiritual stress as well as for secular convenience. A favorable African-oriented resolution of the four issues would be seen as a discreet enunciation that the Catholic Church is an African Church.

For the well-being of the Church it is her Nigerian intellectuals who should be made most cognizant of this. For it is among them that the historical hopes of Pope Pius V must take root.

The deep emotional sets and historical social patterns of Nigerian intellectuals are not the only obstacles the Catholic clergy of Nigeria has to deal with in making the Church universal in Africa. Its educated Nigerians see the failure of the ecclesiastical sphere to keep pace with the political Nigerianization of the nation. Individual foreign missionaries are often the object of a great deal of affection, but intellectuals of the Church are increasingly critical of the way the European priests swamp the Nigerian priests in numbers and influence. Further, they resent the tremendous power the missionaries exercise through their control of Nigerian Catholic schools.

As with the Federal and Regional governments, the Catholic Church will need the services of Europeans for some time to come. The Church, like Nigerian government agencies, has to figure out how to carry on its work under the heavy liability of possessing such a proportionally large number of Europeans. Unlike government institutions which provide the necessary economic base for the well educated Nigerians, and thus commands their patience, the Church possesses only that of its members which they give freely and often can give up freely, their spiritual allegiance.

Without the intellectuals the Church cannot hold its grip on those of the Nigerian masses who have already pledged their adherence. A Catholic medical missionary has expressed his anxiety on this score. He pointed out that those Catholic missionaries who talk often about the " good people " of the bush and who disdain the so-called elite who criticize the Church and give it trouble, are contributing to the uncertain way of the Church in Africa. " Must not our reaction be ", he asks, " to bring even greater care to bear on the problem of this youth? Can we believe that the fervour and fidelity of the mass will long survive the case in which the elite have deserted us? "

If Catholicism is to " grow and prosper " in Nigeria, educated lay people will have to come to feel that they are the Church, this, in contradiction to the prevalent identification of the Church with the European clergy. In this regard there is Catholic action, but in the narrow sense that lay people work largely in the spiritual sphere under the direction of bishops and priests. This is certainly fundamental to the outlook of the Church, but a wider Catholic social action must be brought to bear on the problems of the country if the Church is not to lose its place in the tension-filled days ahead in the social and spiritual development of Nigeria.

Father James O'Connell, a Jesuit priest and Lecturer in Government at the University College of Ibadan has caught the tempo and the limitations of the Church's task in modern Nigeria in these words: " We must keep in mind two basic truths of the Catholic stand. The first is that we, Catholics, are interested profoundly in the general human betterment of the world as well as in its religious betterment. This attitude enables us to work sympathetically with those who are seeking to improve their own positions or improve the general position of the country. The second truth is that in accepting the distinction of the spiritual and the temporal we acknowledge that primacy of action in the temporal belongs to laymen and that we must reject as a temptation our urges to deal better with that sphere than our laymen seem to us to be able to deal.

" For several reasons this second truth is going to be rather important in Nigeria in the years immediately ahead; (a) Our politicians and administrators will resent any clerical interference, even the most innocuous, and they will resent it all the more if it comes from foreign-born clerics; (b) There is no Catholic or ecclesiastical solution to the fantastically complicated political, social, and economic problems that lie ahead of Nigeria. No one can quite readily say what techni-

cal solutions the country is going to take.

" The Church has everything to gain from disengaging herself as much as is compatible with her spiritual mission from the temporal sphere. Where we cannot in any case go wrong is in getting across to our educated people through study circles and other organizations the essentials of our social stand. It is they - the politicians and administrators - who are entitled to work out the technical approaches to the country's problems. Our task is to see that they have the guiding knowledge of Christian doctrine and the natural law within which alone the technical solutions can be worked out in a way that respects human nature and the relations between men and God. "

This is a strenuous and, for the Church in present day Africa, dangerous charge. The efforts of the African bishops are taking place within the orderly and princely organization of the Church. Father O'Connell and his fellows must pursue their " pious labors " in the brilliant glare of the African sun.

Sincerely yours,

Charles J. Patterson

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