

## Structures or Persons, Activities or Formations: Reconsidering the Church's Pastoral Priorities

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### Abstract

*The evangelization effort of the missionaries in planting the faith gave way to the present pastoral activity among the faithful now institutionalized as a local church. The structural aspect of this church is essential for its external reality and visible unity. However, the hitherto overemphasis and undue concentration on this particular model of the church at the detriment of other models have many consequences. Among these are: seeing the treasure and pride of the church in structures rather than in the Christian community of persons living a vivid faith and worship; unhealthy competitions and inordinate anxieties on structure at the neglect of other apostolates; focusing on social activities at the overlook of spiritual formation of the faithful and complacency in apostolate induced by mighty monuments built under manifest insensitivity to the plight of the poor masses. The paper is an attempt to highlight and address these anomalies, with a view of creating a need for a reconsideration of our church's pastoral priorities. The paper intends to proffer proposals that would present the church, in the light of the New Testament's teachings, as taking the opposite direction to counter the ostentatiously materialistic stance of the present age rather than allying with it.*

### Introduction

At his historic visit to Nigeria in 1982, Pope John Paul II used 12 verbs to describe evangelization. The verbs are to proclaim, to announce, to bring, to promote, to preach, to spread, to advance, to share, to live, to bear witness to, to extend and to communicate (Okoye 1984). Using any of the verbs in a sentence in relation to evangelization, the object is always Christ. Such a sentence would imply an indirect object which is human persons. The purpose of evangelization is to communicate Christ to humanity. Human person is therefore at the centre of evangelization.

The primary duty of the church is evangelization of human person in its totality. Today people have many definitions of the church. This paper adopts two of these. One is that of Ogunduyilem (2012) which is that the church is a New Jerusalem, the body of Christ, in which those who believe have Christ's life. Analyzing further he sees the church as a community of faith, hope and charity, a visible, organized society, through which Jesus Christ communicates truth and grace to all peoples. The other definition is according to Jackson (2013) theological, and is given by the New Hampshire Confession Article 111 thus.

A visible church of Christ is a congregation of baptized believers associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the ordinances of Christ governed by his laws, exercising the gifts, rights and privileges invested in them by his word.

The church is described in the gospels as a cultivated field whose true vine is Christ who gives life and fruitfulness to the branches (Mt 21: 33-34; Jn. 15:1-5).

From the above definitions, it is clear that human person is at the centre of the church. It was, therefore, proper that Christ referred to Peter as the rock (*kepha*) upon which he would build his church (Mt.16:18). The original Aramaic form makes clear that 'this rock' refers to the person of Simon and not to his faith (Meier 1980).

The notion of the church as community of persons has appealed to many modern theologians (Dulles 1976). In its ultimate reality, the church is a special fellowship of persons. The church's utmost pastoral priority should be persons rather than structures, formation of persons not activities.

In the Nigerian contemporary church, the reverse is the case. Structures are the main focus in the annual strategic pastoral plan of the churches in both parish and diocesan levels. Structures form the highest scoring mark in any pastoral appraisal. Structure is of the major agenda in the meetings of the parish council, the diocesan pastoral council as well as the presbytery council of dioceses. The above strategies have given rise to ‘the money, money’ church that churches in Nigeria have now been branded. This is because launching or mini-launching is held in the churches almost on monthly basis, in some places weekly. The effect of these is that the people are not grounded in the Christian faith and doctrine.

The paper will highlight with particular reference to person and structure the present realities of the churches. A critical analysis of the church in these realities as well as the implication to its pastoral ministry vis-à-vis the gospel of Jesus Christ will be made. Finally, the paper will advocate for a reappraisal of the churches’ pastoral ministry as a way forward to responding to the challenges of the present realities.

### ***The Church and the Structures***

It is pertinent to point out that structures are part and parcel of building the kingdom of God that is the major role of the church. From the beginning of God’s relation with mankind in the Old Testament, structure was an important aspect of man’s input. Moses was ordered by God to erect the dwelling of the meeting tent (Exod. chapter 40). It was by Noah’s ark, a mighty building that God saved the first “righteous” generation of mankind (Gen.chs.5-8). There are several mentions of synagogues in both Old and New Testaments, as a building in which gatherings of a community of persons (the people of God) organized for a religion purpose. According to Millers (1973), there are more than 50 references in the New Testament to the synagogue in this sense. A certain centurion was recommended to Jesus by the Jewish elders as one who loved their people and built their synagogue and so deserving Jesus miraculous favour (Lk. 7:1-10). There are mentions of the synagogue of freedmen at Jerusalem (Acts 6:9) and numerous ones at Damascus and other chief cities of western Asia and the Eastern Mediterranean in the time of Paul (Acts 9:2).

Perhaps the best example and reference to the importance and significance of structure in the bible is the temple. The focus is on the Jerusalem temple mentioned in 23 of the Old Testament and 11 of the New Testament books, which became religious centre of the world jewry (Millers 1973). For 100 years the Jews attached great importance to the temple (Millers 1973. cf. Ps. 84, 122). Jesus as a Jew recognized of the importance the temple. Earlier in his life he was once found in the temple interacting with the teachers. (Lk.2:41-50). He chased out from the temple those who were selling and buying in it on the ground that they were turning ‘a house of prayer’ into a ‘den of thieves’ (Mt. 21; 12-13).

There is also a mention of tent in the bible as a form of structure. Tents were “houses of hair” that were houses of Israel after their settlement in Patriarchal groups in Palestine. Their worship centre was a sacred tent of meeting (Millers 1973). At Jesus’ transfiguration, Peter, James and John asked to be allowed to build three tents for Jesus, Moses and Elijah, as their response to a deep and exciting religious sentiment (Mt. 17:1-8).

It must be remarked that often the church is called the building of God. Christ compared himself to the stone which the builders rejected, but which was made into the corner-stone (Mt 21:47). On this foundation the church is built by the apostles and from it the church receives solidity and unity. Today this edifice has many names to describe it: The house of God in which his family dwells; the house of God in the spirit; the dwelling place of God among men (Catholic Catechism 1994). On the whole Christ represents the sense in which “house/ building” is used.

### ***The Church and Human Person***

The biblical inauguration of a church by Christ (cf. Mt. 16:18) places human person at the foundation of the church. Christ and human person then form the centre-point of the church. For Dulles (1976) the church is an institution, a mystical communion, a sacrament, a herald and a servant, imparting, communicating and relating the life of Christ to human person. This human person created in the image of God but messed up by sin (Gen. 1:27; 3:1-14), is in need of transformation and redemption. This essential need is supplied by the church. In doing this the church as a human institution makes use of many human values. None of these human values should be projected as replacing the basic way in which the church serves mankind which is “by looking up to Jesus, the servant Lord and by subjecting itself to the words of the Gospel” (Dulles 1976:185).

Describing the church of the first century AD, Campbell (1985) says that it was a church of God's people gathered around the person of the living Christ, witnessing to him, learning his life and sharing faith in him. For Campbell, the pastoral emphasis of the church of every age should also be that of living persons gathering around living Christ.

Jacques Maritain a philosopher, asks a question what do people mean when they speak of human person? In a philosophical sense he answers that human person is more a whole than a part and more independent than servile. He is a minute fragment of matter that is at the same time a universe, a beggar who participates in the absolute being, mortal flesh whose value is eternal (Nwaereka 1991). Illustrating further Nwaereka quotes Maritain thus:

The value of the person, his dignity and rights belong to the order of things naturally sacred which bears the imprint of the father of being and in him man has the end of his movement and being. Man as a person is a centre inexhaustible of existence, bounty and action (Maritain 1972:39).

Value for human person is one of the church's major inheritances from its founder, Jesus Christ. Human person is for him a treasure from the father that is to be jealously guarded (Jn. 17:12). He has come in search of human person to be saved and laws can be relaxed in favour of human person (Lk. 19:10). For him the Sabbath law was made for human person (Mk.2.27). his first disciples were asked to abandon their lucrative profession leading to their earthly development in preference to the gathering of human persons for the kingdom of God the father (Lk. 5:40) it was for the love of human person that he gave his life on the cross (Jn. 15:13). His gospel was begun by his demand for transformation and renewal of men because the reign of God was near ( Mk.1:15). He came that human person may have life and have it abundantly

The truth is that the church actually was begun by Christ with human person (Mt. 16:18). And the disciples kicked off the mission any work of this church in response to the yearning of human persons. The number of persons involved in the early conversion following the event of the Pentecost was given as 3000 (Acts 2:41), indicating deliberate emphasis on human person adopted by the early church. It is venerable that while series of specific actions and counteractions of the disciples and the people as well as their consequences were mentioned in the record of the history of the early church (Crowe 1928) Materials things like carriages, boats ships, used by the disciples for their travels and the types of houses they lived in were not specified. This is an indication that there was certainly little or no emphasis on them.

The missionary, pastoral and evangelical works of the church continued to be centred on human persons up to the period of its birth into the African land hence in his illustration of the early missionaries' missionary principles, Hastings (1967:15) writes "the mission is to draw men into the divine life of truth and love" The setting of principle was followed up sending out of person.

Also tracing the background to the planting of Catholic Christianity in the Lower Niger, Obi (1985:8) states that "the Holy Ghost missionaries came to the Lower Niger out of generosity and obedience to the Vicar of Christ who assigned them to seek the welfare of the black race". Okoro (2011) observes the fundamental evolution in the New Testament church soon after its inception following the events of Pentecost. This new form of the church contrasts sharply with the Old Testament form of worship and religion. Unlike Judaism whose capital city was Jerusalem having the king temple and which observed the laws, the Sabbath and circumcision, the early church had no capital city, no priest, no altar, no holy land as such. It was designed to consist of human persons sharing faith and life in the risen Jesus who remained fully present in their midst.

### ***Structures and Persons, Activities and Formation: The Church's Present Realities***

In the structure of the local churches, in the Catholic Church for instance, there are stations, parishes and dioceses. A diocese has a bishop as a local ordinary. A number of dioceses form an ecclesiastical province, sustaining and nurturing the faith of the people of God that constitute it. By these groupings the people of God are easily reached and better ministered to. The church uses the leaders of the groupings namely: the station leader / catechist, the parish catechist, the parish priest / assistant parish priest, the Bishop and the Metropolitan Archbishop to fulfill its duty of teaching catechism (basic catechesis), formation of basic Christian communities, preaching of the gospel, administration of sacraments, and moderation of Christian doctrines and traditions.

These leaders play significant role in the Christian communities by presiding over their regular meetings.

Today what dominate the agenda of these meetings are rendering of accounts of previous levies or donations, discussion on the new ones to be made, reports of the committees on projects either already executed or yet to be executed, discussions on strategy plan towards catechesis to deepen the spiritual life and faith of the parishioners as well as efforts at evangelization are secondary. What may be considered very important matters would be deliberations on the best way to make maximum use of the congregations for optimal fundraising for the completion one parish project or the other. This is the reason for spending time and energy organizing highly publicized award title giving for categories of Christian women and catholic men in a locality where many of them see nothing wrong in patronizing jujus and shrines, keep concubines, take brides, embezzle public fund and rig elections.

In the dioceses, the priests are appraised and graded on the quantity and quality of structures the put up at their places of assignment, never on the impact they make on the lives of persons in these places. It is common these days to hear of the phrase “he has transformed the place” but not “he has transformed the people”. More often than not the effect the construction of these structures has on the spirituality of the persons who are over-tasked to construct them are never considered. This structure syndrome apostolate presently focused on in our churches has the tendency of affecting negatively the pastoral zeal of priests. It is a fact that the pastors who are in parishes where rich politicians and business men and women worship float in what Igwegbe (2007) calls “booming religious industry” even though they make little or no impact on the lives of the faithful. Priests in the poor places may also be demoralized at their apparent inability to make an impression despite their frantic efforts.

The contemporary church gives an impression that is well in term of pastoral ministry simply because the premises of the parishes are colorful with imposing structures including the parish churches. The result is that while a scene of a developed church is being projected all around the dioceses; in terms of faith the position is different. Consequently, the life of darkness of “pre-Christian mission” days man’s in humanity to man, human ritual practices, survival of the fittest, disregard to the sacredness of human life, hatred and enmity, rancour and acrimony, all other kinds of crimes and pagan practices are observed all over the country of more than a century- and-quarter- old Christianity.

It is not an overstatement to say these days that many take more pleasure in building a church than going to church. This is true because the people see building a church as a thing of honour. Villages and towns compete among themselves in church building. If village ‘A’ is senior to village ‘B’ by tradition, the village ‘A’ will see no reason why its church will not be bigger than village ‘B’s’ church. And village ‘B’ will prove to village ‘A’ that although it may be its senior it has more rich people than it by building a bigger church. Structures are put not necessarily due to a need but for show off and self aggrandizement.

Presently the great attention to a big church, big parish hall and big father’s house has created “sacred cows” in the church. These are people whose voice must be heard, people who must be respected, regarded and acknowledged. They can use phone call to arrange the wedding of their driver who will only make an appearance the week of the wedding. They can ask for a bishop to be invited to officiate in the funeral mass for their grand father who was baptized two weeks before his death. They have specially reserved seats in front of the altar even though they are not communicants. What is more worrisome here is not the scandal of the church giving undue honours and recognition to these nominal Christians but its incapacity to evangelize them. They are placed at the centre of the church and yet cannot be impacted towards salvation by the church. For President Barrack Obama one needs to come to church precisely because one is of this world, not apart from it; rich, poor, sinner, saved, one needs to embrace Christ precisely because one has sins to wash away, because one is human and needs an ally in his difficult journey, to make the peaks and valleys smooth and render all those crooked parts straight (Obama 2006). If theologians take Obama’s definition of “coming to church” to be acceptable, then the church has by her present emphasis on structure, rendered, theologically wrong some people’s motive for coming to church.

### ***A Reappraisal towards Having a Person-Centered Church***

Given the feature of the present church realities vis-à-vis the person-centered church of the New Testament, there is a need for a reappraisal towards having a church that will impact spiritually to the faithful living in a materialistic world of today, towards having a picture of a church whose focus is different.

A certain university Vice Chancellor in a discussion about a certain prophetic priest whose Sunday homily is always centered on the politicians in their injustice, exploitation and oppression of the poor masses, has this remark: "I praise the courage of the priest, but the reason why I no longer attend his mass is the boredom of not hearing something different from what I hear from the society, the radio and the news papers Monday to Saturday." If people can be bored hearing the same thing in the church as they hear from the society, how much more bored would they be seeing the church materially worldly as their secular world? A church whose mentality in terms of physical structure is different from that of the society is more likely to generate on the people a sense of sacred and sense of a different world that is actually their Christian aspiration.

Such a church is seen at home with things small in line with the kingdom of God that is likened by Jesus to a mustard seed (Mk.4:30-32). Its growth projects that which starts with a small "congregation of baptized believers" (Jackson 2013). It progresses by catechesis to a more knowledge of the gospel of Christ, leading to a cultivation of virtue and a deepening of faith; it increases in numerical strength and finally expands to having an edifice reflecting a growth in the faith of the people. The merit here is that the pastor's energy is expended more on persons and their formation by catechesis than on structure. Such a church concentrates attention on the growth and quality of the faith of individual faithful making up the Christian community. In this church every one is important, every one is respected, everyone can be preached to, and everyone is a stake holder in the building up of the Christian community.

Contemporary society needs a church that reflects the early church in Jerusalem that made such a big attraction to people not because of a big and imposing edifice housing it but because of its manifest deep faith in Jesus Christ, Christian living in charity, unity of purpose, sharing of resources and mutual help in fellowship. The case of the early church is clear evidence that the gospel of Christ, when correctly preached, accepted and lived by the people, is in itself an attraction. Hence dissipating energy in the church on things that are neither theological nor ecclesiastical, just to make an attraction or an impression should be uncalled for.

The issue of poverty alleviation should be a concern of the church. Professor Adedoyin (2012) quoting the Food and Agriculture Organization (FAO) of the United Nations gave the number of hungry or Undernourished people in sub-Saharan Africa as 239 million in 2010 out of 925 million of the world figure. As Osunwokeh would hold, "no one questions the spirit of hard work and commitment of the pastors that carry out the execution of these projects; neither should any one devalue the great faith of the people that contribute the money; no one also denies that 'a thing of beauty is a joy forever' "(2010:92), however, there is an obvious worry when these points are placed by priests above sensitivity to the level of poverty of the masses constituting the major of their congregations.

The idea of collaborative ministry advocated by the New Testament (cf. 1 Cor. 3:1-15), compels priests to shun taking pleasure in this and that structure "being put up by me." Consequently, Okoye thinks that "the human temptation to put all structures in my time must be evangelized" (1984:20). St. Paul who compares the whole work of evangelization with the farm field belonging to the Lord, takes every disciple as a mere labourer in it. For him then since one merely "plants" and another "waters", the temptation for one to think of taking the glory and another envying, is out of the question. The Lord alone takes the glory and assesses the input of each labourer. For Umoh (2006) that Paul takes pains to explain to the Corinthians this mere servant position of the disciples is an indication that he was aware of a possibility of rivalry between them. The church should also anticipate possibility of rivalry between priests by emphasizing persons and formation rather than structures that can generate it.

The church's pastoral ministry is for the welfare of the people. What is advocated here actually is the achievement of this. In doing this there is need to apply the principle of resource management, which is "the effective and efficient use of all available resources human and material, to meet the needs of the organization, and to achieve its initial aims and objectives" (Falaiye and Aitufe 2010:213). The key note here is "to achieve its initial aims and objectives". In line with the trend of thought of Falaiye and Aitufe in resource management; for the church to apply comparatively management objectives principles in religion, its emphasis must be human persons that are its initial aims and objectives rather than structures. The two scholars think that "lack of management hinders many good intentions; it cuts short the benefit that would have accrued from the efforts of a religious minister if they were better conceived and executed" (2010:213-214). One of the reasons the priests give for their more emphasis on structures than on persons, is the fact that money flows in the particular institution of their authority.

But structure / building is not the only project that money can be invested on. Giving loan or grant to the members of the church towards poverty alleviation, granting of scholarships to the children from poor parents etc, can pass for the church's apostolate. Infact, using the flowing money in the institution to provide social facilities for the people can easily convince them to attend one's church and embrace Jesus' gospel of salvation.

Today, one may ask; how many catechists of the parishes have formal education beyond Senior Secondary School? To use the parish fund to train people to graduate in theology or any other religious discipline or employ already graduates of some of them to serve as parish catechists is a worth while project, as important to the church as building a big church or a big hall. The only difference probably is that people are more likely to ask: who built this church or hall than who trained this catechist?

The church of Jesus Christ is basically a church of the poor. Hence Osunwokeh agrees with Kelly (1985) that "Jesus' mission directs him towards the poor and where they can be found" (2006:1400). For the church to place its pastoral priority on structure rather than on the poor masses constituting it is a gross misplacement. Commenting on such a misplacement of priority during the middle ages (AD 600-1300) due to the church's materialistic tendencies with its increased power and wealth, McVeigh writes.

There had always been some within the church who protested at the church as an institution. Initially the monastic orders had tried to separate the church from world power and call it back to its original simplicity and purpose, that of defending the poor and acting in solidarity with the oppressed (1989:53).

The present undue priority to structures tends to blind the church to the needs and yearnings of the poor masses that make up the greater percentage of its population and building up the kingdom of God in the sky.

The concept of the priest as a sacred person, different from the baptized, is not a congenial one to many contemporary Catholics, who understand the church as the people of God, a community of disciples, even an egalitarian community. These men and women are deeply dedicated to the church and want to claim their own ministries within it (Rausch 1992). There is a need to direct the church's greater attention to lay ministries, and taking the whole idea as a project. Bishop Anthony Gbuji in the mid 90s established schools of evangelization in his Iselle Ukwu Catholic diocese. His lofty idea spread to other Catholic dioceses. The schools produced many evangelization graduates. Today these graduates make little or no impact in their parishes and dioceses because of little or no attention and even recognition to them on the part of the priests. There should be a rethink to this position. The loft initiative of this pastoral-minded Bishop should be effectively utilized as a person- oriented pastoral project of the church.

### **Conclusion**

Perhaps many would today perceive the church's big role to the society of human persons in the same way the American President Barrack Obama does when he writes:

Out of necessity, the black church had to minister to the whole person. Out of necessity, the black church rarely had the luxury of separating individual salvation from collective salvation. It had to serve as the centre of the community's political, economic and social as well as spiritual life; it understood in an intimate way the biblical call to feed the hungry and clothe the naked and challenge powers and principalities. In the history of these struggles, I was able to see faith as more than just a comfort to the weary or a hedge against death; rather, it was an active, palpable agent in the world (2006:207).

The paper observes with Madu (1999) and other scholars that the deep faith required for a sustainable Christian living is yet to be attained by the African/Nigerian Christians despite the celebrated growth of the church in Nigeria in particular. It however disagrees with him (Madu) that such attainment will be realized when the Nigerian Christians merely learn to be honest to their African cultural heritage and integrate the same into their Christianity. It rather insists that as a way forward the present trend of apostolate that gives a priority to structures rather than persons, creating a false impression of a glorious church, should be reconsidered.

The general absence of more emphasis on structures than on persons is clearly noticeable in the scriptures. In the Old Testament from Abraham up to Moses, the Judges, the Prophets, and the Kings, the emphasis was on God interacting, teaching, admonishing, loving and saving his people. Even in the case of king Solomon whose magnificent temple's construction was highly emphasized, his priority of persons was first clearly indicated (IKgs. 3). In the New Testament the matter is even clearer.

From Jesus' birth in Bethlehem up to his death by crucifixion in Jerusalem, there is little or no stress made of structures, apart from the case of the cleansing of the temple (Mt. 21:12-13). In the disciples' carrying on with Jesus' mission after his ascension, there is no record of any emphasis on the structures. Of all his missionary and apostolic zeal and efforts, Paul according to the scriptures never laid any emphasis on structures.

Southcott says it best: "The holiest moment of the 'church service is the moment when God's people-strengthened by preaching and sacrament- go out to the church door into the world to be the church. We don't go to church we are the church"(2013:1). For Southcott as for Fairchild (2013) the church is not the building. Its twofold purpose: coming together for the purpose of bringing each member to spiritual maturity (Eph. 4:13) and reaching out to spread the love of Christ and the gospel message to unbelievers in the world (Mt.28: 18-20, Fairfield) should be its pastoral priority.

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