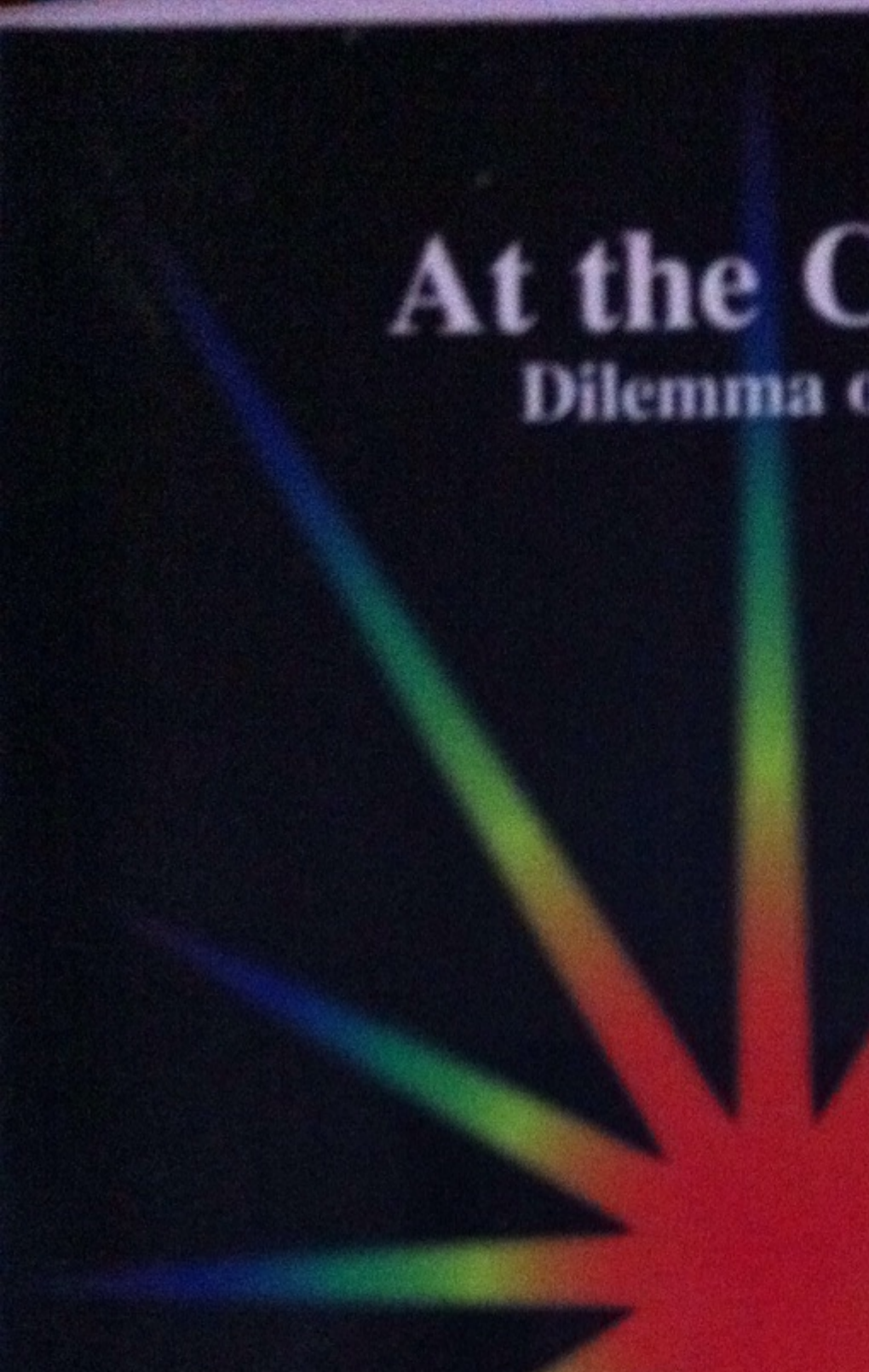


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ISBN: 0-7392-0472-6

**Cover design - By Ken Bartlett
Columbia Falls, MT. USA.**

Printed in the United States of America

By **M**orris **P**ublishing

3212 E. Hwy 30

Kearney, NEBRASKA 68847

1-800-650-7888

Author's Contact Address:

Diocesan Secretariat

P.O. Box 430, Orlu

Imo State, Nigeria

All proceeds from the sales of this book will be used for the promotion of vocational education for poor young men and women in the diocese of Orlu, Nigeria.

AT THE CROSSROADS

Dilemma of the Man of God

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PREFACE

AT THE CROSSROADS - DILEMMA OF THE MAN OF GOD

I sounded funny and looked like a fool among some of my past students and seminarians, most of whom are now parish priests when I ridiculed the idea of celebrating the silver jubilee of my priestly ordination. "What is this crazy celebration of 25 years as a priest? What is the purpose? What is it I have achieved during my 25 years as a Catholic priest? What am I to celebrate?" And many other questions I put to the young priests, who like Jesus' disciples, wanted to know from their master where and when they would begin laying the table for the great meal. These young fellows who came to discuss the celebration of the silver jubilee, two years in advance were disappointed by my reactions. They actually thought I was out of my senses.

In Nigeria particularly it is "proper" and "usual" to celebrate at various occasions - big and small. It doesn't need to be necessarily a "Silver" "Golden" or "Diamond" Jubilee. As my young friends made me to understand, I was not reasoning properly and must be out of tune with the times. Everyone does it and why should I be an exception? Don't most Nigerian priests celebrate "First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth Year of ordination ... ad infinitum? Don't people, including traditional rulers, chiefs, knights of the Church, catechists, and even altar servers celebrate the anniversaries of their enthronement, initiation or date of their reception into the special category of special people or members of a group?

Each anniversary of the enthronement of an Eze or Bishop is a familiar festival in Nigeria. These feasts or anniversaries are of course celebrated with pomp and pageantry. It looked foolish therefore for any "right-thinking fellow" to try to depart from this "unique tradition." They pointed out that such celebrations have little or nothing to do with great achievements or one's past records. I was in fact telling them that I had no reason to celebrate since I could not lay hands on any great achievement I had accomplished in the past 25 years. But when I

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suggested that I could celebrate my 25 years as a priest in a low-keyed environment, it was hard not to believe that my idea attracted a lot of laughter from the boys. So whether their master wanted it or not they could go on with whatever arrangements they thought necessary for the great celebration!

It is a futile attempt to try to look different in Nigeria and particularly unobtrusive, modest, and small. Very few people may take interest in your unassuming posture. Since it has become almost a “rule” and an important celebration, wouldn't it be ridiculous and foolhardy to close one's ears to reason and disappoint your friends and family who in most part carry the entire burden involved in this celebration? Ndi Igbo would warn you: “There na eme nwanne onye ara!” It is the members of one's family and closest friends who pick up the shame of the nakedness of their deranged relative. If you can't beat them, join them! It mightn't pay to try to look different.

So I joined the mob, but had other ideas. I thought this “documentation” of my experiences of the priesthood might serve a purpose. I see the event as a period of ecclesiastical stock taking, taking the inventory of our lives. There could be no other better way of celebrating the silver jubilee. **At the Crossroads - Dilemma of the Man of God** is part of this celebration.

It is divided into **three parts**. The first part outlines the purpose of a celebration such as the silver jubilee. The second part examines my childhood reminiscences and some important events and issues that have influenced my life. The third part tells the story of my missionary enterprise outside my fatherland, namely the United States.

My gratitude goes to Father Finnian Nwaozor and Debbie Burke whose immense contribution to this work can never be estimated. Ken Bartlett and Jean Beil took care of the Cover Design and the pictures. May God bless them.

Nathaniel Ikechukwu Ndiokwere

This work is dedicated to all my students - priests and laypersons - minor and senior seminarians - teachers, and superiors, whose friendship and care helped to enrich my life and ministry.

CHAPTER 1

INVENTORY OF OUR LIVES

In celebrations such as silver, diamond, gold, and silver jubilees, I have never believed that there should be great cause for much rejoicing and expectations for laurels from friends and admirers. Jubilee celebration must be a moment of soul-searching and serious reflections on the past life. In my own case I strongly believe that silver jubilee celebration should be the right moment to bemoan my failures and to seek better ways of improving my life and services to the community and people entrusted to my care. For better or worse the individual remains his own best judge. He is in the best position to judge whether all the praises being lavished on him by friends, the wonderful addresses read, and the gifts received on this day of celebration could have better served other purposes. Like at death the tendency is usually to point at one's good deeds rather than one's failures and tragedies. But in most circumstances we have little option other than to accept all the accolades even when they don't fit us. Not a few celebrants expect congratulatory messages and great moments of jubilation as they prepare to celebrate what they consider an important stage in their lives.

A celebration such as the silver jubilee could indeed be for the "Man of God" a great opportunity to "meet the press." Perhaps he could tell the public what he had experienced in life as a messenger of God and what his expectations would be in the years ahead. Most of the celebrant's schoolmates and age-mates no doubt occupy exalted positions in government and private sectors. Some have ruled powerful governments. Many have been voted into power as a result of their charisma and leadership qualities, while others have grabbed power through brute force in a military or palace coup d'etat. Not a few have been too young and immature to rule.

Other schoolmates or friends could have been and could still be among the great minds that re-shaped world history, particularly in the passing century. Truly there have been great and astonishing discoveries in the 20th century. This is the

century that split the atom, probed the psyche, spliced genes and cloned animals. It invented plastic, radar and the silicon chip. It built airplanes, rockets, satellites, televisions, computers and atom bombs. It overthrew our inherited ideas about logic, language, learning, mathematics, economics and even space and time. Few of these great minds ever lived to celebrate their achievements. Only years after did other people realize how their contributions influenced us. And behind each of these great ideas, great discoveries and great inventions is, in most cases, one extraordinary human mind.

It is the 'extraordinariness' of their personalities that makes most of their admirers think that these great minds are only by a little measure less than God. Admirers mob many celebrities because of their extraordinary talents. Most of us are not as smart and as blessed as they and so we adore them and wish we could be like them. It is not unusual to become childishly excited when we behold certain personalities and celebrities in real life. Could such human beings, identified with many discoveries, inventions, and achievements have lived or be living among us in our villages and cities? What of the mother that bore the whiz kid in her womb and suckled him?

Putting thoughts into writing

I decided to search my mind at this stage of my life in this manner and to put my thoughts into writing. My dreams and expectation expressed in these chapters might help to elucidate my concept of success and failure, disappointment and achievement. The reflection points to what could have happened, but did not, what could have been done, but was not undertaken. The competition for supremacy in our public lives is too fierce. The intrigues that go with our struggles for survival are perplexing. The jealousies are too deep and the chances of a critical fellow having his way are unfortunately terribly slim. There are too many risks involved and few like to take them.

Silver, golden, or diamond jubilee celebration as well as any important stage in our lives is a momentous opportunity for the celebrants, in the words of one American priest, Father

Ernest F. Burns, "to take inventory of our lives." According to him, the process involves recognition of one's powerlessness and then turning to a Greater Power. One must make the decision to turn one's life and will over to God. We take an inventory of our lives - everything - and this leads to confession. This surrender leads to freedom. "Anger, fear, resentments are gone," Father Burns affirms.

Taking inventory of our lives involves more than personal confession of sins within an enclosure. Meticulous examination of one's past life can never be allowed to be swallowed up by noisy celebrations, hugs, eating and drinking. As the silver jubilee celebrant looks toward the golden jubilee celebrations in the years ahead, he will become increasingly aware of his past failures and sins. There could be reason to celebrate and be grateful to God for the gift of priestly vocation. It is precious gift because not many have ventured into the life. There are many who have fallen by the way side. The glorious past records the celebrant must have counted, if any, would encourage him to persevere in his present and future commitments.

Misdeeds that haunt us

There are "global sins" as opposed to "personal sins" in which we all share as Father Burns remorsefully reminds his brother priests and countrymen:

We have, as a people, departed from the Spirit of Christ and His Gospel. In history it has often ended in dissension, persecution, even in wars of religion. We have been guilty of counter-witnessing; causing grave scandal; doing 'well and calling it 'good;' refusing to forgive; refusing to speak; refusing to help those in need; holding on to personal hurts and grudges, even for a lifetime.

On a personal level, our speaker laments: "As individuals, we have gone along with injustices; or perhaps because of indifference or fear, we have done nothing when we should have done something."

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Taking inventory of our lives would in the case of silver jubilee celebration involve first of all an updating of the catalog of "sins" of our past lives before we count our achievements and blessings. The magnitude of such 'sins' will determine the type of purification that must be done. There will indeed be need for purification - a thorough confession of past sins and errors, infidelities, inconsistencies, and oftentimes slowness to act. We acknowledge our weaknesses and prepare for challenges ahead. The celebrant could have been an alcoholic who had sometime abandoned his pastoral ministry and taken a leave-of-absence because he could not quit drinking. The damage done to the image of the church and the amount of diocesan money spent on counseling and rehabilitation of the priest-alcoholic could have been enormous.

In many parishes and parsonages all over the world believers have to bear with the burdens of the undeserving man of God imposed on them by the church, bishop, or personnel board. He might be a chronic womanizer or an abusive playboy. As his atrocities are discovered church authorities and superiors have often resorted to transferring the delinquent man of God from one parish community to another as a measure to cover up his sins. But no sooner does he continue his old habits and as the community gets fed up with the man of God someone could suggest a court action. There have been too many such lawsuits against church's ministers and the church. A lot of money has been lost.

What should be done to save the church from embarrassments caused by the clergy? How could charlatans be prevented from embracing the vocation? How can the true prophets be distinguished from the false ones? Who are those in sheep's clothing? Perhaps it could be time to examine oneself more closely and see where one fits in rightly in society. But thanks be to God that the man now celebrating, once a prodigal son who lived a worthless life and was considered dead, is now alive. That at least is a sufficient reason to kill the fattest calf and put the golden ring in his finger!

Even though he considered himself the best among his equals and qualified for a higher ecclesiastical office, such as that of the bishop, the celebrant might have been blind to his

'sins.' Observers, including his closest relations, parishioners, schoolmates, and superiors must have known his sins and handicaps better than he had realized them. Perhaps some of his scandalous misdeeds had been concealed. This could be the proper moment to retire to a lonelier place, a desert place, a monastery for longer and more profound retreat. A meticulous examination of conscience in such a unique situation can help the man of God come to decisions that might have far-reaching consequences for him and the Christian community. Perhaps it could be the right time to quit! Many have taken such a decision at one turbulent moment on a difficult journey.

Literally speaking a **crossroad** is a place where roads intersect; **figuratively**, it is a point at which a vital decision about one's life must be made.

Bigard Golden Jubilee Priests Celebrate 25th Anniversary

Bigard Golden Jubilee Priests is a group that is "special" in the history of this seminary because their ordination in 1974 marked the 50-years of the foundation of the most populous and prestigious major seminary in the entire Catholic world. Bigard Memorial Seminary took its name from two French benefactors who founded the institution in the most densely populated Catholic population of Nigeria. The other major seminaries in Nigeria trail behind the Bigard in terms of population. They include Saints Peter and Paul Seminary Ibadan, Seat of Wisdom Seminary Owerri, St Joseph's Seminary, Ikot Ekpene.

Before the fall of South Vietnam to the communist North, the largest Catholic seminary in the world was in Saigon. In spite of the increased number of vocations reported in some other countries of Africa, Bigard Memorial Seminary among the major seminaries in Nigeria has continued to produce the largest number of priests every year. 1974 was Bigard's year of glory when the Seminary clocked 50 and celebrated its Golden Jubilee. The special feature of that celebration was the ordination of the largest single group of priests in Nigeria since the establishment of any major seminary. There were more than 70 priests

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ordained that year. Since then this group formed an association named Bigard Golden Jubilee Priests Association (BGJPA).

Though I belonged to this group of schoolmates, unfortunately I was not among the lucky ones who were ordained that year of special anniversary. Because I left the group for further studies in Rome and lost a year I was ordained a year later in 1975. But this did not detach me entirely from this group of excellent friends and priests. I have remained a financial member of the Bigard Golden Jubilee Priests Association. I received the circular letter they dispatched to all the Golden Jubilee Priests informing them of the grand celebration marking their 25 years as priests of the Catholic Church. But I did not like to participate or celebrate mine too early! In their letter the coordinator and president of our association had nothing to hide. It was to be a great celebration and he demanded some data from members. The information requested included the following:

- Curriculum vitae (résumé) which included the following: full name, names of parents, place of birth/home town, parish, schools attended, and academic qualifications obtained, important dates in the journey to the priesthood, date of ordination, place of ordination, ordaining prelate, pastoral and other assignments since ordination, interests and awards.
- Photographs for brochure
- Articles for publication
- Paid Messages of goodwill from friends and benefactors
- Donations from jubilee celebrants and friends toward the Silver Jubilee celebration.

From every indication it was to be a great celebration as well as a moment of reflection. It was presumed that articles for publication in the special edition of the BGJPA magazine would summarize 25 years of experience of each one as a priest. Sweet and bitter moments from the first year of the journey to the 25th year must feature in the articles. Successes and failures, great hopes and elusive dreams, great ambitions, philosophical and theological thoughts, as well as new ideas on issues of the moment must definitely be part of those articles expected from

the celebrants. That Silver Jubilee magazine will feature a compendium of experiences of so many men of God who have in great measure successfully labored in the Lord's vineyard.

Another write-up is part of my own contribution to that great event. If I were to send it for publication in the special Jubilee Magazine there would be no space for others. So my reflections on the **Office of the Bishop** taken up in another publication is my contribution to the Bigard Golden Jubilee Priests Association celebrations marking the group's 25 years in the priesthood.

Disillusionment and failure - elusive dreams

One of my closest friends thought I was out of my senses when during a discussion with him I considered myself a failure in life. I insisted I was a failure in life because so far I have not realized most of my goals and dreams and therefore have no reason to celebrate at my 25th year as a priest. Two things are possible from my utterances, my friend thought. Either I was kidding or I was indirectly trying to sing my own praises. Sincerely none of the above.

As far as this friend was concerned I was and have been an ambitious, ungrateful and selfish fellow. He has heard about the **drama** that took place in my family after the release of my secondary school certificate results in 1966. I was responsible for the embarrassment which my parents and brothers had to deal with. There have been many occasions I had been depressed as a result of little failures in life. The following story illustrates one of those occasions and throws light to my predicaments in life.

Failure to attain an expected grade turns to a nightmare

I attended mission high school - called secondary school in Nigeria those days - Bishop Shanahan College - B.S.C. Orlu - one of the few prestigious schools in the colonial days. I did not like the seminary school, which in Nigeria is still the special high school where boys aspiring to the priesthood are trained. I opted

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for secondary school against the wishes of my parish priest and friends because I wanted a broad-based secondary education. I could not support the type of training they gave seminarians those days. At that period in time subjects like Biology, Physics, Chemistry, and Additional Mathematics were not taught in the seminary. Despite the assurances given to me by the rector of the minor seminary that more science subjects and Mathematics would be introduced in the seminary curriculum that year, 1962, I refused to take chances and rejected the admission offered me in the seminary.

My mother who was not happy that my eyes were on the priesthood celebrated victory "that God has heard her prayers." She said I was the only "girl" in the family who helped her much in the domestic chores and perhaps would take greater care of her at her old age. God blessed our parents' marriage with ten children but none was female. Our father, who also was not so enthusiastic about my option for the priesthood was equally satisfied with my decision to attend a public school instead of the seminary. He thought before the end of the secondary school education I would have become a "spoiled," and "corrupt" student and would have forgotten all about the priesthood. A deal was struck by the parents and their son - "after your secondary school education and you still wish to embrace the priesthood, we will not stand on your way!"

A Grade One score or nothing

A maximum number of 8 subjects would be entered by students sitting for the West African School Certificate Examination - WASC. Any student who wished to take 9 subjects must get the approval of the principal. The principal's decision was final. I wanted to enter for 9 subjects. That 9th subject was Additional Mathematics and one of the most difficult and gravely dreaded subjects. But I wanted to graduate well in both sciences and mathematics in case the road to the priesthood closed somewhere. I would be in the position to take up medical or engineering studies - my second choice in the line of professions awaiting bright students after high school. I had decided to enroll in the following subjects in the 1966 WASC examination:

English Language, Mathematics, Physics, Chemistry, Biology, Health Science, Literature in English, Bible Knowledge, and Additional Mathematics.

Marist Brother Lewis - the dean of studies - warned that I could not make "Grade One" in the School Certificate Examination if I took 9 subjects. To make "Grade One" in the WASC examination those days in Nigeria was the greatest goal any ambitious student set for himself. "Grade Two" was good and acceptable, but I didn't think that would be good enough for me. There were too many "heavy" subjects in my list. "Only a few had made it in the past," the dean warned. I insisted I could make it, even though it did not matter much if one ended up in Grade One or Two. I was sure I would come out in flying colors! But it was not to be. As the Reverend Brother had predicted I made Grade Two. The problem was Additional Mathematics. It consumed much of my time and my sub-grade in the subject was 7 - which in 1966 was a failure!

The atmosphere in our family as the news of my Grade reached me was that of bereavement. There was wild moaning, and rolling on the ground. Neighbors who came up to find out what had gone wrong stood amazed at my behavior. But that type of reaction to "success" and my concept of "failure" is a key to unfolding my ambition, struggle for excellence and the determination to win at the end. Unfortunately I have always been a "poor loser" when I competed with other people. This is a poor side of me. Often I fail to appreciate other people's achievements and like attention focussed on me rather than on others who have greater talents. So, my friend and any other person could understand and bear with me when I discuss my problems in life. I have not changed much since that incident in 1966.

My Publications - failures & disappointments

The successful publication of my first book - **Prophecy and Revolution** - increased my urge to respond to the challenges of our professors while I studied in Rome. That urge was behind my efforts expressed in the two volumes of **The African Church, Today and Tomorrow** which examined the prospects

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of the Christian Church and challenges facing the Church in Africa. Prophecy and Revolution looked like a success story and I was encouraged to continue the adventure, namely to write more. Unfortunately my joy did not last. The result was abysmally discouraging. The response from fellow priests and superiors to my propositions was disappointing. It was summarized by Uzor Maxim Uzoatu in his review of the two books in a Nigerian Daily, **THISDAY**:

Ndiokwere believes in the creative inculturation of progressive practices and observances in traditional culture into Christianity. He makes a case for an active Church that will not only stop at promoting the landmark. He wades into controversial waters by tackling such issues as Christianity and Title Taking and the participation of Catholics in traditional festivals...

Journalist Uzor seemed to have made a useful observation, what looked like part of the reasons why the issues I raised in the second volume of **The African Church - Inculturation in Practice**, were not given any serious attention by the leadership of the Catholic Church in Nigeria, when he wrote:

The pro-African views of Ndiokwere remind one of the life and work of Monsignor Maduka of Ekwulobia who fought a spirited battle to enrich Catholicism with cherished traditional mores. Maduka met with much persecution including a spell in Aro-mental hospital, Abeokuta on charges of alleged insanity! Ndiokwere may meet with such travails in his cause. But as long as he remains steadfast, victory is certain. He is a Churchman to watch.

I did not see any reason why I should be watched. But one does not need a fortuneteller or a seasoned journalist and political analyst like Uzo to confirm that the Catholic authorities are usually never impressed when any African clergyman or theologian writes on the **Africanization of Christianity** or any such stuff. The African Church leadership has been accused by both Europeans and fellow Africans of being "more Roman than the Pope." They defend "orthodox" Catholic positions more than the Europeans. There was no surprise therefore at their reaction

to my views as expressed in the books. Out of 26 Nigerian bishops who received complimentary copies of *The African Church*, only one acknowledged the receipt and thanked the author for the gesture.

But as our friend Uzo said, "But as long as he remains steadfast, victory is certain." Even though I felt that I failed woefully in my little attempt to draw the attention of Africans to the rich cultural issues that could be explored by Africans to enrich Christian values, I did not give up the attempt. These issues were taken up again in **"The Third Millennium Church - The Church That Will Survive"** and **"Search for Greener Pastures - Igbo and African Experience."** "Search for Greener Pastures" was meant to awaken Africans in Mother Africa as well as those in Diaspora to the economic, political, cultural, social, and spiritual predicament in which most African nations have found themselves. Is there any hope for African renaissance? "The Third Millennium Church - The Church That Will Survive" - discussed the fate of the Christian Church in the new millennium. The new Church that emerges will likely assume new features.

There is truly very little hope for any miracle. Instead of standing up to the challenges facing them, many Africans have continued to flee their fatherland in panic. Not a few have settled permanently in Europe and America. The already depressed populations are abandoned to the mercy of the vicious and corrupt politicians, military men, and armed bandits who have continued unchallenged to ravage the villages and cities in their insatiable search for power and wealth.

Among those deserting their people and playing their pipes while Africa is burning are the clergy, academics and professionals who immigrate to other parts of the world and refuse to work among their depressed people and communities at home. Is enough not enough? Is it not the time to raise alarm and sound the trumpet in Zion "for vultures are hovering over the house of Yahweh?" But most of my countrymen and women, fellow members of the clergy seem not to be as disturbed as I am. Very few are alerted by the sound of ominous music. They continue to chase rats while their houses are burning.

Person of the Century

What great message has the year 2000 for the modern man? There are too many speculations surrounding the next century. Time's continuing series of special issues naming the 100 most influential people of the 20th century is an interesting feature of the great magazine (Cf. Time, April 12, 1999). At the end of 1999 Time would name a single figure as the *Person of the Century*. To help editors decide, a select group of people had already pointed to certain personalities. Intriguing possibilities have already surfaced.

Someone thought Adolf Hitler could be the Person of the Century. It would be awful to see his face on Time's last cover of the millennium. But this observer concludes with the greatest sadness and reluctance, that the person who had the most profound impact on the events of the 20th century was also the century's most evil person - Adolf Hitler. But the century was indeed filled with inspirational leaders who advanced its most powerful ideas. Some have pointed to great figures like Roosevelt, Churchill, Gandhi, and Martin Luther King Jr. whom they claimed advanced the idea of freedom of individuals.

But not a few observers think that the poison unleashed by Hitler and his terrible contemporary Joseph Stalin has survived. Not only should we still mourn, at century's end, the tens of millions who died as result of their actions, but can still see in many parts of the world, from Kosovo to Rwanda, murderous echoes of Hitler's theories and policies, promoted through methods of mass communication and propaganda. The essence of Hitlerism - racism, ethnic hatred and cleansing, extreme nationalism, state-organized murder - is still alive, still causing millions of deaths.

I have been worried whether any leader of the great world religions, including Christianity, which I serve, could emerge as *Person of the Century*. I would be so glad to see any leader of the church - pope, bishop, priest or any member - recognized by the world body as one who has influenced humankind in a most significant and positive manner.

Whatever dreams and disappointments I must have had since the past 25 years as a priest, there are however some

moments and stages in my life that are worth remembering. Most of these moments point to the various issues that have indeed contributed to my survival so far. If the past glories could be exploited there is little doubt that the future could be brighter than it looks today. So I had to begin my narrative with some reminiscences of my childhood.

Nicknames - aspirations and dreams

Most people hate nicknames particularly when those names carry pejorative connotations. Even those that convey worthy aspirations are not always liked by some people. I have had many nicknames in the past. Some still linger around. I know classmates who claimed that nicknames imposed on them by their schoolmates contributed much to their misery and setback in academic and social lives.

In our primary and high school days two categories of nicknames were in vogue. One negatively referred to certain physical, moral or social defects in a person. In such a case the victim was called by names such as **cockeyed, big head, big ear, crooked legs, bad teeth**. Many humans as well as wild and domestic animals have one or more of these physical defects. There are very few obese people in Nigeria. But lanky or gangly - thin, bony and lean people are usually despised. They are thought to have no strength as a result of malnutrition or hunger. Plump or fleshy women have better chances of getting good husbands than lean women.

Tantalizing and uncomplimentary names

Generally there is nothing complimentary about nicknames. People can react even violently to certain nicknames. One classmate in high school whom boys nicknamed "cockeyed" was always in aggressive mood and ever ready to fight any boy who teased him. He carried pebbles and dangerous missiles in his pockets, always ready to attack his enemies. During one of such encounters our aggrieved friend dealt heavy blows on his victim and knocked out one of the boy's teeth. After that terrible incident most of us ceased to call him names. Today it is not

uncommon to find people sue their teasers for psychological and social damages and many school children and adults are careful when they address people who have various physical handicaps.

Nicknames with complimentary connotations

In some cases, however nicknames, although unpleasant to the nicknamed may carry complimentary connotations. These are nicknames that depict greatness. From a negative point of view, it may be presumed that the owner of the nickname does not merit the honor. He is an impostor, a hypocrite assuming a status or honor that is not due to him. From a more positive perspective, a person is addressed with titles that depict his true character, a deserved office or status.

Although friends and admirers tease him and may hurt his feelings, they are full of admiration for him. They know him not as an impostor. They would not be surprised if their friend later attained the positions of honor about which they taunted him. By calling him those names, they have not been addressing him in borrowed robes.

From pre-school days I earned many nicknames. These included titles such as **Catechist, Fada, Interpreter, Teacher, Bishop, Archbishop, and Pope**. Later in high school and college I exhibited a stubborn stance during most philosophical and moral arguments. My friends called me many names, including, **head-teacher, secretary, chairman, chief, politician, mayor, or president**. Because I associated with my teachers and superiors, many of my classmates didn't trust that I wouldn't share their gossip with authorities. They always believed I would secretly go to the teachers, headmaster, or principal to report them. They called me "spy." Often teachers delegated their powers to me as monitor or prefect of the class to settle small schoolboys' squabbles. Classmates often called me **judge, president, adjudicator, or referee**.

In most organizations, unions, or associations in which I belonged in school I was usually elected to the post of president, chairman or secretary. I held the post of secretary or president of many of the religious sodalities I belonged - Altar Servers Association, Legion of Mary, St. Jude's Society, Pioneer

Abstinence Association, Confraternity of the Holy Rosary, Sacred Heart League. I was for many years the secretary of our students' union and the secretary of our high school branch of the Young Catholic Students - Y.C.S. This was an umbrella association that united all Catholic students in mission high schools in the old Catholic dioceses of Owerri, Nigeria.

Man of God - From Catechist to Pope

Most of the "religious" nicknames I earned in school pointed to my aspirations in life. When I met former schoolmates years later, none was surprised to find me in clerical garb. One primary school friend I met a few years ago recalled he nicknamed me "catechist" or "interpreter" because he always saw me in company of white missionaries. I spoke their language and therefore could interpret for them or teach like a catechist.

Although most former classmates and teachers thought I would one day be a Reverend Father, I was very slow to claim God chose me from my mother's womb. Some Old Testament prophets had visions and believed God chose them to be His spokespersons or "Men of God" before they were born.

My parents, siblings, and our relations recall vividly however, that at the age of 5 or 6 I was already showing signs of vocation to religious life. I used to gather smaller kids and taught them how to make the sign of the cross and other prayers. I also set up "altars" decorated with flowers and candles and "celebrated mass" for the children. I mimicked most actions of the priest at mass, preached to the kids and distributed pieces of bread to them at the end of the mass. That was the "Holy Communion" There was no discrimination against anybody at my children's mass. Each person shared in the "Eucharistic meal."

Sometimes those kids who answered my questions correctly received more shares of the bread and the substitute local bean-cakes when bread was not available. Some of the bean cakes or "akara" used to be some of the leftovers from the share I received from our mother. It was the custom those days for mothers to buy and bring home from the market bean cakes for their kids. One of my senior brothers confirmed my story and

pointed out how meticulous and conservative I was in the preservation of things, including perishable food. Often he noted some of my bean cakes were eaten by ants as I hid them away to be used in the celebration of my type of "Eucharistic meal or mass." Indeed I behaved liked "Fada."

Political leadership

Will the "prophecies" of those who called me names come to pass? Truly I am Fada. What of bishop or pope? There is absolutely no chance that I will ever be made bishop and that of pope is definitely farfetched. But that of the mayor, governor or president remains an open question.

At one stage on the journey to the priesthood I had thought I could have been a lawyer or a politician. The priest has not had much influence on the political life of his people and nation. The Catholic tradition even bars priests from active politics. I once thought I could have combined the two professions. What was wrong if the priest widened his area of operation by reaching out to the larger community and not limiting his influence to his little community of believers?

As a governor-elect or at least a senator I could have contributed more to my people's development and happiness, built good roads for them, sunk wells for the poor communities that still descend the steep and dangerous hills to fetch water. I could have provided electricity to the remotest villages in our state and country. If the king-makers could have considered my good will, readiness to offer my people the best services and teach my counterparts the lesson of leading by example by appointing me to the revered post I would have been a better fulfilled man today than I am at present.

I have never given up the idea of embracing a political office as a priest or an ex-priest. A good political leader - governor or president - could be in a better position to lead his people and wipe away their tears and restore their lost glorious moments. Those were really no lofty ideas I have entertained in my mind for long. They have been part of the dilemma of the Man of God.

CHAPTER 2

FROM CLASS MONITOR TO TEACHER'S AIDE

With nostalgia I recount the stories of the amazing loving relationships, and privileges I have enjoyed under the care of teachers and superiors right from the early days of my primary school education. Only a fool would not like to be loved. To be liked, admired, revered, loved, and cherished, especially by one's teachers and superiors can fire the beloved to greater heights. To be exceptionally loved by one's superiors when there are many others vying for such honor can also turn into a nightmare. Lavished love concentrated on one person - the beloved - can attract jealousy, and hatred from even closest friends. It is often a double-edged sword and can lead to disastrous consequences.

The story of Joseph and his brothers confirms this affirmation. "Now Israel loved Joseph more than any other of his children, because he was the son of his old age; and he had made him a long robe with sleeves. But when his brothers saw that their father loved him more than all his brothers, they hated him, and could not speak peaceably to him" (Genesis: 37: 3-4).

There is no doubt that I have enjoyed exceptional love of certain people who have in one way or another influenced my life. I have no better way of repaying them for such love than relating the incidents, which brought us together in this book. Since most of them are still alive I hope they will not be embarrassed seeing their names mentioned in this book.

Monitor and teacher's aide

Right from my Primary School days most of my teachers recognized the leadership qualities they claimed they discovered in me. I was therefore not regarded as an "ordinary member" of a particular class. I was the monitor of our class in my first year in school - Infant One - at the age of 7. My first teacher was **Madam Grace Uzomah**, a beautiful lady who was married to

the Biology teacher in Bishop Shanahan College, Orlu - Mr. Philip Uzomah. The monitor's function those days included that of the teacher's aide. If Madam, Miss, or Sir was not around, the monitor took control of the class. He would take down the names of those naughty kids or "noise-makers" and present the list to the teacher when he or she comes back. Often the noisemakers were punished and the monitor bore a lot of recriminations from those evil boys when the school was over. They could punch you or call you all sorts of agonizing nicknames. The monitor also kept the properties of the class in custody. These would include dusters, chalk, and counting sticks. He was also the regulator.

The tragic death of my baby

Madam or Maa Uzomah as she asked us to address her was sad when I dropped out of school at the middle of the school year because I had to baby-sit our 7th brother - Goddy. It was the tradition those days in most Igbo families that an older brother or sister should baby-sit the younger one. In such circumstances the baby-sitter must drop out of school for at least one year to take care of his baby. A baby sitter was no doubt strong and therefore capable of taking care of the baby while the mother was away. Those days too, parents spaced out pregnancies so that each sibling was at least two years older than the other. I also baby-sat our 8th brother, but did not stop school.

Goddy's death was a tragedy. The boy Goddy (Godfrey) in full was the most handsome of all the 10 boys born to Mr. and Mrs. Gabriel and Janet Ndiokwere. Our mother called him Nwaopuruiche - the one different from the rest. He was fair in complexion. He was my baby.

Goddy had fever. Our parents concluded it was malaria fever and one "medical doctor" from another village was summoned. This man was one of several clandestine quack "doctors" who although unlicensed yet administered all sorts of white man's medicine. Since these "doctors" were not licensed, they always hid their instruments and drugs from the police and security men, who were always after them. Only God knew the number of people they killed through their illegal and dangerous operations.

The main treatment they gave their patients was injection. The needles they used were never sterilized. And the pains these doctors inflicted on their victims could only be experienced than imagined. Children who received any dose of this injection cried the whole day, while adults only gnashed their teeth in deep agony. These fake doctors injected people at ailing part of the body. Reports confirmed that they had often injected some people who complained of severe headaches right into the skull! Many had died on the spot.

The story of Goddy was not different. On arrival at our house, the doctor brought out a small bottle containing some white stuff. He called it quinine. He asked for some water. Some water was given to him in a drinking cup. It was not sterilized water in any sense. He brought out his syringe and selected one needle from so many in his bag. From its size, which I observed, it was not for children. Only adults could have survived the pains such large-sized needle inflicted. But he cared less. With his syringe he drew out some water from the drinking cup, surely to rinse the instrument. He performed the ritual two times. The third quantity of water he drew out was used to mix his concoction.

We watched the village doctor in horror as he asked our mother to unveil the buttocks of my baby. He injected the entire stuff into the boy. The baby could not cry aloud and was suffocating in agony. The doctor asked our mother to rub the spot on the boy's buttocks as he packed his belongings and left on his bicycle. I was moaning loudly and our father drove me out of the house. I knew my baby would not survive. And after about 30 minutes Goddy collapsed in our mother's arms. The wailing was uncontrollable as our neighbors joined the funeral of the baby. For over a week an overwhelming grief engulfed our family. The quack village doctor murdered the baby and no one ever thought of prosecuting him for this crime.

Double promotion to a new class

The death of my baby meant I could go back to school. Even though the school year was almost drawing to an end our teacher insisted I should be admitted to Infant Two. He was **Mr.**

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Clement Onwuanumkpe - Musa - as he was addressed. Musa liked me so much. A new boy and a latecomer in his class, he made me the monitor of the class because I was smart and "master" in Arithmetic and Reading. My Writing was bad. While I always got 100% in Math and other subjects, my marks in Writing remained low throughout my primary school career. Often Musa took me to the staff room and asked me to "dictate" certain data from his notes of lesson, while he careful entered them in the class register and the school diary. How I was able to read out difficult English words astonished our teacher and the boys. I was always selected to read out bible stories in Igbo from a short bible-missal called "N'afa Nna." My classmates were jealous.

Musa usually circulated my Arithmetic book around the class telling the boys to learn what neatness and orderly presentation of materials meant. He assigned some weaker boys to me. I taught these kids Arithmetical tables, Reading, and Religion during recreation and free-play time periods. I even flogged those who did not perform well. Our teacher encouraged me to flog them if they failed my questions. I timidly flogged them, knowing the consequences of my action after school. Some of them were bigger than I was and could beat me up. Some indeed did.

One day after recreation the senior Headmaster of the Practicing School, **Mr. Pius Uzoeshi** came to our school - the Junior Primary. He often visited our school unannounced, mainly to control the teachers. Sometimes he would stand behind any class listening to the teacher. He reprimanded some of the teachers who were not doing well.

One day Mr Uzoeshi came to our class with Mrs. Uzomah. They discussed for a few minutes. Then our teacher summoned me to their group. The Headmaster asked me to cross my right arm over my head, which I did. They agreed that my fingers touched my ears. I didn't know what that meant. But next, the headmaster announced that I had been promoted to a new class - Standard One. Our teacher, Musa confirmed to the class that it was the right decision, which they had made. I packed my belongings and moved over to the new class as the boys watched in amazement.

Our teacher in Standard One was the parish catechist, **Mr. George Ebigbo**. Again he liked me very much. Each time the Angelus bell was rung he said "Nathaniel say the Angelus." I used to lead the class in prayers and remained the primary "reader" in Igbo and English until I left the class for another town the same year. Our teacher was sad as he learned I was leaving for Adazi, another town far away from Orlu. I had agreed to go to Adazi to "minister" to my uncle as a "servant" while he took up appointment as a nurse in St Joseph's Hospital Adazi - Awka.

A Whiz kid?

I transferred to Adazi during the middle of the year. I continued in Standard One. Our teacher was one **Mr. Fidelis Aguh** from Uga, Aguata. Again he loved me so much. I always scored 100% in Arithmetic, Reading, Religion and English. I knew most of the tenses and could recite them off-heart. Our teacher said I was a wonder boy or a "genius." That was the first time I heard that word and I looked it up in the dictionary. He introduced me to the headmaster and other teachers. He passed my Arithmetic and English exercise books to the other teachers and their class boys who examined how orderly I always presented my work.

At Adazi like when I was at home, I was often called up to the senior classes to give correct answers to difficult questions, which the boys failed. Without warning or any preparation I was usually called before Standard two, three, or four schoolboys and given a chalk by the teacher to solve difficult problems. I always got them. The teachers knew I would get them correctly. In some occasions I was given a stick to flog those boys who failed the questions. This, as would be expected landed me in deep troubles. In one occasion the boy I was to flog was about 3 times my size. The teacher was angry at my intransigence as I refused to flog the boy. He once took the stick from me and gave me two heavy strokes on the back!

The boys - classmates as well as the seniors - were jealous. While some of my classmates admired my courage and excellent performance, not a few disliked me. Some of them teased me as I spoke a different dialect, which sounded funny to

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them. In Nigeria, Onitsha people think that their Igbo dialect is the best. They despised Igbo people who did not speak like them. But whatever the case, I enjoyed the affection of the teachers and the headmaster at St Andrew's School, Adazi. Fortunately or unfortunately it was at the middle of Standard Two that I left Adazi to return to my hometown Orlu.

Back to the practicing school

My teacher in Standard two at Holy Trinity Practicing School Orlu was **Sir Oliver Ikpa**. He was also the headmaster of the Junior Primary School. He combined the two functions. After Standard two, one is promoted to Standard three, which was then located at the Bishop Shanahan Training College premises. The Senior Practicing School was so-called because the students of BSTC, did their teaching practice in our school. I was the regulator of the Junior Primary while in Standard Two. I was as usual the darling of our teacher. He sent me on very important errands to the senior primary, which included passing circulars to the other teachers. I was also one of the "singing masters." I taught songs like other teachers.

My teacher in Standard three was **Mr. Livinus James Ekeocha**. He has been a very religious man and would have been a priest, brother or monk. But he was the only son of his mother in a polygamous family. His mother vowed she would commit suicide if her only son embraced the priesthood or religious life. Livinus, who incidentally is a cousin wanted me to achieve that which he could not - become a priest. He succeeded in his campaign. His love for me was unlimited, more because I responded well to his religious persuasions. I belonged to every religious society in the parish and prayed the rosary. Academically I was on top and always secured the first or second position in class.

The Math Boy and "Sacred Cow"

My teacher in Standard Four was **Mr. Aloysius Nwukor** or A.A. Nwukor as he was called. He was a wonderful teacher and never joked with his lessons. Among all the teachers, however, he

flogged the hardest. But in his class I was a "sacred cow." He never flogged me or scolded me once. As far as he was concerned I was a great mathematician, and particularly for this he admired me so much. He wondered how I could compete with him, and took a risk one day. He set a very difficult Math on the board and boasted that nobody in the class could get the answer. He brought out a ten-shilling note and vowed to give it to any boy in the class who could solve the problem.

And everybody went to work. There was tension in the class. Within five minutes I raised my hand. "Sir, I have got it." "Bring it here" he motioned to me. I went to his table and showed the answer. He was stunned. But in order to make sure I did not guess the answer, he demanded that I should come out before the class and state the process on the blackboard. I was required to **show work**. That I did. He gave me the ten shillings. The boys watched in amazement. Mr. Nwukor related the event to the headmaster and the other teachers. All held me in high esteem.

My teacher in Standard five was the Headmaster, **Mr. Pius Uzoeshi**. Our friendship had begun six years before when he promoted me to Standard one. He was a great music teacher and demanded that schoolboys should be able to read music. It was a difficult task and most of us could not sing the notes. We simply memorized the hymns. Everybody dreaded him when it came to singing practice. Any senior schoolboy who dogged or missed choir practices or masses on Sunday received heavy punishment from the headmaster.

Although I was poor at reading music, I was a good choir director. The headmaster trained me to direct the school choir, an assignment, which enhanced my prestige among the boys in the entire Senior Primary School. I was again the school regulator and in one of the class pictures we took that year I was carrying the school clock and the bell. Mr. Uzoeshi was replaced by **Mr. Hyacinth Uba** as the Headmaster.

Mr. Uba was the one who did the unthinkable. He was the first teacher to spank or land a stroke of cane on Nathaniel's buttocks. The news circulated in both the Junior and Senior Primary Schools, namely that a teacher had touched the "sacred cow". Some of the boys jubilated while others were shocked.

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The new Headmaster had "decreed" that all the boys should always have a low haircut, which he described as best for school children. I was among those who did not obey that order. He was enraged and decided to flog everybody in this group. When it came to my turn there was an uneasy calm. And so the news went round the school that "Nathaniel was flogged by the headmaster! I felt humiliated, but at the same time realized that I was still a schoolboy and could not have been treated differently.

Special teacher's assistant & choir master

My final year in the Senior Primary School - Standard Six - was the most glorious. **Mr. Evaristus O. Eze**, our teacher was the best of friends and almost treated me like a peer or a colleague. He did not only appoint me the monitor, choirmaster, regulator, but also raised my status to that of co-teacher or his personal assistant. He appointed a monitor to take care of my needs. My personal monitor carried the classmates' exercise books to my home where I corrected or marked our assignments. My monitor always came to our house each morning to carry the corrected exercises and my school bag to the school. I corrected the boys' assignments as well as mine. Our teacher trusted me so much that he never suspected I could be unfair. And I never disappointed him. Sometimes, he cross-checked the exercises before handing them over to the boys personally. And not even one classmate raised a voice in protest! Nor did I in any way abuse this rare privilege.

The choirmaster injures a schoolboy

The multi-function of assistant-teacher, class-prefect, labor-master, and choirmaster once put me into trouble. All the teachers were there. Some sat outside chatting, while a few sat with the boys while we rehearsed Latin hymns for the Sunday Mass. The school choir was a group of talented boys carefully selected by the headmaster. The school choir practiced and sang the most difficult hymns. Since Mr. Uzoeshi, the renowned headmaster and music teacher had retired, the new headmaster

and all the teachers leaned heavily on me for support as the school choirmaster. It was a very challenging year for me.

It happened so quickly and I did not reflect. I had noticed that one of the boys, a classmate was not paying proper attention as I was struggling with the difficult hymns. I had warned him once or twice, but it seemed he had decided to ignore me. Then like a flash the ruler in my hand went across and struck the inattentive boy in the right eye. Blood trickled out. I felt the pains as the teachers around rushed to get the boy's injuries treated. As the boy was taken away no one questioned my action. Not even the headmaster reprimanded me!

Helping whiz kids

While not claiming to be a genius during those early years of academic development, I was convinced that if I had been better challenged by my teachers, definitely I would have been a different person today. It was a painful oversight on the part of my teachers who failed to see some rare talents which I exhibited during the early parts of my academic formation. Some of those talents thus neglected decayed or rotted away! Maybe not.

By allowing me to teach other schoolboys, my teachers perhaps unknowingly gave me a great gift. One must know far more about a subject to teach it to someone else than merely to learn it oneself. After years of studies in Europe and back in fatherland I nursed grudges against my earliest schoolteachers for not doing proper supervision, guidance and counseling with me - their boy whom they loved so much and who showed rare talents particularly in the areas of Mathematics and science. This might sound rather ungrateful, but I really had such feelings. But whatever the case I have never stopped to show gratitude.

In the developed countries special attention is given by government and private agencies to gifted children in school, especially in areas of mathematics and science. These children are grouped together and given more challenges and tasks designed to motivate them to great heights or levels of achievement. In some cases this is how most great minds have been made. Could this same goal be the reason behind the division of classes in "As," "Bs" and "Cs" those days?

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In 1984, I directly confronted two of my Primary School teachers and accused them of neglect, lack of foresight and inability to detect and enhance my academic potentials those days. One of them admitted that I was right but said that such thoughts never came to his mind, and even if they ever did there was not much he could have done to help me. There were no agencies and schools of thought charged with the care of gifted children in that part of Africa those days!

I have read and believed that most of those great minds that made stunning discoveries that have continued to revolutionize the world could have remained incognito until their death. Some were even never taken seriously when first they made their thoughts and hypotheses public. Some were persecuted or ridiculed while some of their ideas were dubbed "silly or fantasies." Not a few great minds suffered in the hands of the Roman Inquisition, while others were even burnt at the stake as a result of their "revolutionary ideas." I also learnt that some of those great minds in their early days as students were poor or dropouts from school.

Albert Einstein the great physicist was a poor student at 14, but by 26 he had reshaped time and space. The scientific touchstones of the modern age - the bomb, space travel, quantum physics - all bear his imprint. According to reports Einstein's teachers never properly recognized his gifts or challenged and encouraged his special abilities. He did it himself, as most geniuses do. After all, how can a teacher of ordinary intelligence know how to challenge a genius student who probably knows more than the teacher?

The father of modern television was a 12-year old whiz kid named Farnsworth. Reports confirmed that the whiz kid was in his 2nd year in high school when he produced the first sketches of his pioneer work. Two other whiz kids - the British Mathematician, Alan Turing and Tim Bernes-Less were quite young when they began their pioneer work as computer scientists and the architects of the Internet and the World Wide Web.

Some people are born geniuses while others are made. The American nine-year-old **Greg Smith** plans to cure diseases, bring peace to the world and build space stations over the next

24 years. Then, when he's old enough, he'll run for president. Far fetched? Few people think that the whiz kid's dreams would be unrealizable. It mightn't be, if you have one of the highest IQs in the world! Nine-year-old Greg-Smith is already a freshman in college and sits with 20 year-olds in class. It was a waste of time and talent keeping him in Primary or High School. He has no time and interest in playing with his age mates. He enjoys reading and only watches classic movies while his age-mates spend time on Disney - motion pictures and animated cartoons. Greg does not enjoy kids' storybooks but classics and science magazines.

It would be a tragedy to ignore a child of such level of sophistication to languish in a village school. He should not escape the watchful eyes of his parents and teachers who must have seen the "adult kid" a future great mind in their midst. If Africa and the rest of the black world could take time and discover early the developing "great minds" in their midst perhaps development in science and technology would not continue to elude the peoples who inhabit these areas of the world.

Academic fraud or charity?

If writing exams for other students could be seen as a felony definitely I committed it in a great number. That could be an obligation a brighter student owed his dearest but poor friends in school. Three times while in primary six I sat for entrance examinations on behalf of my classmates. While in the major seminary I did the General Certificate of Education Examination (G.C.E.) for friends in need. Once while studying overseas I sat for the London G.C.E. for a friend.

There were little or no strict controls on candidates those days. But where we were not sure I traveled with the friend to the examination center. In the first entrance examination, which I did for a close friend, I scored 100% in both English and Mathematics and came first among many hundreds of boys who sat for the examination. Both my friend and I attended the interview, which was conducted by three different examiners. When we discovered that the best candidates in the entrance

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exams were exempted from interviews - oral and written - we were so happy and so my friend got his prospectus to be a freshman in that secondary school. Unfortunately he was expelled from the school at the end of the first year when the authorities discovered that he was not the person who scored those incredible marks.

In the second case, in order to evade detection by the local people and other candidates, my friend and I traveled over 150 miles to another examination center for the exams. Once again my scores were very high and he gained admission into the technical college. This friend was expelled at the end of the second year when it became clear to the authorities that he was not the one who sat for the entrance exams. As this friend recounted he suffered a great ordeal in the hands of the principal who threatened to punish him if he did not confess. They brought out the original entrance exam scripts and it was clear that he was only an impostor. They sent him home packing.

In three of the G.C.E. examinations, one of the results was cancelled as the authorities discovered some anomalies in the scripts and completed forms. We were afraid they would have taken further measures to identify me. I was in great stress as I considered the consequences of my "charity" if the major seminary authorities discovered this type of "academic fraud." Fortunately I went scot free. The morality of "academic fraud" or "examination malpractice" haunted me for many years after my ordination to the priesthood and much after I became rector of the seminary.

There were other little "malpractices" always done in good faith, like writing essays on scrap-sheets and asking the poorer schoolmates to recopy into their assignment exercise books. In such cases efforts were made to avoid detection by the teachers. I deliberately made silly mistakes and instructed the boys concerned to repeat them. Other malpractices were designed to fool careless examiners during school tests. Solved problems in Mathematics were carefully passed round to the weaker students who copied them into their own sheets. I usually put my name on my sheets only at the end of the tests. In no time did I demand any fee from those friends who enjoyed my charities. But the love and admiration they lavished on me were

without bounds. Not a few brought me gifts, mainly fruits and nuts. Some others decided to compensate me by doing my own portion of manual labor while I attended to some other private chores.

As I was writing this chapter of the book, I was deeply stung in the heart and panicked as I listened to the confessions of an American lady schoolteacher in an interview in a television program. The teacher was helping many college football and basketball students scale through their examinations without tears. She received payments of various sizes to write examinations and terms' papers for those students who devoted more time to sports than their academic life in colleges and universities. Many newspapers in the United States carried the reports of the incident, which they described as academic fraud and scandal in the universities. It was admitted that the practice was not unusual in many higher institutions of learning. Here competent authorities and coaches collude with the hired examination writers to help students who are highly gifted in sports but not in academics maintain good academic records throughout their careers.

First School Leaving Certificate

When a mistake was discovered in my Standard Six Certificate, no one doubted who owned the best result. A serious mistake was made in the compilation of the results. There was a mixture. My name appeared as "Ndinojuo Nathaniel" instead of Ndiokwere Nathaniel." The next in the list was "Ndinojuo Dennis" correctly written. It was a fatal error. But the headmaster and our teachers never doubted who got the only "double distinction" in the examination - Dennis or Nathaniel?

It was decided that the certificate, which came with the results, should be taken to Umuahia, the zonal headquarters of the Ministry of Education. It was only the minister who could authorize or effect a change of names in the certificate. Father Holly, the manager of schools in the Orlu zone was to sign an application by the school requesting the change of names on the certificate. When our headmaster and I went to Father Holly to sign the letter, the manager of schools said it was not a useful

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exercise. He insisted that I would not need that certificate any time in my academic journey. That certificate remained unchanged till this day.

Father Holly took note of my extraordinary performance in the First School Leaving Certificate in which I scored double distinction and 100% in Mathematics. Did this incident inspire Father Holly's decision to scribble something about Nathaniel in his diary as he left Nigeria thus offering me a teaching position in my alma mater if I wished to teach?

CHAPTER 3

WHITE FATHERS' CONFIDANTE

I was nurtured by the missionaries and regard that period of friendship with them as the best of my teenage years. I became an altar server before I made my first communion at 8. I was an ardent altar boy, well liked by our parish priests and priests in the staff of Bishop Shanahan Training College, the twin sister of Bishop Shanahan College. Both colleges were founded and administered by early missionaries who named both institutions "Bishop Shanahan College" after one of the first Irish pioneer missionaries who evangelized the Igboland. Both colleges were located at the hilly part of Orlu town, in two plots of land called "Iyieke," a piece of land dedicated to the local gods. A story circulated in the town concerning the struggle between the forces of good and evil as the missionaries started clearing the land of "Iyieke" to build the two colleges.

Many white explorers and missionaries in the West African coasts and hinterland died of malaria. When some of the white fathers administering the colleges in Orlu caught ill, the story went around that "Iyieke" was fighting to reclaim his desecrated land. News circulated in the town and neighboring villages that the missionaries could not enjoy their sleep because of harassment by the local gods. Most of us believed there was real battle between the Angels of God - the Missionaries - and the Devils - the "Iyieke." By clearing the "Iyieke" land all the fetishes deposited there by the fetish priests as well as the "Iyieke" altars must have been demolished. Who would blame the gods for fighting back to reclaim their land? At last the Iyieke apparently gave up the battle, as there were no further incidents in both college grounds.

Holy Ghost Fathers and Marist Brothers

Even though both colleges faced each other and were administered by white missionaries - Irish Holy Ghost Fathers and Scottish Marist Brothers of Schools - the relationship

between them was less than friendly. As kids we observed that students of both colleges were always at each others' neck when it came to sports competitions. When B.S.C. boys played, B.S.T.C students usually supported their opponents and vice versa. Authorities of both colleges always avoided encounters between students. At students' mass in the Holy Trinity Church, B.S.T.C students sat on the right pews while the B.S.C. boys sat on the left. They never mixed in the Church. A "Cold War" raged between the two colleges analogous to the unfriendly relationship between Catholic missionaries and Protestant counterparts in England and Ireland. The Orlu townspeople did not like the situation.

The Reverend Fathers who administered the Training College were more popular in the town than the Reverend Brothers of Schools. The fathers administered the parish from their house in the college and provided for the spiritual needs of the people. There was no actual parish priest because all took their turns in celebrating for the people. Many white priests visited and worked in Orlu from the early forties to late sixties. To many Orlu people, B.S.T.C was the hub, a sort of orientation camp for young Holy Ghost priests who came from Ireland for various Apostolate in Eastern Nigeria.

Some stayed at the B.S.T.C. briefly while others remained longer. Some names are more familiar to Orlu people than others: Fathers Mc'Kenna, Curran, Linzzy, Curtney, Walsh, Kennedy, Connolley, Maher, Forley or (Fada 'Ndewo'). Father Forley was nicknamed "Fada Ndewo" because he always greeted the natives in Igbo "Ndewo" meaning "Hi!" Others were Fathers Ward, Enright, Doheny, and McManus. Father Kevin Doheny - popularly called "Father Dodo" later became the rector of Okpala seminary and was one of the most popular Holy Ghost priests who served in Igboland. He was also called "Ogwuaja" (bulldozer). Father Doheny actually bulldozed the old B.S.T.C. rough sports terrain and carved out two magnificent football fields from the old playing ground. He also gave the Orlu people their present stadium. He was a wonderful missionary with great love for Igbo people. That, along with his public support of Biafra caused military authorities of the federal government to

declare him "persona non grata" in Nigeria after the end of the civil war - 1968 - 1970.

While at B.S.T.C. other Holy Ghost priests were remembered for their special attitudes - bad and good. **Father Walsh** was a kind man and loved children. After mass he allowed us to climb his huge motorcycle. An impromptu contest decided which two kids got to ride with him. The two children who first touched his white cassock after mass won the privilege. With the winners sitting behind him, he quickly rolled his cassocks between his legs and drove away to the college. We never understood what he spoke, but we knew we had to hold him tight to keep from falling off the huge motorcycle. On reaching the fathers' house, he gently let us down and we walked back home, a distance of about 4 miles!

Father Anthony Nwedo was the only black priest who served in the B.S.T.C staff. Unlike Father Walsh, Father Nwedo was a very ascetic Holy Ghost priest and rode a bicycle.

Father McKenna - the thunderbolt

Father **McKenna**, nicknamed "mgbaraku" (thunderbolt), was thought to be wicked and unapproachable. He was known to have beaten up many teachers who annoyed him. A no-nonsense man, McKenna was a militant priest, greatly feared by everyone around him. Few people ever risked approaching him.

Another Father who resembled McKenna was the most influential principal of B.S.T.C, Rev. Father **Cornellius C. Holly** or C.C. Holly. He, too, was an unapproachable personality. He never smiled and looked as if he always had grievances. He treated the teachers harshly and was impatient with the people at mass. His constant state of anger threatened to explode at any moment. And in some occasions, he did.

Once at Sunday mass he let loose his anger. That day he was celebrating the 8.00 mass and I was one of the altar servers. As I passed the communion plate under the cheeks of the communicants to catch the pieces of hosts that might fall away, I noticed anger on Father Holly's face. Always in a hurry he never liked long queues or any celebration that lasted long. He noticed some people were approaching the communion rail too slowly

for his limited patience. Truly there were some long gaps. Suddenly he turned and strode to the altar, carrying the ciborium and his Holy Communion. Amazed, I followed him and deposited the communion plate on the altar.

The stunned catechist signaled stranded communicants to get back to their pews and they did. After a few minutes the Father continued the mass but before the final blessing, he thundered: "Will those lazy folks who missed the communion come out now. If you don't come out quickly I will end the mass and go home!" He asked the catechist to interpret. The catechist obeyed but omitted translating the insult - calling the people "lazy folks."

The people scrambled for Holy Communion. While scampering from their seats, some fell on one another. I couldn't believe what I saw. I was surprised that they cared for Father Holly's Holy Communion, as he distributed the spiritual food with reckless abandon. The Father's action scandalized me. Despite his hot-tempered manner, Father Holly did have a redeeming quality - his beautiful singing voice. People liked to attend his "High Mass" or "Sung Mass." The Easter 'Exultet' was always his specialty.

Fr. Holly and Church Committee

An encounter with the church committee that prompted another incident for which Father C.C. Holly would always be remembered in Orlu was his meeting with the Church committee. The committee observed an annual custom of presenting a gift to the Fathers for Easter. Unfortunately the fathers in B.S.T.C never cared for such gifts. They were well-paid teachers, as they never took offertory collection or A.M.C. (Annual Mission Collection) for themselves, instead entrusting the catechist with such collections. Often they handed over a part of a year's offertory collection to the altar servers or to poor people.

This year the members of the Church committee had bought a fat ram as Father Holly's Easter present and invited me to the "presentation ceremony" to interpret. They knew about my warm relationship with the fathers. At about 5.00 PM the 8-man

committee of the Church assembled near the father's house and we approached the main door cautiously. I had spotted Father Holly near his window in the second floor. And he saw us. Then he thundered:

Fr. Holly: Nathaniel, who are those people?

Nathaniel: Father, wait we are coming.

Fr. Holly: Coming to do what! What do they want?

Nathaniel: They have a gift for you and the fathers.

Fr. Holly: What gift! For what purpose?

Nathaniel: It is a fat ram. They want to say "Happy Easter" to you and to the Fathers. They want to present the ram to you.

Fr. Holly: Okay. Tell them they can go and eat it. They can share it. We don't need any ram or goat or fowl. They can go.

He closed his window.

I didn't know what to tell the stunned and disappointed parishioners. Finally I mustered courage to lie to the people:

He said he was impressed by the gift, but would want you to take it home and share the Easter gift among yourselves. He said he appreciated the gift.

Few of the embarrassed people believed me. Of course they knew that "action speaks louder than voice" and surely some understood English. They wondered why the father did not descend the steps to welcome his august visitors, even though the fathers' kitchen might be full of meat. They hadn't brought the ram for show. We all went away crestfallen.

Father McManus - special friend, pastor principal & manager of schools

This Irish Holy Ghost Father who took over from Father C.C. Holly as the principal of B.S.T.C. became the first recognized parish priest of the Holy Trinity Church. Father McManus was my best friend among all white missionaries. When he arrived to join the B.S.T. C. staff, he was very young. He told me he was only 3 months old in the priesthood when later asked to prepare

for his African mission. He looked frail and found it hard to acclimatize to African heat. He rarely ventured outside without an umbrella even though people laughed at him. Only old people and nursing mothers carried an umbrella when it is not raining. Why is this Irish priest shielding himself from the sun? Would he survive in Africa?

Father McManus needed help. And he found a true friend in me. He often invited me to the fathers' house to "tutor" him. One day I went to help him prepare for confessions and other pastoral duties. He was taking his 4.00 PM tea. I peeped through the window of their refectory. He motioned to me to come in. I hesitated, then refused to go in. But he insisted. I went inside where I saw him feeding their cats with tea and bread. He asked me to sit with him and to enjoy the evening tea.

I was shy and afraid. What would happen to me if the big boss - Father Holly - saw an African boy sitting and drinking tea with one of the fathers? He might throw me out of the window. Once when I had visited Father McManus I left my bicycle leaning against the walls of the Fathers' house. When I came out later my bike has disappeared. One of the fathers' boys told me that Father Holly threw it into a near-by bush because the walls of the Father's house was not the proper place to balance one's bike.

I recalled the bike incident as I sat in the refectory with my friend McManus and sipped tea, which he prepared for me. I dipped bread into the tea and enjoyed the evening tea or "merenda." I could only hope Father Mcmanus would protect me from Father Holly's aggression if his boss saw me in their refectory.

I was Father McManus' 'tutor' for quite a time. He didn't understand Igbo language and knew little about the Igbo customs and traditions. He couldn't even pronounce a little phrase like "Ahu Christi" (Body of Christ or Corpus Christi). He asked me to coach him in the art of the confession although he understood nothing as he sat for hours listening to the people's sins. I instructed him as if in a drama class: He would be the "confessor" and I, the "penitent." He asked me to enumerate all imaginable sins in Igbo and interpret them in English. Thus he learned and eventually became more comfortable at the

confessional. He visited me often in my house. I accompanied him to sick-calls and introduced him to many families. When he took over as the principal of B.S.T.C, manager of schools and the parish priest, he needed my assistance more.

I took charge of the religious article shop, a job that was normally function of a prefect in B.S.T.C. Father gave me money to travel to Onitsha and Owerri to purchase religious articles and prayer books which I sold to the people after Sunday masses. He trusted me and I rendered good accounts of the sales. I also traveled to Port Harcourt to hire and return movies that the father showed to the young people. I helped other missionaries in Orlu as well. When I eventually decided to join the seminary, they were not surprised and gave me the most wonderful recommendation.

Father Holly's grievances

Father C.C. Holly could never be described as a friend of Orlu people. He did not like the people and would often lash at the least provocation. My father was the Holy Trinity Church committee chairman for many years. As a day student and also friendly with the fathers, I helped the committee in their correspondences with Father Holly and McManus.

The proposed site of the new Church at Orlu posed many problems. One faction supported the present position, while another faction supported by the fathers, preferred virgin land near the Church cemetery at the 'Eke' market square. The fathers wanted to make the new church a 'pro-cathedral Church' that would also serve as college chapel.

The controversy over the site raged for many years. Father Holly looked for any pretext to abandon the project. An excuse finally presented itself. A notorious Orlu man nursing grudges against missionaries saw a way to complicate matters for the Church people. He wrote a letter to Father Holly threatening to shoot any father who tampered with the virgin land at 'Eke Orlu' market.

The committee received a copy of the letter. They had gathered in our home. When they heard the letter, which I read to them, they were sad and confused. Father Holly abandoned the

church project. The committee couldn't change his mind. Nothing happened until Orlu later became the seat of the new diocese.

How I became a primary school teacher

In spite of his unapproachable stance, Father C. C. Holly loved me. He never displayed enthusiasm or allowed anyone to get the impression that one was friendly with him. Only long after he left B.S.T.C. did I realize his deep affection toward me. Father C.C. Holly left Orlu without announcement, ceremony or send-off party.

Then one Monday morning the Headmaster of Holy Trinity Practicing School Mr. Hyacinth Otika came to our house and told me I had a message from Father Holly. I asked if the Father had returned to Nigeria. Wasn't he in Ireland or the United States? The headmaster explained Father Holly wrote his message in his diary, which he left with the fathers at B.S.T.C. In his diary, Father Holly had written notes directing that any available teaching position in the Primary School should be offered to Nathaniel Ndiokwere if Nathaniel wished to be a teacher after his Secondary School.

I was truly surprised because I had never asked Father Holly for any teaching appointment. The offer tempted me and might prove an obstacle on my way to becoming a priest. But the headmaster gave me several days to consider. The following Monday I reported for classes. I became the teacher of Standard Four A in the Senior Primary. My monthly pay was seventeen pounds ten shillings. I opened my first bank account. Although I had already taught, the new experience of being a salaried teacher excited me. I loved it.

Father Holly's unexpected and unsolicited gesture added more flesh to my story about favors I received from the missionaries and had remained fresh in my memory even today. Why did Father Holly offer me a teaching appointment in his school? He hadn't offered the job to trained teachers fresh from college. Why should an untrained student be preferred to them?

CHAPTER 4

REWARD FOR UPRIGHT LIFE

I could not find better expressions to lend support to my claim as the psalmist did: "You prepared a table before me in the presence of my enemies; you anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows. Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life, and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long" (Psalm 23). I have enjoyed great favors and relationship and friendship with my teachers and superiors. These extraordinary favors did not stop with my primary school days. They followed me to the parish house of the Irish missionaries, the secondary school, to college, the seminary, the universities, and to Rome, Germany, and London. The psalmist was correct: "His goodness shall follow me always to the end of my life."

Secondary School Education

The Lord's goodness surely followed me to Bishop Shanahan College where I started my Secondary School career in 1962. The Marist Brothers of Schools from Scotland were in charge. B.S.C. was a prestigious mission college. Others compared well with B.S.C.: College of Immaculate Conception, Enugu, Holy Ghost College, Owerri, Christ the King College, Onitsha, Stella Marist, Port Harcourt, Sacred Heart College, Aba, Mary Knoll Ogoja, Trinity High School Oguta, Saint Patrick's College Calabar, St. Pius College, Ogoni and many others. Entrance exams to these colleges were usually published in the Catholic weekly newspaper called **The Leader**. These mission colleges also compared well in academics, management, and sports with Government colleges in Nigeria during the colonial era. Only very bright primary school children gained admission into these "colleges" (as "High Schools" or "Secondary Schools" were called those days). Mission colleges were mostly boarding schools.

In B.S.C. students could either become boarders or day students. Since B.S.C. was only a mile away from our home my

two brothers were all day students. Our father sponsored us in college since he paid only the tuition fees. Our mother took care of our other needs. It was however compulsory for day students to move into the boarding house at the end of their third year - the "Junior IHigh."

Our senior brother was an excellent student among the best ten throughout his five-year secondary school career in B.S.C. Since B.S.C. had not then been upgraded to a "Higher School," my senior brother completed his Higher School in Christ the King College, Onitsha. After graduation from C.K.C. he taught Chemistry in his Alma Mater - B.S.C. before leaving for Germany for further studies.

My senior brother's good performance in B.S.C. prompted great affection from the then Principal, Brother Justin, who extended that affection to me during my own days at the same school. Although a day student I attended morning masses held in the college chapel. I also served as an altar boy. In class at mid-day I recited the Angelus prayer and sometimes led daily rosary at the end of afternoon studies.

The senior prefect of the college (usually in the "Upper Six" - Second Year of the Higher School) spotted me as a potential religious leader in the college. As the senior prefect his work extended to religious functions, although was handicapped since he didn't know most of the Catholic prayers. One day the senior prefect wanted to see me in his room after classes. I was terrified. Usually when the senior prefect summoned a student, punishment followed.

That evening in his room, the senior prefect requested my help. Because of my ability to lead students at public prayers, he wanted me to lead in the Stations of the Cross during Lent that year. I agreed. Because I removed a great burden from his shoulders he would later reward me. Friendship with the senior prefect opened another way for me to excel.

An oversight turned into a blessing

One Friday during Lent students jammed the college chapel. The Reverend Brothers and the Principal were there. Although they had seen me conduct prayers and the Stations of the Cross on

previous occasions, they never asked why the senior prefect was not carrying out that religious function. That day at 5 PM, everyone waited for me to conduct the Stations of the Cross. But I wasn't there because my bicycle had broken down on the way. The senior prefect was in a sore predicament!

As the entire college waited in the chapel I struggled helplessly to repair the bike. But the Angel of the Lord came to my rescue. An elderly man fixed the chains of my bicycle, which went off their positions. Twenty minutes later when I reached the college, the senior prefect was at the gate looking for me. He beckoned me to hurry up, but did not scold me. I conducted the Stations of the Cross as usual. Nobody questioned why I was late. And the Principal also took note of my importance in the college.

Conspiracy to discredit me - Blessing that changed my life.

My honesty as well as my outspoken character for which I was known since childhood had often brought me ill luck as well as countless blessings. I am an obedient servant and have never been known to be rebellious. But I lack many other virtues. I am not prudent and never believe in caution. I sometimes look down on people who are less gifted than I in academics. But despite my weaknesses superiors and friends always trusted me. I kept secrets. Companions admired me for my honesty and hated me for my outspokenness.

If Nathaniel was a good student, obedient, law-abiding, and honest, how could it be true that he was nearly expelled from the college? I was accused of instigating a rebellion among my classmates? Bishop Shanahan College like its counterparts elsewhere in Nigeria was known for its discipline and academic excellence. Unlike students of other public schools, Shanahan boys were not known for riots and unruly behavior at sports or other public gatherings. Students who were unruly at games and sports were often expelled from college. Manual labor was part of the college curriculum and any student who dodged labor could be expelled from college.

At the Crossroads

I was almost expelled from college at the end of my third year because a report was brought against me by the class prefect that I dodged labor and conspired with other members of our class to mass-boycott a Saturday manual labor! I was summoned before the Principal - Brother Justin - on Monday morning as I entered the class. The dialog:

Principal: I heard you called a meeting of your classmates and urged them to disregard the orders of the labor master. That you were complaining that the labor master hated Class 3A and always assigned the class the worst labor. You refused to wash the "cells" (pit toilets) assigned to you and instructed others not to wash theirs...

Nathaniel: (dumbfounded and terrified) No Brother...

Principal: (furious) If it is not because of your brother and family I would have expelled you!

Nathaniel: (weeping) No Brother. It is not true. No, It didn't happen.

Principal: Keep quiet. You have to do 3-day manual labor. After that you come to the office and tell your side of the story.

Nathaniel: Oh! Brother...

Principal: Get out of my office. Go and meet the labor master.

Honesty is the best policy

I went out of the office crestfallen. According to the rule we were taught, you must "obey before you complain." In other words I must complete my punishment before approaching the principal to tell my own side of the story. Most of my friends and classmates in the boarding school had told me what happened behind my back. So having been forewarned I was forearmed. I completed the punishment and went to the office to see the principal on the fourth day.

Principal: Okay tell your story. (As he closed the door of the office and carefully listened to me.)

Nathaniel: Brother, the whole story was a fabrication by the prefect, Augustine Obiajulu. He was the one who called out the entire class to a secret place in the Biology hall for a meeting against the labor master. He told us the labor master hated our class and always assigned the class the worst labor on Saturdays. (The college operated pit-toilets.

Boys didn't usually like washing the toilets, since most of the users mess them up. Often there was no water on the compound and each student had to fetch water from a near-by stream to wash the toilets. This usually took a lot of time to complete.)

Principal: Did you say that the class prefect called a meeting?

Nathaniel: Yes, Brother. He told us that no member of our class - 3A should wash the toilets, damn the consequences.

Principal: (full of disbelief) Yes. Continue!

Nathaniel: I was the only person who raised a voice against his instruction. I spoke and everyone was there. I told the prefect I would not disobey the labor master. I would select four toilets and wash. Period! And I did my labor. Surely the prefect was angry with me. So he concocted his story to harm me. This is all, Brother.

Recipient of college scholarship

Satisfied, the Principal dismissed me and never questioned me further about the case. Then before the promotion exams only a month to the end of the academic year, I was told that the principal wanted to see me in the office.

Principal: What class are you doing?

Nathaniel: Three

Principal: You are a day student?

Nathaniel: Yes, Brother?

Principal: You are supposed to pack into the boarding school in the fifth year?

Nathaniel: Yes, Brother.

Principal: Okay, you should come into the boarding school at the beginning of your fourth year.

Nathaniel: How, Brother?

Principal: You have been awarded the college scholarship until you finish your course in B.S.C.

I could not believe my ears. I went home and told my parents. They were overjoyed that my honesty had brought fortune to our family. It was a big relief to my father who alone was paying our school fees.

From day-student to high school prefect

The following year I packed my belongings to the college like any boarding student. News circulated that Nathaniel was the new class prefect of 4A, replacing **Augustine Obiajulu**. While the principal told me about the scholarship he never mentioned anything about the prefectship. I never expected it. When I checked the notice board, my name was listed as the Prefect of Class 4A.

In those days, the best students were listed in 'A' classes while the rest were in 'B'. 'A' prefects were more powerful and respected than their B counterparts. As class 4 A prefect, I was destined the following year to become Class 5A prefect, the most powerful figure in the college outside the principal.

Augustine Obiajulu, the demoted prefect, was the biggest and oldest student in our class. He was about 19 when the youngest among us was 13. Classmates teased him. They brought old razor blades to class and asked him to shave his beard! He often beat up his taunters and bullied smaller kids. After his demotion, he had to obey my orders for the remaining 2 years of secondary school. Despite his earlier treachery I never revenged his lies against me. But that did not stop his bitterness and hatred. He would return to haunt me later.

CHAPTER 5

COLLEGE PRINCIPAL'S CONFIDANTE

The Principal's affection toward me grew. He and his co-Marists bestowed trust and admiration on me. I felt like a king among my classmates and co-prefects.

The principal had faith I would never betray his trust nor share our secrets with anybody. So he appointed me his special "clerk" (similar to a confidential secretary). "This is like "confessional secret. Never abuse these privileges," he warned me, staring into my eyes! "Do you understand"? "Yes, Brother," I answered, frightened. What "special assignments" did he plan for me? Could I live up to expectations?

The college had a clerk. He was from the town. We all knew him and he always typed documents and perhaps compiled the students' results and so on. He worked in the inner part of the Principal's office. He rarely talked to students and we were told that his small office was out of bounds to students. That rule was obvious to most of us. There were secret documents there and the small office looked like a KGB or CIA secret office. The cupboards contained thousands of files and documents, which had been accumulating since the college was founded in 1949.

We believed that the college clerk never held the key to the principal's office, which led into the smaller one - the clerk's office. When he came to work in the morning the college clerk waited outside the office until the principal or the senior prefect came and opened the office to let in. As the principal and the "office boys" guarded this part of the college building, it was clear that the principal's office was not for every one. But why I was made the principal's special assistant when the clerk as well as the other Brothers were there really baffled me.

During siesta, games, and manual labor the principal would lock me inside the clerk's office. The clerk usually went home at 2 PM. I never worked together with him. "Sit down there. Listen to what I want you to do," introduced each day's special task. I compiled exam results and grades, even for students in grades ahead of me. I knew who would be expelled at

the end of the year. No one, not even my closest friends had any idea of the scope of my knowledge. I kept the secret. Nobody saw when I entered or left the office. Sometimes the principal came in unexpectedly startling me. "Have you finished, Ah?" "Yes Brother." Then he let me out.

Once, the principal was delayed and I had to wait a long time, locked inside the office. I was hungry, thirsty, and bored. I could not even look out of the window because if someone saw me inside the clerk's office, they would raise alarm. But overall, the principal treated me well, giving me money and rewards for my extra work. I lacked nothing.

Augustine Obiajulu strikes again

The former class prefect I replaced never forgave me. He blamed me for his demotion and other misfortunes, which I didn't know about. He envied my special relationship with the principal. I also enjoyed relationships with the assistant principal and dean of studies, Brother Lewis, the literature master, Brother Ignatius, as well as the senior English master - Mr. Arkanika from Siri Lanka (Ceylon). Most senior masters in B.S.C. in those days came from India and Ceylon. They taught sciences, Mathematics, Zoology, Botany and Applied Math. They were wonderful teachers and cricket (baseball) masters.

One day Mr. Arkanika called me to his office and assigned me the responsibility of compiling English entrance examination results of the students that year. That was my fifth and final year in B.S.C. I knew immediately the principal must have told Mr. Arkanika about me. I agreed to do the job.

As usual I was locked up in the principal's office. I completed the assignment believing that the English master would be happy. Then I received a terrible shock. Mr. Arkanika summoned me to his office. He accused me of betraying his trust and charged me with dishonesty. He said he received reports from Augustine Obiajulu that I had inflated the marks of candidates from my town.

Mr. Arkanika's accusations embarrassed me. I protested. "I did not know the names of the candidates from my town and it

would be absurd to pass all of them." I vowed to fight Augustine Obiajulu for bringing ill reports and to exonerate myself.

The case went to the principal who carried out a thorough investigation. Fortunately the principal did not believe I could commit such evil. He also knew what Augustine Obiajulu was capable of doing. Over three thousand candidates took the examinations. Examination sheets of candidates from my town were reviewed. The sheets proved I had not altered any grades. Mr. Arkanaika later apologized to me. But why the principal did not expel the treacherous Augustine Obiajulu remains a mystery to me up till this day.

College prefect and principal's aide

My special relationship with the principal as his special clerk enhanced my influence as class 5A prefect over the boys. Even the Upper Six prefect (the most senior at the college) delegated most of his powers to me because he admired my efficiency. I often made decisions or punished offending students without consulting my superiors.

During the early part of 1966, our fifth year in college, I was nicknamed "**Aguiyi Ironsi.**" Major General Ironsi was the highest ranking general in the Nigerian Army who took over the government after the first military coup in Nigeria. When Aguiyi Ironsi was murdered in counter-military insurgency in July 1966, my nickname changed to "**Ojukwu,**" then military leader of the secessionist Biafra. Students, particularly the younger ones, thought I was too strict and "militant" in disciplinary measures I took against those who broke rules and regulations.

Younger students sometimes feared and respected me more than they did the principal or the senior prefect. One day B.S.C. played an important quarter final soccer match with Stella Maris College, Port Harcourt, at our grounds. Spectators from the town and beyond packed the B.S.C compound. The McNulty Cup, like Shanahan Cup soccer championship was among the best-contested matches in Nigeria in those days.

The first half ended without scores. Tension mounted throughout the entire match as both teams played equally well. In the dying minutes of the game the white priest-referee from

At the Crossroads

Enugu blew his whistle. There was an infringement within the B.S.C's penalty area. One defender had played a rough tackle and a Stella Maris attacker lay flat on the ground. Was it a deadly attack? No. Players normally feigned fatally injured to gain advantage in the opponents' critical box.

The referee quickly pointed to the penalty box. But the Port Harcourt boys' penalty kick did not score! Jubilation exploded but did not last. From the edge of the field, Brother Lewis, the assistant principal and the games master signaled to the B.S.C defender who committed the foul to leave the football field. Although not the referee, Brother Lewis exercised the rare power of expelling his own player from the field. Those white men often attempted to teach a moral lesson that players should not be "brutal" in the field of soccer. But that lesson backfired this time!

Students' protest and rampage

The game resumed. Although the Port Harcourt boys missed a last chance to score a winning goal, they were encouraged by the absence of B.S.C's expelled tough defender. Worse yet for the B.S.C boys, there was no replacement. They had to finish the game as a ten-man team.

Port Harcourt boys launched continuous attacks at the dying minutes of the match. They scored a winning goal. The final whistle sounded. Pandemonium broke loose as B.S.C. students, as well as boys from the town, rushed toward Brother Lewis to avenge their anger. Students threatened to destroy vehicles or even set fire to college buildings. They believed Brother Lewis was responsible for their defeat and sought to punish the unscrupulous white man. The students' rage and violent reaction shocked Brother Lewis.

In the past the Reverend Brothers had taken such disciplinary measures against rough players. Neither players nor students had raised their voices in condemnation. But this time Brother Lewis underestimated the students' reaction. His life was truly in danger. Students who didn't want to be recognized attacked from afar, throwing stones and missiles. Many shouted

abuses like "Irish dog and dirty pig!" Brother was stunned that he froze. The prefects, including myself rushed to protect him.

The beleaguered Brother Lewis ordered me to collect the names of violent abusive students. He threatened to expel them. Instead I told him "Brother, run for your dear life. It is of no use collecting names of angry students. You are responsible for their anger. You provoked them by expelling their best player from the field, and surely this contributed to our defeat." Confused, but remorseful the Brother retired to his house, escorted by the other prefects.

Meanwhile I took control of the explosive situation. I pleaded with demonstrating students to listen. Most obeyed and gathered around me. With order restored, I spoke to them, assuring they were hundred percent right in protesting the vice-principal's action. I told them he regretted his actions and such a thing would never happen again. My words pacified them. Those who expected me to defend the vice-principal were overjoyed when they heard I was on the students' side. I neither disappointed them nor aggravated the situation. The Brothers were deeply grateful. Both students and college authorities admired me. My fame grew.

A Time of Choices

The novitiate (the formation house) of the Marist Brothers of the Schools is still at Uturu, a university town, near Okigwe. Every year the vocation director came to our college to recruit students. Only a few responded to their appeals. During a recruitment drive in my final year, the director organized a wonderful 2-day retreat for interested students. I attended. He explained rules and ways of life of the religious order. At the end he took extra pains to interview those among us he judged to be serious aspirants. When it was my turn, the following dialog took place:

Vocation director: You are Nathaniel and prefect of 5A

Nathaniel: Yes Brother

VD: I received a wonderful recommendation from the principal and all the brothers. I am sure you will join the Marist order.

Nathaniel: No Brother. I have not considered that. I think I would like to be a priest, instead of a Brother.

VD: Why not Brother?

Nathaniel: Oh! I think a priest is more important than brother.

VD: (a little bit unhappy, perhaps from my lack of diplomacy). It is all the same.

Nathaniel: No! I don't think they do the same work. The Brother does not celebrate mass. I will like to celebrate mass for the people.

My eyes had long been on the priesthood but other university studies including medicine, tempted me to follow them. Despite encouragement from spiritual advisors, I did not then commit to any career path. I took the entrance exams to three colleges offering Higher School programs and was offered admission. I took entrance exams to two Nigerian universities and was offered admission. But I warned my father not to pay the deposit fee, which was always demanded, because I did not want him to forfeit the money.

Despite the wide variety of options open to me, despite my family's attempts to influence my decision, the pull of the priesthood remained strong.

Another possible career beckoned to me

I was avowed Biafran fanatic. Many times during the war I tried to join the army to fight for the survival of Biafra. At the beginning of the war most of the seminarians were engaged in relief services. The food and other relief materials brought into the Biafran enclave were distributed mostly by parish priest and seminarians.

I helped our parish priest in the distribution of relief materials as well as in visiting the sick and the wounded soldiers and victims of the federal bomb attack. Often after bombing raids we removed the dead for burial and sent the injured to the hospitals and temporary Red Cross clinics.

As there were many refugees from the captured Biafran territories, we had a great deal of work distributing relief materials to them. We organized them in their camps and provided most of their needs. The food was never sufficient for

the great number of refugees that took shelter in primary schools and village halls. Most of the children died from vitamin-deficiency disease called kwashiorkor. They were buried in mass graves.

When relief materials started arriving in large quantities from foreign aid services like Caritas International, Misereor and the World Council of Churches, most of the refugees and the needy villagers got enough supplies that helped sustain them until the end of the war in early 1970.

The construction of the Uli Airport by Biafran engineers hastened the airlift of relief materials from many donor-countries to the suffering people of Biafra. Blockaded from land and sea, the only available means of bringing in food into Biafra was by air. Unfortunately the Nigeria jet fighters often attacked the planes flying relief materials into Biafra. Some planes crashed.

Even though I was heavily engaged in the distribution of relief materials to the needy and the refugees, I preferred a more challenging war effort. A wanted to be army officer.

Once I went to Agwu recruitment camp, near Enugu for officers' recruitment exercise. The Major General Offiong, Ojukwu's Second-in-command addressed us. That time things were proving tough for Biafra. The enemies had captured the state capital, Enugu. But the fall of Enugu as it was clear to the whole world, was not the end of the war. The Biafran command had transferred its headquarters to Umuahia and the war went on.

Major General Offiong encouraged us - the would-be new officers to fight gallantly for the liberation of Enugu. Most of us were enthusiastic to get into the field of battle after a few days' training and indoctrination. We would capture Nigerian soldiers and be promoted to higher ranks. We would fight hard, rout the timid enemy soldiers, capture their abandoned weapons and fight to regain the lost territories. With the defeat of the Nigerian army, Biafra would become the first and greatest black nation in the world.

Recruitment officers raised our spirit of patriotism and gallantry. Most of us were ready. We only needed the weapons! But harsh reality intruded our dreams. What a shock when General Offiong complained to us that Biafra did not have sufficient arms - few guns and grenades, and of course no

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armored cars, aircrafts, and warships. Two soldiers had to share a single gun, they called "Mark four." It was suicidal war and no one wanted to die in such a miserable fashion. I left with the next available lorry for home.

My activities and all the favors I enjoyed in Bishop Shanahan College were over when I decided for the priesthood. If I had decided to continue in the Higher School, I would have had different story to tell. I would have ended up a medical doctor, a lecturer, or even an army officer. Perhaps I would have been a dead fellow during the Biafran War. Many of my high school mates died in the war.

CHAPTER 6

THE MAJOR SEMINARY - INITIAL PROBLEMS AND SUCCESSES

To go or not to go

When the vocation director and rector of Okpala seminary, Father Dodo (Doheny), came to our home he seemed to be asking the same question Prophet Elijah put to the unfaithful and wavering Israelites: "How long will you go limping with two different opinions? If the Lord is God, follow him; but if Baal, then follow him. The people did not answer him a word" (I King 20.21). In my own case, too, like the Israelites I did not answer Dodo a word. I did not know what to say and so we sat moping at each other for some minutes. Then he said in a prophetic voice: "What are you thinking. Why are you straddling the issue? God is calling you. Christ is calling you to be one of his disciples. He wants you to be his priest. You have no more time to waste. I have come to fetch you for an interview so that you might begin your major seminary formation when the seminary resumes soon. Are you ready to go with us to the parish house at B.S.T.C?" Tears filled my eyes as I stood up to gather a few things I needed for an interview. A mysterious anxiety descended on our household as I left with Father Dodo to drive to the Fathers' house in the college compound.

Admission into the seminary

Father Dodo took me to a small inner room in the Principal's private office and we sat down. There was silence. Then he spoke: "Nathaniel, I have received the most wonderful testimonials on your behalf from the principal of B.S.C and the other Reverend Brothers. The one from your parish priest is the most interesting testimonial a priest has given a student or a religious aspirant. The headmaster of the school where you taught as well as your former teachers said wonderful things

about you. I am much impressed. I hope your parents will support your vocation even though you have already secured admission into the universities." I said nothing.

Father Dodo questioned me about my private moral and spiritual life. Before I could open my mouth to respond, he said: "The testimonials before me testify you have been a good and exemplary student and I have no doubt you will make a good priest." I nodded in agreement. He continued: "In all, you have excellent testimonials from the Brothers, Fathers and your Teachers. For many years I have been rector of the seminary I have never seen a testimonial as good as yours." "Thank you Father," I said in excitement.

New rules and regulations

When I eventually took my first step to the priesthood, the major seminary reopened at Afaha Obong, near Ikot Ekpene, Southeastern Nigeria. The Nigeria-Biafra War was raging and the seminary at Enugu had been evacuated as the federal troops had been bombarding the city. The seminary authorities decided to re-open the seminary in this part of the state they thought was safe. It was not. Later when the city fell to the advancing federal troops the major seminary took refuge in another remote town called Amaimo, near Ikeduru. Next we evacuated to a more remote area called Amakohia. That was one of the last strongholds of Biafra until the war finally ended in the early part of 1970.

There were many rules and regulations, as well as other laws referred to as seminary traditions. These traditions included the wearing of white cassocks at all times within the seminary and too many prayer-sessions every day. There were rules about hours of silence, recreation and labor. Some of them were new and uncomfortable to me. I almost complained but feared I would be expelled. That would be a great tragedy. I tried to bear the burdens and struggled to adapt to the seminary environment. For the first few months I found myself in deep thoughts wondering if I had taken the right decision. Perhaps it was not yet too late to retrace my steps and decide for another profession.

Attachment to clerical dress

The seminarians' attachment to the clerical dress - soutane or cassock - was very distressful to me. Indeed I felt miserable in the seminarian's cassock. We got several of them made for us as indicated in the prospectus. According to the rule, seminarians must wear their cassocks, the white-flowing clerical garb except when they are working and sleeping. Under the scorching heat of the African sun it was a nightmare to stagger around in this cumbersome garb. Many seminarians demonstrated their discomfort by pulling the stuff down their waists when they studied in the halls or classrooms. When the rector or any of the professors approached, everyone would dress up quickly. I doubted whether I could tolerate that hide and seek show.

Some seminarians had two sets of cassocks. The "first-class soutanes" were worn on Sundays and feast days. Seminarians used to be very careful not to soil them. The "second-class soutanes" looked shabby, old, and dirty. Some were too much soiled by the oil and food. I thought it was a crazy rule to put on soutanes every time in the seminary. For what purpose? Didn't the sages say, "the habit does not make the monk?" Why have the Nigerian seminary authorities stuck to this outdated custom when most of their counterparts had done away with cassocks in the West?

In the past, seminarians had to wear their cassocks at every minute of the day in the seminary. They wore cassocks while praying, working, eating, dancing, studying, singing, playing in the fields and even while sleeping! According to this ancient practice when "the habit made the monk", seminarians were even expected to get into the bathrooms on their cassocks.

Then inside the bathrooms and with the doors well locked they could remove their cassocks, then tie their large towels around them to avoid exposing their private parts! Some of those stories sounded like fiery tales, but here we are today at the threshold of the third millennium and not much has changed. I tried to keep this rule of putting on the soutane in the seminary. I never got into trouble, but only God knew I did not like that fashion-show.

Violation of Seminary rules and regulations

Although the uniform code chafed at me, I tried to abide by other rules and regulations. But not all seminarians did. Some dodged manual labor, prayers, masses, common choir practices, and even games and sports. Most were greedy. If one failed to come to the refectory in time for meals, one would starve. The greedy fellows collected the lion share of the food and the rest of us would starve. Those seminarians were shameless. They should have visited my alma mater, B.S.C, to learn table manners and what it meant to "do unto others as you would like them do unto you." I rarely got enough to eat at the seminary and later went about looking for some victuals to fill my empty stomach.

Frequent reports of stealing in the major seminary alarmed me. It was even worse in the minor seminaries. I was stunned. Often the auxiliaries entered the hostel in the dead night and ordered everybody to get ready for a search for missing articles. Many reported they lost their watches, articles of clothing, shoes, beverages and money. Many reports of loss of books, including prayer books and breviary - the official prayer books of priests and religious - were always documented. Thieves tore off the pages of those stolen books where the owners had written their names.

As a senior prefect in public high school I remembered a few occasions when students complained about missing articles but there was never a massive search-exercise at B.S.C. Why then should these evils be found within the precincts of a holy institution? I wondered if I was in the right place for the priestly formation.

The number of female visitors swarming around the seminary compound on the visiting days also alarmed me. What were so many fine elegant ladies coming to do in the seminary? Were these young priests in-training their boyfriends? Many of the visitors used to arrive early and most left only a few minutes to the end of that program. What did these young "Men of God" discuss with their female visitors?

Most seminarians I observed were not decent and considerate in their use of the common toilet facilities. Water was scarce and many never cared to collect water from the

common pond or reservoir to flush the toilets or wash the bathrooms after use. They ignored the notes or inscriptions scribbled on the doors and walls of the restrooms by the environmental prefects - **"leave this place better than you saw it!"** While many good fellows struggled conscientiously to observe this rule, others broke every rule concerning environmental sanitation and decency both in the hostels and toilets. Lazy ones stole water from their roommates. They called it "poaching."

Generally I was not impressed by the moral and spiritual comportment of most of the seminarians I met during the first year I spent in the senior seminary. Some acted like animals that had been starved and confined in a cage. When they were loose they pounced on anything edible, grabbing and munching till they got bellyaches. I strongly believed life was much better at B.S.C. or any boarding school system at the private mission colleges than in the seminary.

The obnoxious "dignity tradition"

According to one strange archaic tradition maintained at the seminary then, I was among the **"lowest in dignity."** The dignity factor was a discriminatory measure, which worked against fresh students who joined the major seminary from other educational institutions. These students sometimes referred to as "late vocation candidates" were usually relegated to the back seats everywhere - in the refectory, dormitories, chapel, and classrooms. Everything - chairs, school desks, lockers, beds and even positions in the hostels or apartments must be shared "according to dignity." This obnoxious tradition isolated me and my comrades who joined the seminary after our secondary school career. Most classmates of so-called "higher dignity" mocked us and called us names. They referred to us as "raw secondary school students whose tails should be cut short." We should only be seen and not heard. They kept us miserable for most of the time. Fortunately the dignity tradition has been abolished.

While most classmates enjoyed the luxury of private apartment, also called cubicle, the low-in-dignity students stayed

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in the open hostel. We enjoyed no privacy and changed our clothes in the full view of passers-by. Most of us never got good lockers. The first in dignity selected the best furniture and beds. Since oral exams were also conducted "according to the order of dignity" we always had to go last which had its disadvantages. We of "low dignity" had to bear many burdens for a long time. But whatever the surprises and illusions I experienced in the first few years in the major seminary, I managed to survive. The civil war came to an end and the seminary resumed at its permanent home in Enugu.

I enjoyed some of the seminary activities. Beautiful voices of the seminarians intoxicated me when they sang the evening prayers or Vespers. They sounded like angels from the heavens. The special Sunday masses attracted many people from the town. They also liked to listen to the seminarians sing. Unfortunately these outsiders were not always welcomed to the seminary. The seminary authorities explained that the people should attend masses in their parishes, where they should participate fully in parish activities. But during big celebrations, like priestly ordinations, many outsiders were allowed. The seminary liturgical celebrations were superb. At least the singing of the mass in Latin was one of my most favorite attractions to the priesthood. Here I enjoyed it in abundance!

Good relationship with superiors

I barely knew any superior when I joined the seminary. In the Bigard, outside of a few friends I made when the seminary was in exile, no seminary professor or rector knew me. Nor did the newly appointed bishop of Owerri, Mark Unegbu. When he came to the seminary to address his students after his consecration, none of us was formally introduced to him. I had no contact with him.

By destiny or stroke of luck my **dignity** rose as I regained confidence and broke my isolation. My appointment as the circulation manager of the prestigious Bigard Seminary Torch magazine changed everything. As the circulation manager of the **Torch** magazine I was in constant touch with the rector, Msgr. John Ogbonna. One day he summoned me to his office.

Rector: You are the circulation manager of the Torch?

Nathaniel: Yes, Monsignor.

Rector: Here is the list of the seminary benefactors. It is our tradition to send copies of the Torch to our benefactors after each publication. Make sure each one gets a copy each time.

Nathaniel: Yes, Monsignor. I have sent them copies already. I found the list in one of the exercise books in the Torch office.

Rector: Go and get your own list. (I rushed out and reentered in a moment)

Rector: They are the same. You are a good Torch officer. Continue with your work. I will send you new names if we get more benefactors.

Sometimes I took the initiative and went to the rector to request a new list of benefactors of the seminary to update mine. The rector was each time happy that I was conscious of my duty. He called me by name and we became friends.

Honesty is the best policy

I believed strongly in honesty and straightforwardness even when grave risks were involved. I hated crookedness and deviousness. A crook is a dishonest person, a trickster, a con man and swindler. A crooked person is not straightforward, trustworthy or reliable. He is devious. A priest should not be any of those. Sometimes my straightforward attitude landed me into trouble, but on some other occasions I gained.

Seminarians went on a walk twice a week - Sundays and Wednesdays, leaving at three O'clock in the afternoon. We had to return before six. The period was meant to allow seminarians visit the public libraries and bookshops or buy their small needs. Some visited patients in hospitals or undertook some C.C.D classes in the near-by parishes. Strictly speaking, seminarians were not permitted to visit private homes or friends during these periods of "walk." If there was need to leave the seminary, seminarians could obtain permission from the rector or any of the professors. Unfortunately many crooked seminarians abused the privileges, and left the seminary under dubious pretexts. Often they returned late and therefore got into trouble.

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Before the bell for the end of walk rang at six o'clock the rector climbed to the top of St John's hostel and monitored activities of seminarians, particularly those returning home from walk. We often speculated if the rector could remember all the names of late-comers, and more importantly, if that affected his assessment of us.

Being crooked or taking courageous risks

One fateful Wednesday evening, four of us returned late from walk. We must have been 20 to 30 minutes late and the rest of the students had already taken showers and dressed up for evening prayers. One of the boys in our group panicked as we approached the large seminary gate. He spotted the rector in his usual position on the hostel's terrazzo pacing East and West. Another boy suggested that we should sneak into the seminary by the bushy part that led to the seminary kitchen. Yet another suggested that we should remain outside the gate until it was dark and then slip into the compound.

I refused to be a part to any of their suggestions. As far as I was concerned we had only one option. The rector had already seen us. It was foolish to hide. We were truly late. In fact four of us had gone to the hospital to visit the father of one of the seminarians in our group. The man had cancer. We spent a lot of time there, doing God's work. I therefore suggested that we should walk through the long seminary avenue into our hostels at the full view of the rector and the boys. We should take showers, dress up in our cassocks and join in the evening prayer. And if the rector summoned us to his office, we should explain to him why we returned late. We should be ready to bear the consequences of our action. None of my friends shared my views. They all disappeared in the bushes and sneaked into the seminary. Alone I walked the entire avenue into my hostel. I knew the rector saw me.

Throughout the night I waited for the rector's summons. None came. I didn't ask the others if they were summoned. But the next day I saw all three cutting grass in the field. They had been sentenced to 3 days work for their deceit. Nobody

questioned me for returning late from walk. My friends learned their lesson, that honesty is the best policy.

Seminarians' decorum

The seminarians' general comportment outside the seminary did not impress me those days. Their flashy clothes and comportment outside the seminary during the holidays caused parishioners to wonder if their future priests were receiving the right training in the seminary. Some seminarians wore very expensive clothes, shoes, wristwatches, and suits. They made their cassocks from the most expensive materials found in the market. Some had fat bank accounts. Seminarians were expelled because of their extravagant spending habits. I wondered if others would practice the "vow of poverty" when they become priests.

Four of us applied for an official visit or excursion to the Nigerian Broadcasting Cooperation- NBC - in the Coal City of Enugu. We were always ambitious to be on top in most social activities in the seminary. Often we organized "news conferences" to update the students about goings-on in the country and around the world. We adopted the term "panelists" to describe our unofficial function in the seminary. Most boys admired our social exuberance but others scoffed.

The rector and the director of the N.B.C, one Mr. Udeh, approved our application. The director invited us to the official visit of the radio station. We were dressed up and ready to go when I noticed that three of my friends had dressed gorgeously for the tour. Two wore new gray suits with red ties, which matched their expensive red shoes. The third dressed in the traditional Nigerian costume called "agbada." I was horrified.

I wore a plain white French suit, which I thought suitable for the occasion and also for a priest-in-training. I told my friends: "Look, remember we are seminarians. These people in the N.B.C will be scandalized if they see you in these gorgeous attires. We must dress properly and inexpensively."

They didn't take my "sermon" to heart. One grumbled I was wasting time and that we should set out on our journey. Another suggested that my fears were unfounded and I should be

ignored because I was a fresh man in the seminary. He said I should exercise caution if I wanted. As for them they had seen more days than I did and could do as they pleased. They ignored my pleading. We left.

The manager of the NBC received us well. He instructed his assistant to take us on a tour of the various departments, including the broadcasting room, the recording room and the cold storage room, air-conditioned to keep compact discs from warping or other damage caused by excessive hot weather conditions. The cold storage room was full of old and modern African as well as European large compact disks. There were also many recorded speeches of politicians and other local and world leaders. We were very pleased with the reception at the N.B.C and all the things we saw.

Only one resembled a priest

Before departing, we returned to the manager's office to thank him once again. He was happy for our gesture. As we were about to leave, he called us back and carefully closed the door to make sure that no one overheard. He questioned why we decided to visit the NBC. While he appreciated our curiosity and ambition, he questioned the clothes of my three friends: "You all are seminarians, priests-to-be? I don't like how you dressed. You don't look like priests, except this one" (pointing at me!). He continued: "I am also a Catholic." "Please when you are in public places, remember people are watching you. Only one of you here resembles a priest. You can go."

As we left the N.B.C premises I had mixed feelings. I was happy my appearance befitted a priest of God. I was also pleased to be vindicated. But my friends felt crestfallen. The trip back to the seminary was silent. But in spite of this mishap, we all eventually succeeded as priests anyway.

CHAPTER 7

GETTING INTO TROUBLE - WILL THE DREAMS COME TRUE?

Most seminarians throughout their long years of training remain in state of fear and anxiety. Many suffer from chronic states of anxiety and ulcers. Anything could happen any time and the dreams of becoming a priest could be dashed to the rocks. Many are under terrible stress because they fear expulsion after years of studies, sacrifices, and struggles to become the man of God. It is the Holy Spirit who is said to act through the intermediary of the seminary rector and teachers.

There is no argument about it, many have been expelled or denied ordination only few days or hours to the great day. It can be frustrating and some even considered suicide when faced with such incredible situations. Most expulsions at the 11th hour are based on poor academic performance or a candidate's relationship with women. The seminary authorities have never compromised on the issue of celibacy. If one showed early signs of weaknesses in this area, one must be shown the way out of priestly life. The Gospels were clear on this issue and permit no straddling the matter: "Not everyone can accept this teaching, but only those to whom it is given. For many are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Let anyone accept this who can" (Matthew: 19:10.12).

Troubling moral & theological questions

Robert Goddard - the Rocket Scientist - said that every vision is a joke until the first man accomplishes it. The persevering search for solutions to various problems I have seen in the world often made me slip into day-dreaming stupor where I composed imaginary essays outlining what I would do if I had the powers - spiritual or temporal.

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My closest friends in the major seminary used to be horrified by what they considered my lack of caution and extreme stand and views on moral and theological questions. They warned me not to "dispute" with professors in class because such could lead to my expulsion. Some professors were strict conservatives ready to recommend the expulsion of a student who challenged any Church doctrine.

Seminarians rarely asked questions in class even when other professors were willing to answer any question. Many wonderful professors however, encouraged major seminarians to ask for clarifications if they disagreed with any theological view even where these issues had to do with articles of faith already defined by the Holy See and must be accepted under the penalty of excommunication. Unfortunately most students maintained taciturnity in public debates. They never publicly challenged any Church teaching during theological classes for fear of being singled out for persecution by a conservative professor.

There was one seminarian in our class those days. We called him "Martin Luther." He maintained a strong stand against almost everything the Catholic Church stood for, but never made his views public in class. Privately he spoke out against a celibate priesthood. No wonder after a few years of ordination he left the priesthood and took an ex-nun as wife. Because he refused to accept most of the Church's teachings on the Trinity, Real Presence, Marriage, etc, some seminarians called him a "heretic." I found his uncompromising attitude strange and advised him to leave the seminary if he could not conscientiously accept most important Catholic teachings. He remained adamant.

In my own case, many friends thought I was too controversial. Fortunately most professors admired my courage and expressed amazement at my passionate, aggressive style during theological debates. I was convinced that the future leaders of the Church should be well armed to preach the word of God in the secularized world. Many Christians are enlightened and no longer accept certain teachings of the Church they find "unreasonable." There were many such teachings in the past. Some contributed to divisions in Christianity as well as disunity and hatred among various Christian bodies.

On the Sacrament of Penance

For the sake of theological exercise I raised my hands often during classes to "challenge" certain "theologies" that were not clear to me. Once during the course on "De Penitentia" (tract on the Sacrament of Penance) I disagreed with our professor on the best form of administering the Sacrament of Penance, Confession or Reconciliation. Then the **Private Confession** or **Auricular Confession** was in vogue. Having seen all the abuses and discrepancies in this form of confession of sin, I maintained a strong ground in approving the **Public Form of Penance** as the most convenient and fruitful. In those days most priests were white missionaries who never understood a word of the people's native languages. In larger parishes confessions used to take hours. Some priests got tired, frustrated, and of course angry.

Abuses and dramatic scenarios

I recall an especially shameful occasion in my parish. The penitent carefully enumerated her sins, never skipped any or the number of times she committed them. She even arranged them in the categories of "mortal" and "venial". On that fateful day, suddenly the white priest rose from his seat in the confessional. Everybody heard him shouting: "Go away. Go away! Next! Next person, I say, go away, don't you hear!"

The lady protested, "No, Father I have not finished." The white father grabbed her by the sleeves and shoved her from the confessional. Everybody was frightened, thinking the lady must have committed a truly heinous sin to deserve physical punishment and public disgrace! It was a disgusting spectacle!

Considering the staggering number of penitents, the unavailability of sufficient number of confessors, I long wondered why they couldn't adopt the so-called Penance Service or the General Absolution. I held this view as far back as my early seminary days and after ordination covered the issue in depth in **The African Church, Today and Tomorrow (Vol. II) - Inculturation in Practice**.

In another ridiculous scenario when I was in Junior High, our new Irish parish priest invited me to help him out

during the regular Saturday confessions. The Church was full of penitents. The priest had only a smattering command of Igbo language but another new and younger priest who came to help him was blank. He understood no word of Igbo. As I noticed later he had written out on a scrap of papers the names of some "heinous sins." And he based the type of penitential act or penance he would dish out to any penitent on the severity of the sins confessed.

One unfortunate fellow became a victim of this priest's ignorance. A drama was developing at the confessional, as the embarrassed penitent understood the implications of what he thought was the penance he would do for his sins. He was told never to receive Holy Communion for a period of six months! What! He couldn't understand why he should suffer so much and be barred from the Holy Eucharist for such a length of time. If he had the chance he would appeal his case in the court of law!

How I became an "uncommissioned confessor"

As the above case was getting troublesome the white priest signaled to me to come and help out. I became his "assistant confessor." He ordered the frightened penitent to tell me what he had confessed. The young man boldly said: "I told the Father that I took part in a dance during a pagan feast." "What dance?" "When?" I asked him. "Iri Ji, Mmanwu etc." "Okay," I affirmed. "But why did you tell him it was a pagan feast? The penitent was not sure what to say.

Those days many Irish confessors looked out for words and phrases such as "ikwa iko" (adultery or fornication), "ori" or "ohi" (stealing), "igo arusi" - (pagan ceremony or sacrifice). In the catalogue of mortal sins which first communicants and catechumens memorized those days before their first confession were those considered "grievous" or "mortal." They are still fresh in my memory: *Ndia buga nnukwu njo - Ihe ndi obodo n'eme, dika ife alusi, ikpoku ndi mmuo, ime m'obu idebe ogwu chekwube ya ka Chukwu; ikwa ozu nkwa n'abo, ya na iso ndi obodo were mee otu ife afu.* (These are some of the mortal sins - participation in all pagan feasts - including idolatry, witchcraft, compounding of any concoction or keeping any such fetishes,

revering them; second burial i.e. celebrating the anniversary of death...)

Then I explained to the father. "No, it was not a serious or mortal sin. I didn't think participating in social activities like New yam festival was sinful. As for masquerades, it was one of those social festivities that young people enjoyed. It used to be part of the New yam festival..." The priest was satisfied with my explanation and commuted the punishment or penance to five decades of the rosary! There were many such incidents that made private confession odious and in many other cases unnecessary and meaningless.

Priestly celibacy

What most shocked my classmates, rectors, and professors in the seminary in Nigeria and in the Pontifical University in Rome was my "extremist views" on certain theological issues. Many of these problems have still not been resolved. They continue to trouble many minds in the Catholic Church today.

Priestly celibacy continues to incite fervid debate. I was never shy in expressing my views. During one "theological disputation" in Rome I insisted if I were the Pope I would make many sweeping reforms in the Catholic Church and abolish the law of celibacy. My reasons? The practice is old-fashioned and very few clerics actually commit to its observance. Many faithful Catholics who advocate the abolition of this institution have valid arguments and should no longer be ignored.

One particular publicized case illustrates the divisiveness of this issue. An Italian priest abandoned his parish, took a former girl friend to the altar. Then like the prodigal son, went back to his bishop to ask for pardon only 6 months after the celebration of his marriage. He confessed he had made a disastrous decision. He was pardoned and re-instated in his old parish! Much confusion resulted. The older generation in the parish left the Church in protest. The younger ones interviewed by the paparazzi claimed they didn't see any wrongdoing on the part of their parish priest who returned to his office after a short test of married life. Perhaps, I thought, it would be reasonable to

look at our Protestant neighbors to find out if Catholic celibates have done better in their "vows" and pastoral ministry.

A private letter nearly ruined my vocation

One of my older brothers studying in Germany had made arrangements and brought my immediate senior brother over to Germany for further studies. He wrote me offering me a chance. A philanthropic Germany organization called *Africanuum* sponsoring African students would offer me scholarship if I got the required qualifications. I had them.

However my eye remained on the priesthood. I deliberately avoided discussing further studies when I wrote him. I decided not to inform my brother that I had joined the seminary. I feared my choice would not please him. We already had another brother in the minor seminary. What would be the need for a second priest in the family?

After three years of silence I broke the news of my new vocation to my brother in Germany. First of all I took a nice photo in my immaculate white cassock. And to capture the entire seminary view I took two or more shots with friends in front of our big seminary chapel and yet another along the magnificent seminary avenue. Any person who did not know who the priest-under-formation or what the seminary environment looked like should be able to see all in those first photographs I sent to my brother. I added a few lines of greetings from parents and brothers at home. But it was clear I had taken the line of priests and according to the order of Melchizedech. Was my brother happy or disappointed?

Rector upset by the letter

My brother's immediate reaction nearly landed me into big trouble. Those days rectors used to read students' letters. Initially I did not believe it. I did not understand why a person's private letters should be read by someone else. Today it would be seen as infringement on a citizen's human rights and could land the culprit in prison. But that has been an accepted practice in the seminary, yesterday, today and tomorrow.

I trembled with fear when the rector during weekly conference made the contents of my letter public, although he did not mention any names. He expressed anger at what "one man who wrote from Germany was saying about the formation of priests in Africa." In his letter my brother criticized me for keeping my "secret" so long. If he was told in time he would not have stood on my way. He wouldn't have wasted much time making arrangements for my overseas training. He thought I was foolish and immature.

In his lengthy letter he ridiculed African priests who received training in African seminaries. He described them as conservative, immature, and timid. He preferred western seminary training. In spite of his modern ideas about the priesthood my brother remained a committed Catholic intellectual.

The rector believed my brother was not well informed about seminary training in Europe as well as in Africa. He criticized my brother and Africans who think that foreign systems are the best. I waited anxiously for rector's summons. Fortunately I did not get into trouble as a result of my brother's letter.

My older brother was not the only one opposed to my choice. A former schoolmate from BSC later went to Germany to study architecture in the Darmstadt Hochschule. During one of the summer holidays I spent in Germany this gentleman invited me to his house. We ate and chatted. Suddenly he introduced a very "important topic" he wanted to discuss with me. He questioned me closely about how I came up with the idea of the priesthood.

He thought I was making a wrong choice of life career and promised to help secure a scholarship for me to continue my academic pursuit in any other field except the priesthood. If I agreed, there would be no need for me to return to Rome under any other pretext. I could even begin a summer language course in preparation for the university education in Germany. I thanked him for the nice meal, but told him plainly that I was comfortable with the choice I had made and had no intention of changing it.

In trouble with an aggrieved professor

Seminarians were not allowed to criticize their teachers because it was against charity. However one professor I encountered did not perform his duties adequately. Even the worst dunce received 100% grade on papers. Students did not learn from and certainly did not take his classes seriously. Once I suggested to my closest friends that the abysmal performance of this man should be reported to the rector. No one ever tried it. It could backfire.

Someone overheard my opinion and reported the gossip to the professor, who was not pleased. Soon after, the professor's chance to punish me presented itself. One evening several friends and I chatted on the chapel steps while waiting for the bell to go for night prayers. The professor summoned three of us to his office. We didn't suspect misfortune. But seminarians - major or junior - always have reasons to be suspicious when summoned by authorities. Such visits to the rector's office or professor's room could change the entire career of a future priest.

Often the charge might be ordinary - buying newspapers or magazines, not tucking in your shirt, leaving the grounds without permission. But the criminal charge brought against us by this professor came as a shock. He accused us of showing gross irreverence to the Blessed Sacrament.

When? Where? We asked. He told us that we were sitting on the chapel steps and thereby "backing the Blessed Sacrament." Incredulous, we stared at him. How could that be an offense? Did the Blessed Sacrament really have front or backside? The charge sounded ridiculous. Since the friends in my group had not committed any offense, I took responsibilities for their misfortune if the case really turned sour. I was in trap.

Case goes to the rector

The professor reported the matter to the rector accusing us of serious violation of seminary discipline. Our decorum in his eyes was tantamount to a sacrilegious act before the Blessed Sacrament. He recommended severe punishment, may be even expulsion.

The rector expressed surprise to find me part of that group of "delinquent seminarians." He questioned us: "What offense did the professor say you committed?" I responded:

"Monsignor, he said we were sitting on the chapel steps, chatting, ridiculing and backing the Blessed Sacrament, which as you can see was more than 200 yards away from us. We didn't mean to commit any sacrilege. We just sat there waiting for the bell to go for night prayers..."

The rector was visibly amused and told us to go back to the professor to apologize.

When we went back to the professor we feigned deep sorrow for our "sins" and promised never to sin again. Yes, often when people went to confession, they promised "never to sin again" but no sooner were they out from the confessional than they continued the old habit. But the professor made sure we were truly repentant. He ordered that we should make a 4-day novena to the "Precious Blood of Jesus" which the Savior who died for the sins of mankind spilled on the cross. We agreed and when we completed the spiritual exercise we went back to report to him to gain the plenary indulgence!

Off to Rome for further studies

In 1972, I was one of only three second-year theology students from the diocese of Owerri selected to continue studies in Rome. I still remember what one of my friends said: "So Nath's ambition to be a professor has been assured!" He was not expressing envy or disappointment, but was wondering if my "promotion" would not lead to higher academic achievements.

The choice did not come by chance. Lots were not cast those days, as in the case of Matthias who replaced Judas the Iscariot. No order of selection mandated my turn since I rated low in the **order of dignity** as a raw secondary student who had joined the seminary only 4 years earlier. My classmates had spent at least 10 years in the institution. I was not the brightest in our class. Neither the bishop, nor the vocation director could have selected me, because they didn't know me. I had never so much as had an opportunity to speak to them. Everyone wished

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to travel to Europe for further studies because usually it offered advantages. How then did the freshman get selected?

Monsignor John Ogbonna, the rector, recommended to the bishop that I should be sent to Rome for further studies. When I was about to leave the seminary to prepare for the journey overseas, I went to the Monsignor's office to thank him and say goodbye. He said to me:

"Listen, you have been selected because of your good behavior and sense of responsibility. Make sure you represent the Church and your diocese well overseas. Study hard and return home a good priest when you are expected back."

I knelt down and received his fatherly blessing. Only two of us eventually left for Rome to continue our seminary formation and theological studies. The third student dropped out of the seminary entirely before our departure.

CHAPTER 8

WHEN IN ROME...

As we settled down for studies in Rome, we soon realized the full implications of the adage - "when in Rome, do like the Romans." But we took Christ's exhortation to his followers rather as a better instructive material or ethical paradigm than this old Roman adage. Jesus warned his disciples to beware of the leaven of the Pharisees and Sadducees. And concerning the Pharisees and Scribes in particular he cautioned: "do what they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach" (Cf. Matthew: 16.11; 23.3).

A lot of things changed - the food, weather, language, and the Roman style of seminary training. At the Propaganda Fide college at Torre Rossa all seminarians from the third world countries, including India, Vietnam, Pakistan, Korea, Malaysia, Sri Lanka, Nigeria and many other African countries lived together and attended classes at the Urban University.

As we settled down to study the new language, we discovered that most of the students that year were new. The rector, an excellent Capuchin Father who had been missionizing in India for many years was also newly appointed to the college. We were told he was recalled by the Propaganda Fide authorities to "restore order in the college." His predecessor, we were told almost suffered heart failure or brain disorder as a result of great stress and confusion that nearly brought about the closure of the college.

All that glitters is not gold

We quickly discovered what had gone wrong. As the college reopened after summer holidays we learned more than half the students had left the seminary and discontinued their journey to the priesthood. A few who returned to the college actually came to collect their belongings. Many enrolled in other secular universities or found jobs in European cities where they had spent their summer vacation. The mass exodus of seminarians

from the Propaganda Fide College was a clear proof of the breakdown in discipline and tradition.

Coming from Nigeria where seminary tradition had hardly changed since the end of the Second Vatican Council, I appreciated the students' predicament. They enjoyed unlimited freedom in the college and got intoxicated. Virtually no one was threatened with expulsion because in fact there were no rules and regulations. One didn't need any permission to leave the premises at any time. Students left for movies in the evening and returned early in the morning for breakfast. Then attended lectures in the university only when it pleased them.

Nonchalant attitude to studies

Neither students nor professors took studies seriously. There was no obligation to attend classes and one could leave the lecture room at any time. In a class of about 30 students the professor didn't care if only 2 or 3 students reported for lectures. Even though all were expected to sit for examinations at the end of the semester students often cheated during written exams. Even poor academic performance and gross indiscipline did not warrant expulsion. Most African students came to the conclusion that the "special privilege" to study in Rome was not worth a dime.

My friend and I who came to Rome to continue our studies had to undergo a year of "probation" to learn the Italian language. It was not a difficult language. After a few weeks we were able to speak and write a few letters in Italian. We were further disappointed and frustrated to find the courses in Rome offered nothing new to what we already learned in Nigeria. But we had no choice if we wanted to be ordained.

One assistant professor of Moral Theology was a layman and I didn't think he knew enough theology to teach in the Urban University. I criticized his methods and poor presentation of materials. I asked a lot of questions in class. Most were difficult and irritated him. One day he burst out: "Now come out and take the chalk from me. You can teach the class. Let me take your place..." I stood my ground and challenged this assistant professor as the boys cheered me!

Rome - city of contradictions

"Rome was not built in day," is also a well-known adage. In spite of the early frustrations we suffered, a lot of good brought consolation to our near-broken hearts. The new rector of the college did his best to stem the mass exodus of seminarians from the college. He organized excursions for students. We visited virtually all the important historic places and ancient monuments in Rome, the Vatican and beyond. We visited both the ancient and new Rome and were able to see the difference in what made Rome great in both the ancient and modern times. But as the sages say, "all that glitters is not gold." In the midst of antiquity was also modernity. Good and bad, vices and virtues, poverty and opulence dwelt together.

In and around the Holy City, the spiritual and the temporal, the obscene and the sacred found easy accommodation. Thieves robbed pilgrims inside the big basilica, as well as at St Peter's Square. Italian "Area Boys" or bandits snatched bags and wallets from unsuspecting ubiquitous tourists that swarmed Rome in summer. Homosexuals attacked victims in buses and public squares. I was a victim of such frightening attacks in the public bus three times - a terrible nightmare! Prostitutes and gays were a menace to public decency. There were many fraudulent activities. Most Italians never paid their bus fares. Many fake and stolen articles were sold in the "Sunday markets." A few new students in Rome were so shocked and they asked to be sent back to their native countries.

Piazza dell'amore

"Piazza dell'amore" was one of the most notorious public squares on the Janiculum hills where the Collegio de Propaganda Fide is still situated. At the "Piazza dell'amore" (Lovemaking square) every obscene scenario was possible. Lovers met in cars, trucks, on the grass, at night and in broad daylight. Most new students were terribly shaken by what they saw and described the Holy city as modern Sodom and Gomorrah. Condoms and other protective sex wears often littered the "Piazza dell'amore." In some Roman secular universities students brazenly practiced acts

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of sexual pleasures with little or no regard for the feelings of their roommates.

One student recounted his shock as he returned from lectures and found one of his roommates on top of his girl friend in their hostel. The girl could not understand the student's embarrassment. She shamelessly questioned: "What is wrong with you? Are we doing anything strange? I just came to enjoy sex with my friend. Does it worry you?" The injured boy left the room in disgust. In spite of such surprises and disillusionment, most of us did not join the crowd. The tough seminary formation we received before our journey to Europe sustained our morale and faith.

Closure of the Philosophy College

Roman authorities decided to close down the Philosophy College at Torre Rossa. The number of serious seminarians continued to diminish as fewer bishops cared to send new students since enduring pain and raising money hardly seemed worthwhile. Many seminarians lost their vocation the second day of their arrival in the Holy City. By now we all knew why. All remaining students were sent to the Propaganda College at Via Urban VIII, which hitherto had housed only priests. But the closure of the Philosophy College meant fewer students in the Urban University and hence loss of jobs of some professors, who protested such a closure and brought pressure on the Vatican Secretary of State to intervene on their favor. They won their appeal and the college was re-opened in the early 1980s.

Special rector's confidante in Rome

God's goodness followed me to Rome where the rector favored me with his friendship and guidance. He took great interest in me. I struggled to speak good Italian whenever I visited him in his office. He understood and spoke good English since he worked for many years in India. He didn't worry if students spoke to him in English, but he encouraged students to speak the official language. I attended daily morning masses. After our

ordination I always concelebrated with fellow priests at the community mass. I attended all rectors' conferences.

Although I was not one of the college 'Incaricati' (hostel prefects) I helped in many areas of college life. I was the first to accept the challenge to preach during one of the evening devotions. I typed my "sermon" which I titled "Indifferentismo nella vita christiana." In my elementary and unpolished Italian I addressed the issue which worried me most as a new arrival in Rome: the indifferent or uncommitted type of life Christians of all walks of life showed. For example, people did not try to stop fights or quarrels. If the police were not around, thieves robbed you and fled. Few people bothered to stop a thief. It was none of their business.

Students and vice-rectors who had not attended the evening service later heard about the sermon I gave, and asked for copies. The rector took note of my courage. He subsequently invited me to preach often at some of college masses.

The rector and his new special aide

After those incidents my good relationship with our rector increased by leaps and bounds. He often visited me in my room and we chatted like equals. He was pleased whenever I visited him in his office. He would quietly close the door and place a notice outside the office door: "*Non disturbare*" (Don't disturb).

During my visits with the rector, we often engaged in causal and serious theological debates. The rector was often amused by what he called my extremist views on certain theological issues. I purposely used to "invent" some to tease him. During most of our debates he assumed the extreme orthodox position while I remained on the extreme left. I could have been a communist in clerical garb, he thought!

Once he predicted that I would never become a bishop. The topic of our 'disputation' was "the covetous office of the bishop." Most of my views made him, as well as some professors, uncomfortable. I made it categorically clear to him that I was never interested in such offices. I believed bishops spent more time quarreling with priests and attending meetings and conferences than in discharging duties as credible pastors of

souls. To be made bishop, one should be ultra orthodox in manners and doctrines. Keeping up such pretense would be too much of a burden for me, more than I was willing to bear to achieve that exalted position of honor in church hierarchy.

In Africa, and Nigeria in particular to become a bishop, the candidate has to forego much of his freedom - freedom of speech - freedom to engage in some hobbies - freedom to play games and engage in recreational activities - eat publicly - dress casually, or engage in some other activities seen by some African bishopric candidates as "mundane" practices. In the West these activities are "normal" and are open to the clerics as well as lay people. I told the rector I would not like to be isolated from my community and people and the world around me and be imprisoned in a mansion. By nature I am outspoken and therefore would not like to be investigated by the Holy Office if I were to occupy an exalted and highly contested office of the bishop. It would be a miserable life for me as a cleric.

On his own part I told my rector that he had all the qualities required of the office of the bishop. Although not conservative in his theological views, the rector agreed with me in most of the things I said, but he was always cautious when discussing serious church issues with me. I was not surprised that after a few years I left Rome he was made bishop. In a congratulatory message I sent him, I told him to wait for a bigger office, more than that of the Archbishop. I had no illusions that one day my former rector and great friend could become the pope or at least a cardinal.

Screening new students - a delicate task

Most of other discussions I used to have with the rector centered on more serious and delicate issues. He decided that I should become his close adviser or aide. I had already carried out similar office when I was in high school in Nigeria. In Rome I helped the rector in the screening of students - priests and seminarians coming from Nigeria.

Bishops usually sent in applications for their students months before the beginning of the academic year. The authorities of the Propaganda Fide had the right to accept or

reject an application. Past admission of bad students caused mass exodus of seminarians from the college in the early 1970s. It also caused the closure of the Philosophy College in 1974. Some priests from the third world countries who were sent to further their studies in Rome did not perform well. Many refused to return to their home dioceses after their studies, while others took longer time than required to finish their studies.

For education or academic degrees?

It was in fact the attitude of some of these priests and seminarians that pushed the authorities of the Propaganda Fide to promulgate some obnoxious laws meant to control the number of years African students in particular could spend in any Roman college. Students must vacate their rooms and leave the college after a period of four years. Masters Degree in theology, philosophy or in any of the social sciences was thought to be highest level of academic qualification needed to qualify them for any type of Apostolate they would engage in their home dioceses. The Roman authorities were also very critical of many African bishops who failed to recall their students at the end of their studies in Rome. Perhaps it was never the bishops' fault. Most of the students used to insist on earning many doctorate degrees after their Licentiate or Masters Degree program.

The Roman authorities often vehemently opposed the accumulation of higher degrees by African students who returned to their dioceses to spend the rest of their priestly life in remote African villages as parish priests. What purpose did the accumulation of multiples of academic certificates serve when the knowledge was not put into use. This phenomenon continued to be one of the many dilemmas of the African Church. Some Roman authorities ridiculed African priests whom they said usually come to Rome to accumulate degrees instead of getting a good education.

In many occasions our rector had called me into his office and questioned me about certain students and seminarians sent from Nigeria to study in the Propaganda Fide College. I did not personally know most since Nigeria is a very big country with many dioceses. But I pointed out to the rector that Nigerian

bishops were usually meticulous in their choice of students for overseas studies. I presumed they sent their best priests and seminarians. The rector accepted my suggestions and warned me never to discuss this screening process with any of my friends. I did not disappoint him.

Most Nigerian priests and seminarians who lived in our college were among the best, but regrettably the vice-rectors, some professors, and friends could not tolerate our flamboyant lifestyle. The Nigerian students bought the most expensive cameras, radios, record players, television sets, and other electronic gadgets. Nigerians were the noisiest among the various groups of students from the third world countries. Nigerian students excelled in academic and social matters. They organized big celebrations during ordinations and invited many friends. Our rectors and professors often joined in the celebrations usually marked by the "exhibition" of Nigerian cuisine and exhilarating Nigerian music and dancing. No one wanted to miss Nigerian celebrations in the college in those days.

A Priest in the Order of Melchizedek

No one chooses for himself the honor of being a high priest. It is only by God's call that a man is made a high priest - just as Aaron was - Hebrews: 5.4.

June 29th 1975 - Feast of Saints Peter and Paul - was the great day of my ordination. All the candidates from Propaganda Fide - about 50 of us - had waited eagerly for this day. 1975 was "Anno Santo" - Holy Year - in the Roman Catholic tradition. Special celebrations usually marked the end of each 25 years or Jubilee Year of the Church. Pilgrims from various parts of the Catholic world used to offer special prayers and visit holy places, including Jerusalem and the City of Rome during the Holy Year.

Among the most beautiful ceremonies that year was the "Opening of the 'Porta Santa' - the Holy Door" of Saint Peter's Basilica. One of the iron doors of the great Church which had

remained permanently locked since the last Jubilee celebration in 1950 was "opened" by the reigning Pontiff, Pope Paul VI at a special ceremony marking the beginning of the Holy Year. Hundreds and thousands of pilgrims who visited the Basilica entered through the newly opened door to pray. We all witnessed this ceremony.

We received our deaconate ordination in June 1974 and had to wait for a year for the priestly ordination because the Pope was to be the ordaining Prelate. Dioceses and seminaries all over the Catholic world sent their candidates to Rome for this special ordination ceremony. We were 365 in number, the largest number of priests ever ordained by the Pope at a single ceremony. Priests ordained by the Pope received special certificates of ordination. Receiving priestly ordination from a pope meant one stood a good chance of becoming a bishop! That was the rumor circulating in the college that time.

Because of the large number of candidates and pilgrims the ordination took place outside the Basilica, at St Peters Square. The three-hour ceremony began at 7.00 PM because of Rome's hot summer weather. The ordination was televised and was witnessed live by millions of Catholics all over the world.

The 365 newly ordained priests dressed in priestly garbs and golden chasubles made an impressive picture. Some people thought angels of God descended on earth. In spite of the large number of candidates, the summer heat and length of the ceremony, the Pope was able to impose hands on each candidate. He also distributed Holy Communion to the privileged guests.

My father at my ordination

Outside my father who was the only member of our family who attended my ordination from Nigeria, there were many Nigerian pilgrims who witnessed the ordination and were also present at my first mass on the 30th June 1975. My father stayed in a hotel near our college and was fascinated by what he saw.

As a special guest and father of a new priest my father received a special card and seat at the front of the huge crowd near the altar. He was among the few who received Holy Communion from the Pope. He dressed in a gorgeous African

costume befitting an Igbo traditional chief. He brought with him some Nigerian works of art, which I gave to some of my friends as souvenirs.

At a special Papal Audience - a gathering of pilgrims - in a large Vatican Hall, my father and I had a rare privilege of taking pictures with Pope Paul VI. Toward the end of the audience the Papal guards allowed some pilgrims to approach the Pope for group photographs.

I alerted my father to get ready for a photograph with the Pope as I boldly drew near the Pope and whispered to the Pontiff that my father - a great African chief who welcomed the missionaries in our land - was around. I pointed at my father. The Pope beckoned him to come. He said "vieni, vieni qua, Signore - come, come here, Sir." Both my father and I flanked the Pope as Vatican photographers took some shots. I purchased the pictures, which my father took home - a memorable souvenir of my ordination and his pilgrimage to Rome. This large framed picture hangs in our parlor at home.

My First Mass

I celebrated my first mass at the convent chapel of Polish Sisters of Charity at Cassaletto, about 3 miles from Rome. Many Nigerian pilgrims and friends from various parts of Italy and Germany were there. I received two sets of new chasubles and albs for my First Mass from my friends in Rome and Germany. One of my closest friends and classmates preached at my first mass.

The sisters entertained my visitors sumptuously. And at the end of the meals, my father, through the help of one of our Nigerian priests who translated his speech into Italian and English told the audience his own story of my vocation. According to him, he had no doubt I would become a priest. He thanked God for the blessings he had showered on our family through my ordination. He also thanked our rector, my spiritual directors, and others who helped me to become a priest.

Before the end of the meals I thanked God for accepting me as his priest. I used the occasion too, to thank all those who attended my ordination and the First Mass, particularly my

friends who came from Germany and Trieste, North of Italy. Their priest and a large number of parishioners represented Trieste parish. As a deacon I spent some time during our Easter vacation at this wonderful parish. The pastor helped much with my preparation for the priesthood. After my ordination I returned to the parish for a First Mass.

I took my "motto" for my souvenir card from Prophet Jeremiah. The words were: "You have overpowered me. You are stronger than I am" (Jer. 20.7) Like Jeremiah, I believed God's urge was so irresistible that I had no option than to answer the call. In our wrestle, God was stronger.

After First Mass

Before I left for summer vacation in July I brought my father to various places of interest in Rome. He was overwhelmed with joy and awe by what he saw at the Catacombs of Saint Callistus in Rome - the ancient underground labyrinths and tunnels where the persecuted early Christians hid and worshipped. We visited the Vatican Museums, the Sistine Chapel, and the Coliseum - the Roman Amphitheater where in the ancient Rome gladiators fought with lions and other wild beasts.

On my way to Germany I stopped over at Como, near Milan to celebrate another "First Mass" for my family friends there. They received the special blessing from the newly ordained priest. In the Catholic tradition, people knelt before the newly ordained priest to receive his blessing, which they believe, has special healing effect.

In Sankt Josef Stadtkirche, Gaggenau-Murgtal, I celebrated again what the Germans popularly called "Nach Primiz" - "After First Mass." It was a solemn occasion of merriment. I had many friends and benefactors from that parish. After 24 years in the priesthood I am still in contact with many of the parishioners and the current pastor.

First Pastoral Experience

I exercised my first pastoral assignment at St Joseph's Church Gaggenau under the guidance of the then pastor - Pfarrer Oskar

Sheerer. He was a very kind man who offered me the opportunity during the two months I stayed with him of putting into practice some of the things we learnt in the Pastoral Theology class.

The first baptism I performed was in Gaggenau. A couple who attended mass in our Church from another city called Kupenheim phoned Pfarrer Sheerer and requested that "the African priest who celebrated mass the previous Sunday" should baptize their last and 8th child. I agreed.

It was a big celebration. The entire family Klefenz and friends were present as I baptized their daughter - Cerstin Klefenz. Many pictures were taken during and after the baptismal ceremony. During my studies in Rome, the Klefenz family often invited me to spend a short vacation with them.

It was during one of such visits that they requested me to wed their daughter. It was in June 1976, a year after my ordination that I celebrated the first wedding. It was between Claudia Klefenz and Lothar Weber. I was glad to wed the couple at a beautiful Nuptial Mass in their village Church at Kupenheim.

In 1992 I visited Familie Klefenz again in Kupenheim, Germany. They were glad to see me. They told me their daughter, Cerstin, whom I baptized 16 years ago had expressed desire to see the African priest who baptized her in 1975. I was glad too to see her. A beautiful young lady, Cerstin most of the time stared at me in admiration.

During the rest of my time in Rome I visited Germany, Austria, Switzerland, and Northern Italy to help out in various parishes, thus gaining more pastoral experience. There was no doubt I enjoyed exercising the pastoral activities in those foreign countries. When I returned to Nigeria I was sure I would face a different situation as well as more demanding pastoral challenges.

At the Propaganda Fide College most of the newly ordained priests concelebrated at the daily Morning Masses as well as on Sundays. Each priest was expected to sign up for "Chief Celebrant." The Chief Celebrant also preached the homily. Often students and the superiors criticized those priests

who did not preach well. Thus we learned to prepare our sermons well and were also able to learn from one another.

German & French language school

My good relationship with our rector in Rome yielded other remarkable benefits, which I would not easily forget. Like most students in the Propaganda Fide I secured the scholarship to study German in Goethe Institute, "Sprachschule für Ausländer" (language school for foreigners) in Passau, in the Bavarian region of the Federal Republic of Germany. It was a wonderful experience.

While I was completing my doctorate program in Rome, my professor noticed that I did not consult enough relevant French texts, books, theological, and biblical journals in my thesis. He insisted I must consult the most important French authors, whose works were not translated into other European languages. I had to master enough French to deal with those works he recommended otherwise he would not advance with me.

I accepted the challenge to update my French. The rector helped me obtain a scholarship on my behalf to study French, first with the intensive program department in the French embassy in Rome and later in France at the language school in Strasbourg. It worked. I was highly indebted to my rector who made it possible for me to scale that obstacle on my academic success.

The language course in Strasbourg France was not as exciting as the German course in Passau, Germany. There were fewer exercises on grammar in class and most of us did not learn much. Our lady teacher did not challenge the students much. She was much after her beautiful appearance before the students.

How I got big money and Swiss benefactor

A group of German and Swiss benefactors and pilgrims visited the Propaganda Fide for a serious discussion with the rector and officials. The Germans did not speak Italian or English. The rector summoned me to interpret and translate. He had seen me

At the Crossroads

with German theology books and magazines. I could not have performed like professional translators at the United Nations. But the rector and German and Swiss visitors were impressed by my efforts as I went from German to Italian and English.

One evening about two months after that translation exercise the rector summoned me to his office. He said I had good news from a priest in Switzerland. One Swiss Lady named Anne Langholt had lost her husband in a tragic accident. For a long time she grieved over the death of her sweetheart and could not be consoled. Then an idea came to her. Both husband and wife were good Catholics.

Lady Langholt wanted a priest to celebrate masses for her husband to keep good memories in her mind. She related her intention to her parish priest who wrote the rector requesting a priest preferably African who could help Lady Langholt. The African priest should speak German and must promise to visit Lady Langholt in Bazenheid, near Saint Gallen, in the German-speaking Swiss province. She and the African priest would visit the grave of Herr Langholt and pray for him in the cemetery. The lucky priest would receive 10,000 Swiss francs (equivalent of \$6,500 those days).

The rector soon figured out who qualified for the offer. When I went to his office, he gave me the letter from Lady Langholt's parish priest, who would be visiting Rome that summer, giving wonderful opportunity to meet the priest and arrange how to visit lady Langholt.

I enjoyed visiting the mountainous region of Switzerland. They grazed a lot of cattle there and the people claimed I was the first black person they had seen in their area. Unfortunately I did not like their food. It contained a lot of dairy products. The lady who cooked for the pastor was not a kind fellow. She could not understand why I rejected most of the food she cooked.

Generally the people were very friendly. Some families invited me for dinner. Others took me to various places of interest, including old churches, museums, and parks. I received gifts from the people. But the biggest was the money from Lady Langholt. That large sum of money helped meet most of my needs as a student for a good length of time.

CHAPTER 9

THE ROMAN DIPLOMA CONTROVERSY

When I defended my doctoral thesis and attempted to secure the Roman degree certificate, also called "diploma" I ran into trouble. Most of my friends - students, rectors, professors, spiritual directors, and many Nigerians were there during the defense in the aula. Everybody clapped and cheered as I defended the various positions of the leaders of the Independent African Churches. I traced the emergence and proliferation of the religious and prophetic movements to many factors - socio-political, religious, and theological. Everybody in the hall believed I did a wonderful job and shook hands with me while the three 'judges' went into the inner chamber of the hall to deliberate and award the final grade.

A fascist professor upset by my remarks

Their deliberation went on a long time. Everybody wondered why the delay in announcing the result. At last the three professors emerged from their chamber. Some of the students shouted "trenta su trenta!" (30 over 30) - the highest grade in the Italian system. I scored the highest possible grade - "Summa cum laude." Everybody cheered.

But the story did not end there. Some of my friends alerted me that one of the three professors appeared unhappy as the students cheered. He did not clap hands and he carried a sad face indeed. He left the hall and did not participate in the small party, which followed.

I later learned the reason. Two judges awarded me 30 over 30 and 29.9 over 30. But the third judge, the unhappy face disagreed. He only gave me a score of 24 over 30. Oh no! The other two cried "foul." They refused to accept his judgment and demanded explanation. He did not hide his grievances. He pointed to a paragraph where I made what he refereed to as

indecorous remarks about Italy in my thesis. And here is the paragraph that displeased him:

The origin of "Ethiopian mythology" can be traced back to history and the Bible. The successful military resistance of the Ethiopian Empire against the Italian colonial occupation in 1896 was said to have impressed Africans, and especially the blacks in South Africa. It brought a stirring of hope among Africans, who thought that perhaps, in a similar manner, the whites in South Africa would be faced with devastating defeat at the hands of those whom they had for long oppressed. (Cf. *Prophecy and Revolution*, P. 28).

The other 2 professors accused the 3rd of shameful judgement based on prejudices and perhaps racism. He apologized and changed his grade to 29.4.

He was a fascist who would not tolerate any "irresponsible" political remarks about his fatherland. Later I visited him with an African artwork to "thank him for being one of my professors and judges." I did not mean to castigate Italian government - ancient or modern. I was only citing a historical fact. Many African students suffered untold hardship in the hands of European professors who moderated the students' theses and punished them. But I thanked God I had 2 "Godfathers" among the judges!

The diploma controversy

The diploma is issued by the educational institution conferring a degree on a person. This document certifies the student's satisfactory completion of a course of study. In most of the Pontifical universities in Rome, doctorate students are in addition required to publish an excerpt of their thesis to obtain the Roman certificate and an endorsement or seal of approval usually referred to as *imprimatur* (Let it be printed) or *nihil obstat* (Nothing stands on the way). The equivalent of these formal terms is the statement *Printed with ecclesiastical approval*. But as it is often stated by the same authority approving the work, the clearing of works for publication does

not necessarily imply approval of an author's viewpoint or his manner of handling a subject.

In the secular world the practice is referred to as censorship. Censorship of books published by clerics and church's representatives is therefore an exercise of vigilance by the Roman church for safeguarding authentic Catholic teaching. Such procedure requires that books and other works dealing with matters of faith and morals and related subjects be cleared for doctrinal orthodoxy before publication. This is accomplished by having the works reviewed by officials called censors. Permission to publish works of a religious character, together with the apparatus of reviewing them beforehand, generally falls under the authority of the bishop of the place where the writer lives or where the works are published.

In my own case the permission to publish an excerpt or the entire thesis fell upon the authorities of the Pontifical Urban University, Rome. The rule required only an excerpt, about a chapter or two of the entire document. But I wanted to publish my entire doctoral thesis and had even given the book a title. The magnificent exposition of "new theology" as contained in the writings of most of the reigning theologians and in the documents of the Second Vatican Council was the greatest thing I gained during my studies and priestly formation in Europe. I was fascinated by the document on the Church in the modern world. If Africans were to make sense out of the imported Christian religion there was need to look into the project of adaptation or inculturation.

In their exposition of the new theology our professors in Rome pointed repeatedly to the Second Vatican Council's documents that made references to the "signs of the times." African students were always in the majority in the Propaganda Fide and most of us must remain grateful to excellent professors like Carlo Molari and Stefano Virgulin who opened our eyes to the new theology and the Vatican documents. Even though Carlo Molari, the no-nonsense dogma professor was discredited by the ultra conservative group of theologians in Rome, the Italian professor and priest will for long be admired by most of his students. These professors and some others seemed to be reminding the African future priests and bishops: "You people

have a rich culture. Do not be ashamed of your color and tradition. You must explore your cultural heritage and use their symbols to enrich Christianity in the black world. It is useless waiting for Europeans to accomplish this task for you. You must face the challenges."

Many African theologians accepted this challenge in exploring Christian faith and Culture from the African perspective. I wanted to contribute my own quota. Exploring what is good and praiseworthy in African way of worship led to my interest in the Prophetic movement as found in the African Independent Churches; hence the title I gave to that first publication - *Prophecy and Revolution - The role of the prophets in the independent African Churches and in biblical tradition*. My moderator, Professor Stefano Virgulin insisted I should publish it in Europe in 1978 before returning to Nigeria. "That should be the beginning," he said. "I expect you to write more when you return to Africa. Don't be timid. You don't need to be perfect. You Africans should be ready and bold to write and express the Christian faith in the "language" your people would understand." He gave me a "testimonial" which he said I should present to any publishing house in London where I was to do a year's course in education.

No Imprimatur, No Roman Diploma

When I presented my case to the secretary of my university, he gave me the booklet, written in Latin and kept in its ancient form to deter any misinterpretation. From every indication those guidelines on censorship as applied to all Roman Catholic books and other works dealing with matters of faith and morals have never known any major change since the days of the Inquisition. The secretary stated that there was nothing to argue about the requirements if I wanted to get my certificate. All the details were spelled out in that booklet. The most important clause stated that the publishing company that had undertaken to publish such a work must send the completed camera ready copies as well as the original manuscripts to the Roman authorities for final approval before the final arrangement for printing. This by no means would never be an easy task and it

could take up to two years or more before the final approval could be granted.

I was in no mood to accept those rules and I made it clear to the secretary that those rules should be changed. At least there should be some exceptions and I had reasons for demanding them. I was traveling to London for studies and while there I would complete the arrangements for the publication of my book. Such arrangements had already started and no changes would be possible to suit the Roman requirements. Then this dialog with the university secretary followed:

Secretary: And what do you want me to do?

Nathaniel: I don't think I would be able to satisfy those requirements

Secretary: Then you forfeit your doctorate certificates...and your title will not appear in our list. And your book may even be listed under the index of prohibited books...

Nathaniel: (dismayed at hearing the word 'index') Secretary, I don't think I would even want *imprimatur* or *nihil obstat* to appear on my book.

Secretary: (visibly angry) Then why are you here? What are you doing in my office? You may go!

Without saying any other word I left with the little pamphlet and decided to forfeit the Roman certificate. I was certain that a copy of my book would be more valuable than the certificate. I would be vindicated as my next story reveals.

Index of prohibited books

Index of prohibited books was a list of books which Catholics were forbidden to read, possess or sell, under penalty of excommunication. The books were banned by the Holy See because their treatment of matters of faith and morals and related subjects were judged to be erroneous or serious occasions of doctrinal error. Some books were listed in the Index by name; others were covered under general norms.

The first Roman Index of Prohibited Books, which served the same purpose as earlier lists, was published in 1557 by the Holy Office at the order of Paul IV. The Council of Trent, with the approval of the same pope, authorized another Index in

1564. Seven years later, St. Pius V set up a special Congregation for the Reform of the Index and Correction of Books, and gave it universal jurisdiction. In the course of time, many additions and modifications affecting the Index were made. In 1897, Leo XIII issued complete legislation on the subject, and in 1917 Benedict XV turned over to the Congregation of the Holy Office the function of censoring publications in accordance with the provisions of canon law.

Although the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith declared June 14, 1966, that the Index and its penalties of excommunication no longer had the force of law in the Church, references to Index are not uncommon in the Post Second Vatican Council era. People are still obliged, however, to take normal precautions against occasions of doctrinal error.

Memories of the Index are still fresh in many minds. Among the most heinous sins first communicants memorized those days from *Igbo Katolik Katekizm* was "*Igu akwukwo na aburo nke Katolik na iga uka na aburo nke Katolik*" (reading non-Catholic books and attending any non-Catholic religious service.) Nigerian Catholics and Protestants stood with sharp daggers and dangerous missiles against each others' throats like Catholics and Protestants in Northern Ireland. Battle lines were always drawn between bitter enemies. In mission schools Catholic school children wore white uniforms while Protestants wore brown!

In spite of the positive results of the ecumenical movements since the Second Vatican Council, some Catholic Church authorities still insist on appending the Church's seal (Imprimatur or nihil obstat or both) on books they judge are safe for Catholics to read. Very few Catholics care about the Church's approval before they read any book on faith and morals.

Index and the Inquisition

Both terms usually provoke chilly feelings in Catholic circles. No one can say for sure how far the reforms regarding the Index and Inquisition have gone since the Second Vatican Council. Many critics of the Catholic Church believe that under various forms and guises both still operate in the Catholic Church.

Otherwise why would authorities of Pontifical universities still insist on the rules and regulations before students could publish their books?

In Rome in the early seventies and eighties students of the Pontifical Urban university knew about an ultra conservative underground Roman Catholic group that functioned as Inquisitors and Index managers. They were the publishers of the conservative newspaper named "**Si, Si, No, No**" (Let your word be 'Yes, Yes,' 'No, No' - Matthew: 5.37) taken from the Gospel passage. This group was responsible for the undoing of many of the Urban University professors who suffered persecution in the hands of the Roman Catholic authorities.

Most professors whom the conservatives tagged "radical" were harassed by the Holy Office and accused of teaching doctrines perilous to the Catholic faith. In one publication by *Si, Si, No, No*, in 1977, the authors carried vicious propaganda against the popular Italian dogma theologian named Carlo Molari. They accused him of teaching false doctrines.

Carlo Molari always carried his tape-recorder to class to avoid misquotation or misrepresentation by his enemies. He produced records of his lectures whenever Roman authorities called him on the carpet. But the pressures from the *Si, Si, No, No* gang forced the Roman authorities to remove this illustrious professor from his university position.

The *Si, Si, No, No* group at that time represented the Inquisition - the tribunal for dealing with "heretics," authorized by Gregory IX in 1231 to search them out, hear and judge them, sentence them to various forms of punishment. The institution, which was responsible for many excesses, was most active in the second half of the 13th century. Even today, no one can claim that its activities have stopped in the Roman Catholic Church.

A book vis-à-vis an academic diploma

I left Rome for London for further studies without the certificate. To this day, I never got it. But I believed I had something equal or even much better. That was **Prophecy and Revolution**, my published thesis, which also appeared in the list of published books by the ex-alumni of the Pontifical University. One day I

tried my luck with the published book instead of the Roman academic certificate.

Two years after the publication of "Prophecy and Revolution," I went to the German embassy in Lagos in 1983 for visa to travel to that country. I was not aware that some visa rules had changed. In the past, one could complete the visa forms and obtain the visa on the spot and travel the second day. My flight had been booked and my hosts prepared for my arrival the following day.

The under-secretary at the German embassy told me to return in two-weeks' time to check my visa. I told her I wanted to see the visa secretary. "For what use?" she wondered. Did I think I could change the rules? Yes! With just one idea in my head I went to the visa secretary's office. He was a kind man and well disposed to listen to my story. Perhaps he had heard my type of story before. Then I opened my hand bag and brought out my book:

Secretary: Yea, What can I do for you?

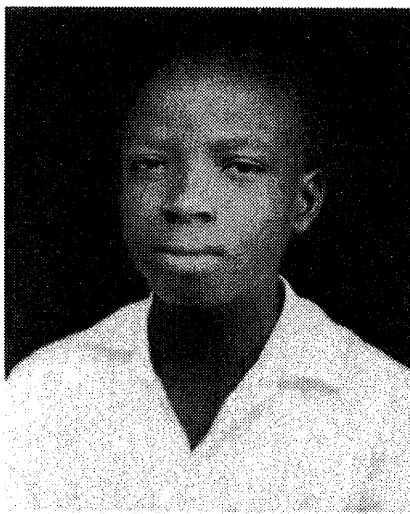
Nathaniel: (bringing out the book) You see, secretary, I did not know that the rules about the German visa have changed. In fact I am ready to travel tomorrow, but they are saying I must wait for two weeks or so.

Secretary: Yea, Yea. We need to send the forms to the home office in Germany to approve the visa.

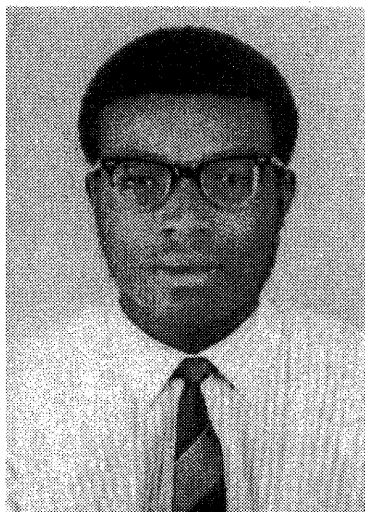
Nathaniel: You see I just want to send this my newly published book to one of my benefactors in Germany. The old lady helped me financially in the publication of this book. Look at her name here in the acknowledgment list.

Secretary: (taking a close look at the book) Is this really your book? Is this your name? You published it in London? Were you there? For studies? Wonderful. Great! Okay. Wait for a few moments.

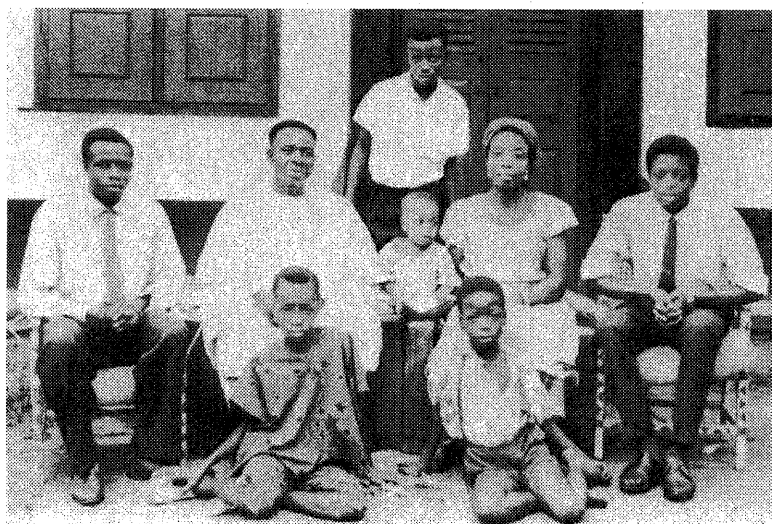
He went into the inner office and after a few minutes he came out and asked for my passport, which I immediately produced. When he came back again, he asked for the visa fee. Finally he issued the visa and wished me "gluckliche Reise" and "Aufwiedersehen!" (Safe journey, see you again!) Who says a publication is not worth more than an academic certificate!



Passport photo for admission into
B.S.C. - Junior High 1961



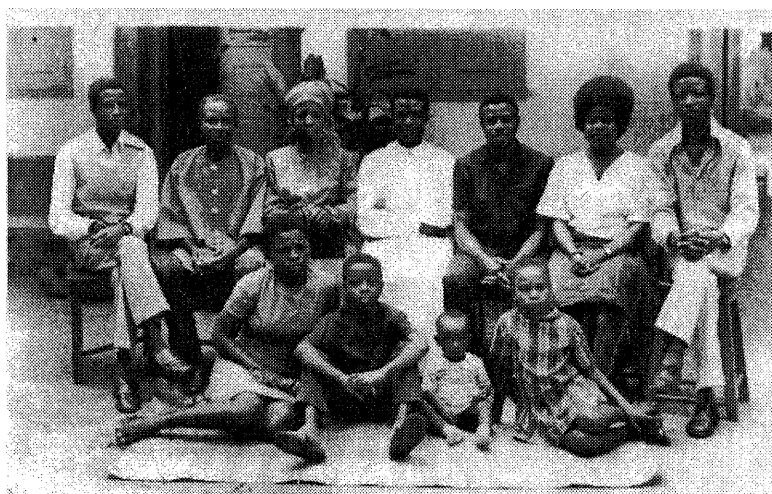
Junior High - B.S.C. - Class 2



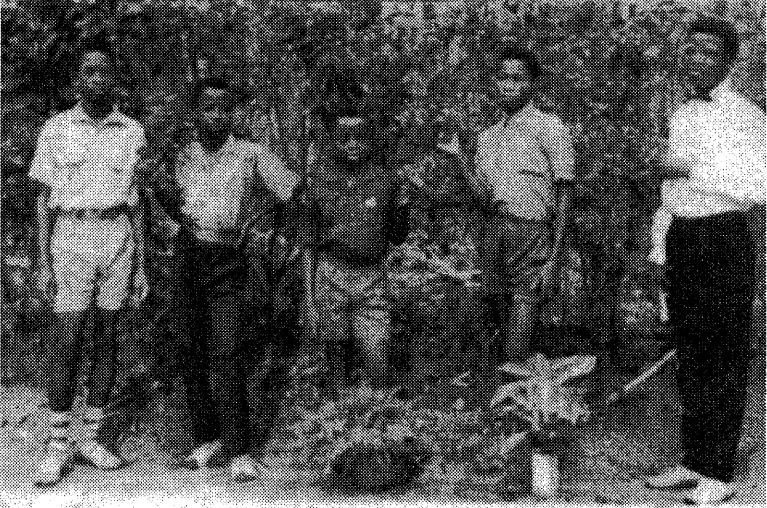
Family Photo



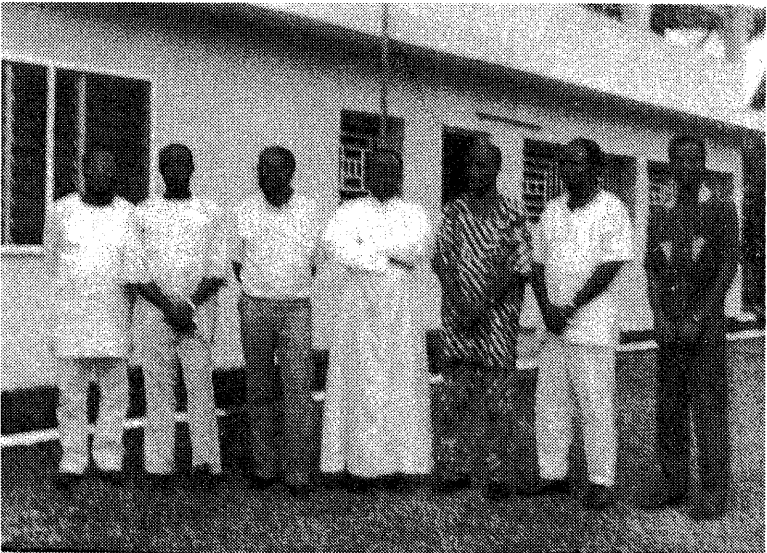
Standard 4 1959 - Won prize in Math



Family picture - Send-off - Further studies in Rome - 1972



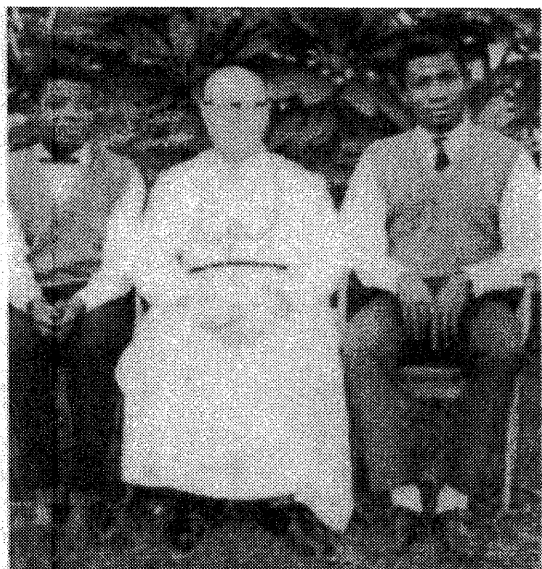
First year in B.S.C. - with cousins and younger brothers



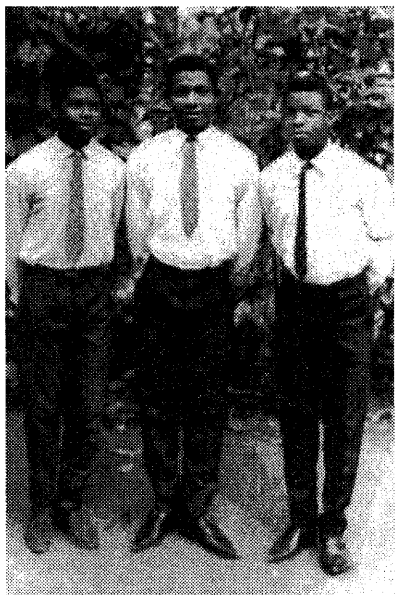
The Seven Brothers



B.S.C. Class prefects - 1965 - Prefect of Class 4A



The Principal of B.S.C. Brother Justin - Gave me scholarship and made me prefect as a reward for upright life.



With three great High School friends -
Jonas & Joseph



Secretary of Orlu Students' Union-
in Class 4



First picture in Seminarians' cassock
1968



Young parents -
Chief Gabriel O. Ndiokwere &
Ezinne Janeth Ndiokwere - 1954



Send-off to Rome



In Propaganda Fide, Rome -
in Seminarians' Cassock



In Cleric's winter garment in Rome



Ordination in Rome 1975 - Ordaining Prelate Pope Paul VI



First Mass - Nach Primiz - in Germany



Ordination picture



First Mass - Nach Primiz - in Germany



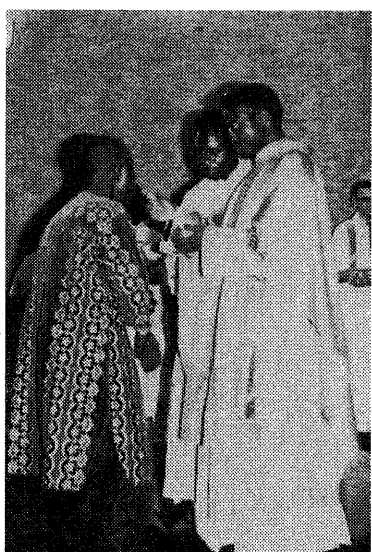
Blessing after First Mass in Rome -
Nigerian Ambassador and wife



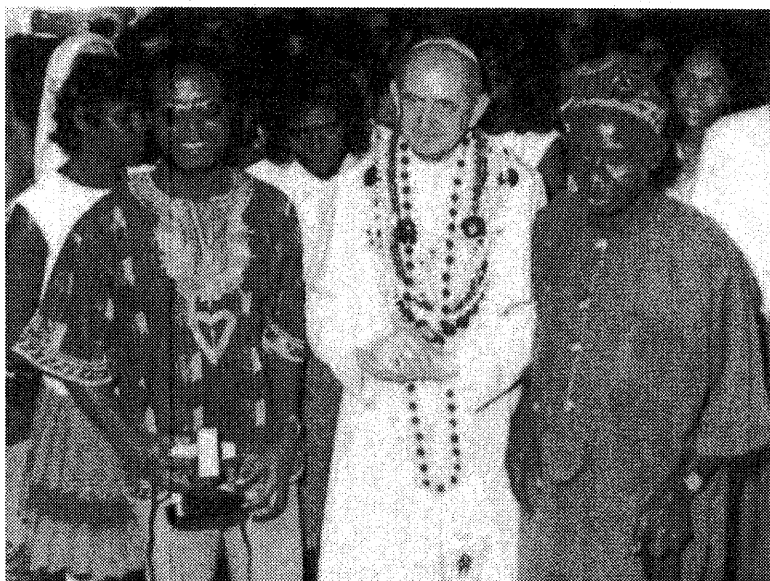
Blessing after First Mass in Rome
Italian Benefactors



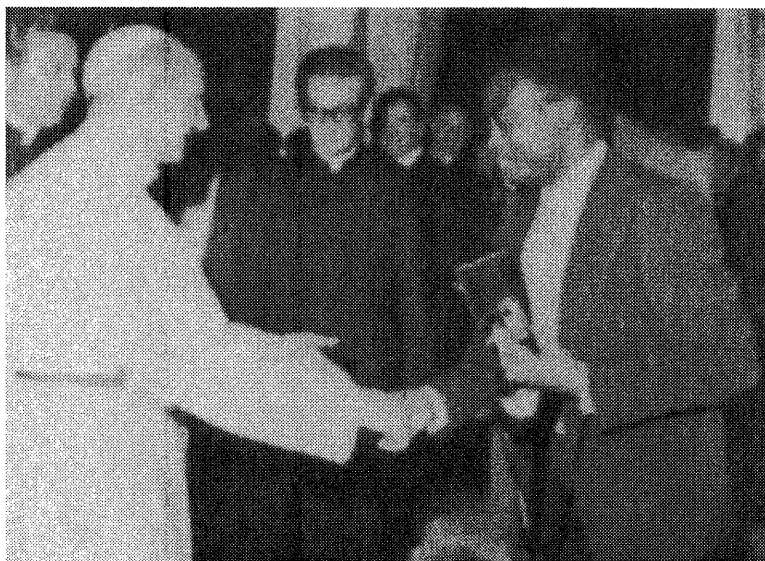
With Dad at the top floor - terrace of
Propaganda Fide - facing St. Peters



Dad receiving first Communion
at my first mass in Rome



Picture with Pope Paul VI - Dad and me flanking the Pope



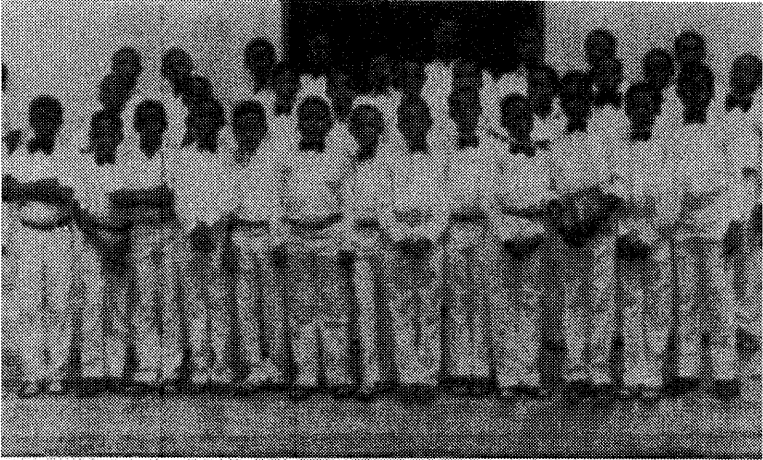
Posing as a visiting Journalist I was welcomed by the Pope at a special audience at the Vatican



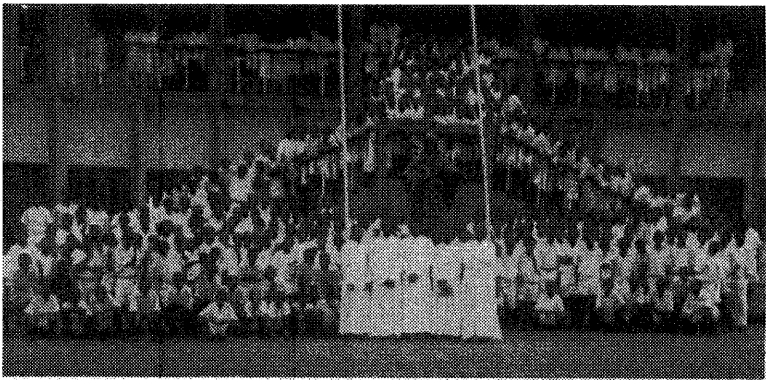
First Baptism as priest in Germany - Baptized Cerstin Klefenz



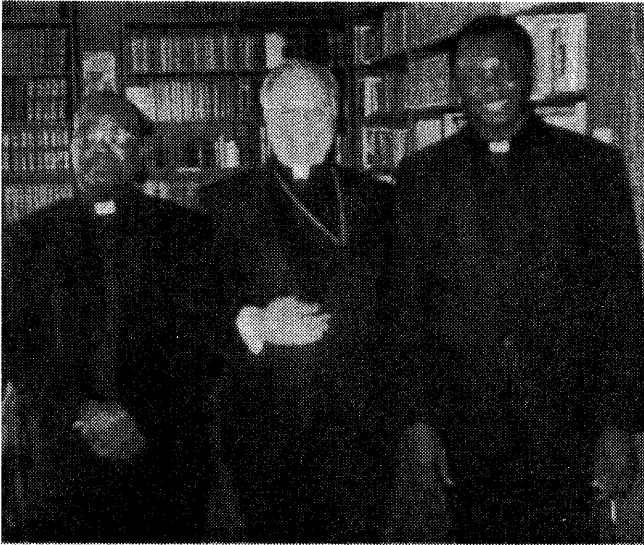
Rector - Bonus Pastor Seminary Osina - with
Bishop G.O. Ochiagha & Associate Fr. Brendan Diribe



First Year students at B.P.S. Osina



B.P.S. Osina - Main Seminary/Office Block



With Bishop Fabian Bruswinski of Lincoln NE. Me and Fr. Finnian



My Niece - Sister Prisca Igbozulike
of Notre Dame Sister



With Bishop Alex Brunett - former Bishop of Helena -
welcomed me to Butte



At St. Richards Church - Columbia Falls Montana



Playing Golf at the Meadow Lake Golf Course - Columbia Falls



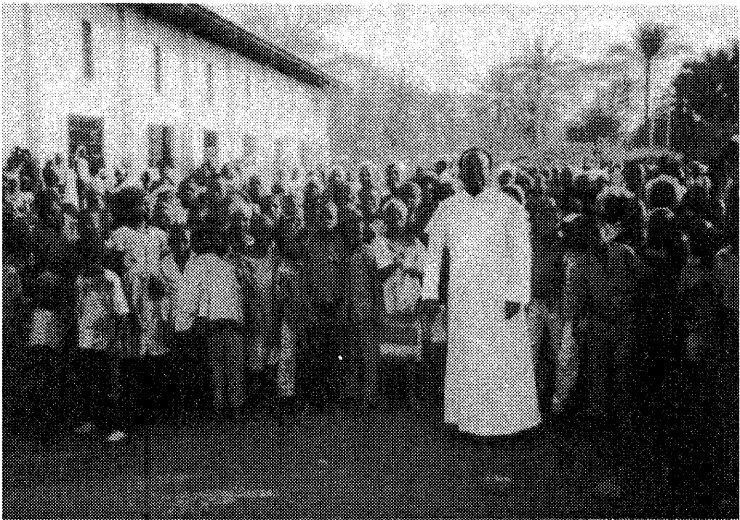
Celebrated independence day July 4 1999 with a caring family in
Columbia Falls, Montana



Traditional African Costume



Benefactors Elizabeth and
George Karback -
Fulda, Germany



After Childrens Mass at St. Mary's Osina

CHAPTER 10

THE LONDON AND RUSSIA EXPERIENCE

Students who worked harder and satisfied the conditions could sit for final exams ahead of the others. So I ended my studies in Rome a year ahead of my classmates. I could return to Nigeria or do extra studies. How to make best use of the rare opportunity? The rector promised to help me to find solutions. Two immediate predicaments were a scholarship and permission from my bishop to study in London. I feared the bishop might not render financial support or even grant the permission. To my great amazement, the rector volunteered to take care of both needs. He requested a scholarship from the Propaganda Fide on my behalf and produced sufficient reasons for the utility of the course I wanted to pursue in London. He also asked my bishop to grant permission for the one-year diploma course in education. Everything worked out fine.

The London study experience was fantastic with regard to exposure and what I learned there. The one-year in London could be compared to 7 - years of study in Italy. Another Nigerian priest decided with me to live in the hostels called Connaught Hall with the rest of the students. We concelebrated mass each morning in our rooms and never allowed the students to identify us as priests. We participated actively in the students' union activities and freely supported or opposed political theories, whether communist or imperialist.

The education course was exciting as well as enriching. The Diploma in Education was an intensive study embracing many areas of educational administration, curriculum studies, education in developed and developing countries, educational planning, philosophy, psychology, and sociology of education. Comparative education - the study of the different systems of education - definitely helped education planners select what is best for individual situations.

Philosophy and psychology of education exposed students to various theories of education and to some of the great minds in this area. In child psychology such names like Jean

Piaget, Jerome Bruner, Maria Montessori, and John Dewey, readily come to mind. Piaget, revered by generations of teachers, found the secrets of human learning and knowledge hidden behind cute but seemingly illogical notions of children. Piaget spent a lifetime listening to children to unravel their thought processes. Bruner, described as one of the two towering figures of 20th century psychology, was the founder of the Harvard Center for Cognitive Studies. As for Montessori, in her schools, teachers get out of the way and students learn at their own rate. Most of the educational theories we learned in London helped me later in both careers as priest and classroom teacher.

Institute of education organized workshops. They were exciting. We wrote essays on various topics, which were debated by students and professors. Once I presented a paper. In the paper titled "**Options in educational assessment,**" I had explored new methods of assessing students at the end of high school and college. I proposed ways of motivating students to study harder and prepare well for examinations. Such methods would equally help to eliminate examination malpractice.

Instead of the traditional way of setting examination papers and handing them to students a few minutes before the examination, I suggested that students should see the set questions even days before the examination. It was something similar to a system in China at the time. Students were free to solve problems themselves or find help from elsewhere. This system, limited to Mathematics and the Sciences, helped students to study hard. On the examination day they would not be allowed into the examination hall with anything. Writing materials would be provided. The same questions they had hitherto worked through would be presented to them again. Many professors and students thought the system was worth adopting in the various educational systems.

Obedience is better than sacrifice

While in London in 1978 finishing my studies in education, I received a letter from the bishop. He instructed that I should return home immediately. According to him, the diocese was

suffering from an acute shortage of personnel, especially in the seminary. The Claretian missionaries who tutored in the diocesan seminary had withdrawn their personnel for more urgent Apostolate outside Nigeria. The seminary could not afford to suffer any deprivation - staff, money, or necessary infrastructure. Without many priests-in-making any diocese could crumble. The bishop ordered me to stop whatever I was doing and take the next flight to Nigeria. I immediately replied, promising to return right after we finished the diploma exams. I also explained I would first have to go to Rome and collect the rest of my belongings.

I had never been known for disobeying my superiors. I took steps to make sure nothing delayed my journey home after seven years of fruitful studies in Europe. I cancelled the Masters degree program in which I had enrolled. Like elsewhere, my good relationship with superiors had also followed me to London. The dean of studies and head of department of education in developing countries, Mr. Holmes, had always been pleased with my performances.

When Mr. Holmes discovered I had cancelled my enrollment for the Masters program he called me to his office and asked why I would not finish up with the Masters Program. "This will help you much when you return to Nigeria," he said. "With your doctorate, you stand a good chance of contributing much in your country as an administrator of education or as a teacher." I told him that it would not be possible for me to continue the next year in the University of London Institute of Education.

Head of Department: Why?

Nathaniel: First, my scholarship was for one-year course in this University, and secondly, I am a priest and have to take orders from my superiors. My bishop has already written and instructed that I should return immediately (I finished the diploma course.)

HD: No. You have just one more year to finish your work on the Curriculum Studies. What you have written on "**Options in educational assessment**" and "**Educational Administration in Developing Countries**" will satisfy some of the requirements for Masters Certificate in Education.

Nathaniel (interrupting) What of scholarship?

HD: That is no problem. I will help secure a scholarship for you if you agree to do the Masters Program.

Nathaniel: Okay. I will think about it.

I gave up the attractive offer to pursue the Masters in Education in the University of London. Mr. Holmes was disappointed. He thought I was a crazy, infatuated religious man. I chose to return to Nigeria to help out in my diocese. That was the right decision. The saying in the Book of Samuel consoled me: "Obedience is better than sacrifice and to hearken than the fat of rams." (1 Samuel: 15.22). What was the worth of my academic certificates if I refused to obey my superiors and lost their love?

Visit to Ireland

While in London I made two important side trips, one to the Soviet Union and the other to Ireland. For most of us brought up by Irish missionaries, Ireland became a dreamland we always wanted to visit. Although history students know about the tragedy that impoverished the Irish people, we still thought the country was rich. Before the potato famine I imagined Ireland must have been the "Promised Land," like the United States of America today. The Irish people must have been a powerful people. Otherwise how could they survive British aggression and produce so many missionaries who went all over the world to bring the message of salvation to various peoples? Without Irish missionary activities most Africans would not have known the God of the Christians or known to read and write. Truly the Irish were great people.

In high school, we had learned the history of the Irish potato famine. The famine proved to be a watershed in the demographic history of Ireland and as a direct consequence, Ireland's population of more than 8,000,000 in 1844 had fallen to almost 7,000,000 by 1851. About 1,000,000 people died from starvation, or typhus or other famine-related diseases. The number of Irish who emigrated to North America and Britain reached 1.5 million. Ireland's population continued to decline in the following decades owing to overseas emigration and lower

birth rates. By the time Ireland achieved independence in 1921, its population was barely half of what it had been in the early 1840s.

The potato famine did not motivate my visit to Ireland. I wanted to visit the land of my great Irish missionary friends. I thought I might meet some who had probably retired long ago. What of the Holy Rosary Sisters who opened many convents, girls' high schools, domestic centers for women, and schools for the disabled etc? Could I find any of those wonderful sisters? What of Sister Mary Aloysius who built the first sisters' convent called "Holy Land" in our town? Could she be alive still? Bishop Shanahan, the pioneer missionary of Southern Nigeria immortalized by the two magnificent colleges in my town - Bishop Shanahan College and Bishop Shanahan Training College had died long ago. Probably most of the other missionaries I'd know were also gone.

The old Irish seminary colleges

When I visited Ireland in the Easter of 1978 I saw only a few retired missionaries at the Kimmage Manor, the old Seminary College that produced most of the earliest missionaries. The seminary was finally closed down and sold due to lack of vocations. Few of the priests were still living. In their younger years they ministered in Igboland. Though old and bedridden, some still remembered a few Igbo words and asked questions about friends they knew when they were in Igboland. Bishop Joseph B. Whelan was still healthy and active. He had been former bishop of Owerri and last Irish bishop in Igboland. He was the bishop to whom I sent my application for admission into the seminary in 1967.

Bishop Whelan truly identified with the Igbo cause during the Biafra war of secession (1968 - 1970) and was the head of the last group of Irish missionaries deported by the Nigerian government after the civil war. The bishop drove me in his car and showed me important Churches and places in Ireland. Before I went back to London I visited Kiltegan, a remote old missionary village. Like the Kimmage Manor, Kiltegan trained Saint Patrick's missionaries who operated in the South Eastern

Nigeria, among the Efiks and Ibibios. I visited many memorable old sites in Ireland.

Study trip to the Soviet Union

While in London, I also benefited from a study trip to the Soviet Union. It lasted two-weeks, taking us to Moscow and many important cities in Russia. It was in December, one of the coldest months. All the seas were frozen. Most people suffered cracked bleeding lips. Even though they gave us fur-like hats and heavy winter coats, most of us almost froze to death. I felt deeply sorry for the people living in that tundra region of the world.

In Leningrad, we heard a wonderful lecture on the contributions of communism to the modern world. The Russian education minister praised the architects of Marxism and Leninism and regretted that in the West people suffered a lot of deprivation, including lack of freedom. I was tempted to mock the speaker when he talked about lack of freedom in the West, but knew he was joking. I believed the Soviets and their allies should be pitied for lack of freedom and also on account of great deprivation. Everywhere I saw long queues of shoppers, some lines extending to one kilometer or more. What were they queuing for, we wondered?

Socialism in practice

In the Soviet "free world" one had to queue up to buy everything - bread, milk, butter, chocolate, soap, ice cream, meat, chewing gum and much more! Such commodities, usually in abundant supply in the West, were in short supply in the Soviet Socialist Republics. Around our hotels young people and con men always gathered in the evening whispering into our ears "dollar." They wanted to buy dollar. They were among the ubiquitous black marketers. But we had no dollars. We had been warned never to speak to anybody. The KGB was everywhere we were told. Soviet custom required travelers to exchange all foreign currencies at the port of entry. Officials took back the Russian rubles to control illegal money transactions.

Most of us did not witness many "evils" associated with communism during the Cold War. The professor who led our trip advised we should not take any articles of religious practice, including bibles, prayer books, sacramentals, like rosaries and medals. The other Catholic priest and I ignored the warnings of the professor. We put small tables together in our hotel and celebrated morning mass everyday just as we did in London. The workers saw us and knew what were doing. No one questioned us. Contrary to Cold War reports most Churches we saw remained in tact. The pews and altars looked as if no one had touched them since the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution. Many Churches however had been converted to Museums.

Members of our group were stunned by the Soviets' good organization and amount of order we saw there. Unlike in the West we did not see any obscene sites and pictures. People looked more disciplined. Was their general comportment a result of the "police state?" We gave them credit for good administration at the borders or ports of entry.

Many years before, I had obtained an international passport in Nigeria. With it I had traveled to Israel, Greece, England, Ireland, Yugoslavia, Italy, Germany, France, Holland, Austria, and Switzerland and no one, not even the customs officials, discovered that my passport had no official seal of the country of origin. The Soviets finally caught the mistake.

In trouble with Customs officials

Most of our group encountered no problems at the customs when we arrived at the Moscow international airport. To my great dismay everyone watched in horror as the customs police questioned only one person: me! What offense had I committed? They didn't find anything illegal when they were searching my suitcase. I was sure they saw my rosary and prayer books, but didn't take any close look at those items. They only examined my passport passing it from one desk to the other. They closely examined it. I could not guess what the trouble was all about.

Many questions ran through my mind. Perhaps they wouldn't allow a Nigerian. But my colleague had passed over unquestioned and Nigeria had good diplomatic relations with the

Soviet Union. While submitting our documents for the visa in London, students who applied were clearly told that some countries described as "unfriendly to the Soviets" would not be issued with visa. One of those "unfriendly countries" was South Africa. As a result of that country's Apartheid policy those days the Soviet Union had no diplomatic relation with South Africa. They wouldn't admit South African citizens into the Soviet borders.

Then one of the customs officials brought a translator who spoke a little English. He demanded other documents I had brought with me. I showed all my student identity cards from Nigeria, Rome and London. They demanded my driving license which I showed them. They seemed to be looking for more when I reluctantly brought out my certificate of ordination, issued in Rome. It was a small beautifully designed card showing that we were ordained by Pope Paul VI.

With all the documents spread out on their table they compared one with the other and at the same time carefully checked the photos with my face to see that there was no discrepancy. When they finally appeared satisfied with their meticulous investigation, they called their chief officer and pointed at my passport picture affixed on the second page of my passport. Then the translator said: "Look, there is no seal on it. They did not stamp it. If unstamped the passport is not valid..."

Who did not stamp it? Who did not put his seal on it? Why did no one discover this anomaly in the past 15 years or so? These questions and others worried me. It was a true discovery and only the Soviets could have made it! All the members of our group were happy with the outcome of the investigation and heaved a sigh of relief as all ended well. I thought they would have deported me. Thanks be to God that I carried many other identity cards, otherwise no one could have predicted what those customs officials would have done with the unfortunate African.

CHAPTER 11

A NEW KING WHO DID NOT KNOW JOSEPH

"Now a new king arose over Egypt, who did not know Joseph," so opens the account of the predicament of the chosen people of God in the book of Exodus. And with that change in Egyptian rulership the fortunes of the Hebrews or Israelites would never be the same. In this part of my story, I likened the king to then bishop of the old Owerri diocese, Nigeria. The "Joseph" was Nathaniel. Everything happened so quickly and like in a dream seemed not to be true. All the favors, the tremendous and impeccable relationships I enjoyed with my superiors for many years, simply vanished into a thin air.

A poisonous concoction

Things took a dramatic turn as I returned to Nigeria and took up assignment as classroom teacher in our minor seminary. It was like an African poisonous concoction, effectively administered, which paralyzes its victim and often leads to his death. Human beings are fragile creatures in many ways. They are easily prejudiced and jealous. They can be unforgiving, adamant, vindictive, and vicious. The administrator of the poison was my predecessor, then rector of St. Peter Claver Seminary, Okpala, the diocesan minor seminary. The poison worked.

There was nothing particularly exciting about my assignment at Okpala. I taught class 2 and 3 students religion and class 2 English. There were no extracurricular activities. I had a lot of free periods and completely free weekends. I visited my family at weekends and also friends who had large parishes where I helped out in Sunday masses. The rector of the seminary or one other priest in the staff usually celebrated the students' Sunday mass. During the weekdays we concelebrated while the rector celebrated privately in the sacristy.

One day a priest on the staff told me that since I came to the seminary the rector had not been comfortable. I asked what

was causing the discomfort. He explained the rector suspected the bishop recalled me from Europe and appointed me to the seminary staff to replace him as the rector. I told the friend I had no discussion with the bishop. When I inquired what I should do in the seminary, the bishop responded: "Go there and teach. The rector will tell you the subjects to teach." I explained that the bishop never told me that I would replace anybody as rector. But the priest insisted that the rector was not happy.

When I called one of the senior prefects and questioned him, the boy confirmed the priest's story. I was terribly upset. The prefect said the rector had told the students during a conference that any student who visited me or the other priests would be expelled.

I looked at the boy in amazement. "Why?" He explained that the rector thought that students liked me and might prefer taking instructions from me. Such development might mar his authority and respect. I could not believe what the prefect told me. Everything sounded Greek to me and smelt fetish, too.

Organized protest march to the bishop

In order to discredit me, the rector organized an incredible protest march. He first drafted a letter of protest outlining his reasons why my presence might not be in the best interest of the seminary. He shared the contents of the letter with the leaders in case the bishop questioned them about their "mission." He sent a selected group of senior students with this letter to the bishop at Owerri. Here is the substance:

His Excellency, Most Rev. Bishop

Re - The seminary at risk - a dangerous member on the staff

Since you brought Father Nathaniel to Okpala seminary a lot of things are not going well here. The seminarians are no more as obedient and disciplined as they used to be. This Western trained doctor theologian does "strange things" which in our judgement are not good for our students and the priestly decorum. For example, he joins the students

at manual labor and at games. He even likes to eat with them in the students' refectory. Perhaps he does these things to look popular among students so that the students would find reasons to discredit the other priests on the staff. We don't know how this seminary will look like if this new Father stays longer here. The worst is that he does not put on his cassocks while coming to class - like the other priests on the staff. If no action is taken the students might revolt and that will not augur well with Okpala seminary, which had produced more than 90% of priests and bishops, West of the Niger River.

The students on delegation rode to Owerri in the seminary bus. They were instructed never to let me know about it. One other priest knew about the event. But not all prefects agreed to carry out the orders, in spite of the threat of expulsion. One told me about it and called the plans wicked, scandalous, mischievous, and devilish. He refused to be a party to wicked designs by people who called themselves ministers of God.

I was dumbfounded when I heard what transpired. The bishop did not summon me for questioning. He apparently believed the rector's letter. I was a very dangerous man who should be closely watched

Things Fall Apart

The presence of "the king who did not know Joseph" created a situation, which henceforth had a tremendous negative effect on the rest of my life as a priest. At a twinkling of the eye, I had lost all favors, exalted positions as my superiors' closest aide and most trusted friend that I had enjoyed in Nigeria and Europe. The bishop obviously had made up his mind about me and he would not easily change it. He was in fact nicknamed "stiff neck!" If he ever entertained plans of making me rector, that issue became remote and unreal.

When another priest on the staff boldly confronted the rector, the rector retorted the bishop had planned to replace him with Nathaniel. He insisted that was the bishop's plan. He was convinced that the bishop would not bring a priest more qualified than the rector simply to teach religion. If the bishop had no

ulterior motive, he would have sent me to the senior seminary to teach theology.

After a few weeks the rector resigned and left the seminary. With his action some people suspected the bishop's plans had materialized and that Father Nathaniel's dreams had come true. But far from that. Dreams are dreams especially when they occur during the day. Alas! Just the opposite came true. The bishop, like Pharaoh hardened his heart.

The impossible rector

Father Ndiokwere was not appointed rector. Another priest on the staff became "interim" rector pending the appointment of a "permanent" rector when new priestly locations would be published at the end of the year. I continued to do my job as a teacher without any grudges. Then the new locations appeared. I was the third priest among the four who remained in the seminary staff. Another priest finishing his studies in the United States became the new rector. But rumors spread this new rector might not come back as early as expected. It could be two or more years! The bishop faced a dilemma. The "acting rector" was too inexperienced to conduct the affairs of the seminary for that long. Then I got a message the bishop wanted to see me.

Bishop: I am afraid whether you can handle the job of the rector of the seminary. However I will like you to take up the burden from the present "acting rector."

Nathaniel: (hiding his feelings of hate inside said nothing.)

Bishop: I hope you will be able to control the boys...

Nathaniel: (In his mind completed the bishop's statement "until the new rector returns")

My tarciturnous composure compounded the bishop's suspicions and prejudices against me. I was deeply aggrieved, humiliated and considered resigning and moving out of the seminary. The bishop's notion I could not handle the job as rector infuriated me.

But instead of refusing the assignment I decided to accept the challenge. In a short time I would demonstrate to the

bishop and those who thought like him that they had totally misguided impressions about me.

The glorious days of Okpala

The rest of my time at Okpala will still be examined in other chapters. They included the happiest moments of my life as a priest. The boys were motivated to study, to work, to enjoy games, and many social activities. They participated in inter-seminary and secondary school sports competitions and brought home trophies. We organized social activities, film shows, birthday parties, and parents' day activities. The dormitories or hostels and the entire compound assumed a new look. Even Saturday hostel inspections motivated boys to practice basic hygiene and to keep the seminary environment clean. They enjoyed the exercises. Everyone got an assignment which helped to train them as future leaders - the auxiliary, house prefects and captains, social prefects, labor masters, water prefects, sacristans, engine boys, librarians, lavatorians, farm and orchard masters. Inter-house sports became a cherished spectacular event in the year and the townspeople always came to witness them. Winners received durable prizes.

Seminarians who committed offenses or broke serious seminary rules and regulations were cautioned and helped to change. Only truly incorrigible ones were expelled, mainly pilferers. Those expelled were given sufficient reasons "why they were not called to the priestly life." They left without grudges. Many felt thankful they were not compelled to become priests against their wishes.

Once I expelled one of my best students because he violated a serious regulation. He left the seminary in two occasions without permission. Later I repented because the boy was misled by a bad friend. I recalled him after 5 weeks and he eventually became a priest. Another boy said he didn't think he had the vocation. But I assured him he did and encouraged him. He succeeded. I knew the job of the rector extended to counseling and guiding students to make the right choice of career.

The public address system

The bishop was never generous, so I often used my own money for some of the seminary needs. I used the car I brought home from Europe throughout the time I was rector. When it got old, the bishop did not help me get a new one.

When I saw that there was no public address system in the chapel or the hall, I asked for money to buy one. "The diocese has no money" was the usual response. Incredibly, Okpala seminary founded in the early 1930s and once a major seminary for the Eastern ecclesiastical province, did not have any public address system. Whenever the bishop came to celebrate mass he brought his own portable address system. I made up my mind to provide an expensive and durable one for the seminary.

When the bishop later came to celebrate for the students I saw his driver carrying the bishop's personal address system to the chapel. I told him we didn't need theirs. I had bought and installed the most suitable public address system in the seminary chapel. The bishop was amazed when I handed the microphone to him at the beginning of the mass. "Where did you get the money for this expensive system?" God provided the money, I murmured and moved to my seat near the sanctuary.

I did much at Okpala, which stunned the bishop and perhaps helped him to change his mind about me. It was indeed necessary to work hard to uplift the image of the seminary. It had suffered a lot of neglect in the past and there was need for a revolution.

CHAPTER 12

THE OKPALA MISSION

I accepted the humiliation from the bishop with equanimity. He did not trust me and in fact he must have thought that I would be an incompetent and irresponsible rector. But in the depths of my heart I knew that he was totally mistaken. I prepared to change his mind, and convince him that the "revolution" I planned to carry out in the seminary would uplift the image of the institution rather than degrade it.

White man's style

After my studies in Europe my childhood fantasies about the "white man" turned into realities. Except for some white politicians, the terrible fraudulent business masters, white racists and supremacists, I have admired the white people. They may not be of impeccable character, but I think many whites are basically good people. Most are hardworking, trustworthy, truthful, sympathetic, and charitable.

Maybe in my naiveté I trusted the white person so much that I often used him as a paradigm, an archetype, of a role model. I taught my students at Okpala that we should apply some of the white man's principles to make the seminary an ideal place to be admired by everybody within and outside our diocese. The ideology worked to a great extent. I told my students that we should copy the white man's good qualities, including hard work, straightforward life, discipline, cleanliness, honesty, and punctuality. For example, I warned my students that I would not tolerate "African time" in the seminary. I contrasted white man's virtues with some vices with which unfortunately most Africans are identified - ineptitude, inefficiency, irresponsibility, dishonesty, deviousness, and crookedness.

Igbo people refer to the Hausa of Nigeria as "people with one ear" and warn anyone doing business with the Hausa. What does this mean? Is the Igbo ridiculing the Hausa or expressing admiration? It could be both! "One ear" simply means that he is

not a devious fellow. They say that the Hausa in his dealings with other people is a perfect example of someone to be trusted. In fact many rich Igbo landlords in the big cities employ the services of the Hausa Mallam when security is at stake in households, as well as industrial complexes. While a government-paid security agent would not be trusted with the safety of anything; the Hausa Mallam is preferred. He guards his master's belongings as instructed. He rarely turns traitor or saboteur. Hausa trustworthiness is therefore a virtue that most honest people cherish.

A true revolution

My system of thought and action was a departure from the old ways of doing things in the seminary. I learnt a lot of good things while I was in Europe, which I put into practice. There should be more action than words.

In the white man's land for example, I informed students, the big professionals, the engineers, workers of all grades rarely sit idle in their air-conditioned offices examining papers and ordering their messengers about. Civil engineers are seen on the construction sites, where they work hand in hand with foremen and others. White engineers do not dress in suits. They wear jeans and rough clothes. They have no chauffeurs. Instead they drive themselves in rough and dirty trucks and jeeps, which are most suitable for their jobs.

I made it clear to the boys I would not be an "office rector" dressing in immaculate white cassocks and sitting in an office to receive visitors or students. I would teach as well as administer. I would use all available tools and apply all educational theories to motivate students. Once I boasted:

Listen boys. I am the promised messiah sent to rescue you from your state of imbecility. I have come to open your blind eyes and deaf ears. After I have taught you and you fail to improve you should go and commit suicide. After handling you boys and any of you fails to learn or show evidence of progress it would be a calamity. The only option would be for such students to march down the Okpala River behind the

seminary and weep their tears into that river. Tell God I am the most unfortunate fellow in this world!

Although my words were meant to tease the boys, most were not amused or insulted. They took my words to heart. To this day most who write me continue to recall this portion of my speech.

Putting my words into action became a challenge I relished. I acted not to impress the skeptical bishop or to curry favors from him. I carried out my duties as rector as I thought best for the Church and the younger generation of priests and missionaries. I promoted vocation to the priesthood. Those who failed to become priests should not be cast away. If they were well treated and helped, they too, could be useful to the local and universal Church as lay persons.

Simplicity and hard work

My philosophy departed radically from the old ways of doing things where authorities lorded it over students. One virtue I put into practice was **simplicity**. Students and rector worked together, washing toilets, cutting grass in the fields, clearing weeds from the seminary farms, planting yams and cassava, corn and vegetables. The Okpala soil was among the most fertile in that part of the world. The seminary acquired large portions of land, donated by one good old man - Mazi Azunna. He was the darling of the early missionaries and the seminarians loved him. Some of the land remained fallow for years. But the good old Irish missionaries did put the land into good use. They planted palm trees, which supplied the much-needed oil for the seminary kitchen. But when the whites left for their homeland, that palm plantation project was abandoned by the blacks who took over the administration of the seminary.

Father Ndiokwere - the new rector and Father Justin Agu - the parish priest of Okpala and industrious seminarians revamped the palm plantation project. Seminarians climbed the trees, trimmed and cut the ripped fruits which the Okpala Christian women processed. Students learned to work. The seminary saved money.

"The rector who taught my son to work"

Once I visited one of my students, Brian. He was not at home. But the grandpa was in. Upon inquiry the grandpa was told Brian's rector was looking for his son. The old man got up from his chair and in ecstasy asked: "Is that the Master who taught Brian to work?" He grabbed me and poured countless blessings on my head: "God will bless you. God will keep you alive. God will reward you for the miracles you are doing. You are a true Man of God. Sit down, my son and let me find kola for you."

Most seminarians liked the idea of their rector working side by side with them. Others thought I should stay in the office. I was usually present during labor and extracurricular activities to motivate the boys. I tried to lead by example.

One day a man came to visit his son. He wanted to see the rector too. But I was not in the office. The receptionist came to me in the seminary farm and said a parent wanted to see me. "Tell him to come here," I directed the messenger. The parent reluctantly met me at the farm. I started to address him. He interrupted telling me he wanted to see the rector. "Here I am. I am the rector."

He was stunned. After our discussion he went away with mixed feelings. The man later told the receptionist that "his eyes had seen his ears," a mesmerizing way the Igbo people express shock at the extraordinary. The man had never before seen a rector work with the boys in the field.

Labor became one of the most popular extracurricular activities in the seminary. No student dogged work. In fact most looked forward to labor. Some teachers and prefects joined in the supervision of work. Often students waited anxiously for the labor bell. They competed for the best equipment like barrows, shovels, diggers, and big knives, which I provided in abundance.

The students enjoyed the seminary environment - the football fields, the tennis courts, the grass plots and the avenues lined up with planted flowers and whistling palm trees. They went on evening strolls on small well-trimmed pathways in the palm plantations. They claimed their seminary was the cleanest among all in Nigeria! Such sentiments spoke loudly about students' satisfaction with the revolution going on. They

cherished the institution with utmost respect, affection, and nostalgia.

Environmental sanitation

Innovations were carried beyond Okpala. I introduced them in Osina where I was rector for 13 years. The students appreciated clean environment. One of the greatest tragedies to paralyze Nigerian villages and cities is not poverty. It is filthiness. Garbage and unkempt roads that greet any visitor to this big country would make one lose appetite. In many Nigerian cities, good and evil dwell together. Could anyone bring change to a culture where an unhealthy environment was accepted? Perhaps. I thought one could begin with the kids most of whom had not been taught basic hygiene. And it worked!

In most Nigerian cities the sight of a well-dressed gentleman urinating into the gutters or grassy plots did not worry people. However at Okpala students imbibed some environmental sanitation discipline. They learned to view urinating in public with horror and did not tolerate such behavior from visitors in their seminary.

At Osina one story circulated for long. A visitor there ventured to urinate on a grass plot. His shameless behavior horrified the younger boys. They took stones and pelted the unfortunate visitor who scampered away, trying to put his "big man" (genitalia) back into his pants.

On two occasions some Osina students refused to use restrooms at another seminary they visited during inter-seminary sports competition and football. The boys complained those toilets and environment were filthy and did not look decent like theirs at home. Most wanted to responded to nature's call only when they got back to their own seminary. Some did not eat in that seminary's refectory after they discovered old scraps of food and filth.

When another seminary visited Osina, the visitors believed the "compound" they saw was not "ordinary." One said it was a Polytechnic or small university. The Osina boys were glad beyond measure to hear such comments from their counterparts. As for me I was satisfied. I agreed with the

Nigerian military authorities who decreed "a clean-up exercise" in every Nigerian city and village at the last Saturday of every month. Our people need a healthy environment and that culture must be inculcated into our kids as early as possible.

The Latin palaver: facing the challenges

Our experiment on environmental sanitation and labor proved beyond reasonable doubt that African children, like their counterparts everywhere could learn well if they were taught and motivated. They are not blockheads and some are geniuses.

At Okpala I taught English and Mathematics - two tough subjects that often marred the progress of students. Without credits in these two subjects a student likely could not gain admission into any higher institution of learning. The major seminaries are even stricter. Most of my students did well in these two subjects.

The greatest snag in their academic pursuit was Latin. Even though most western seminaries and ecclesiastical institutions had done away with Latin in their curriculum, since the Vatican II, major seminary authorities in Nigeria had insisted on a credit or at least a pass in Latin.

Before I joined the Okpala teaching-staff, students had not been able to participate for three consecutive years in what they called diploma exam in Latin. A body set up by the major seminaries in then Onitsha ecclesiastical province organized this examination for final year students. I learned Okpala students could not participate because there was no one to teach Latin in the seminary. None of the three younger priests in the seminary staff would prepare them for the Latin exams. The priests claimed they had forgotten their Latin! One volunteer gave up after a few weeks of attempt. He claimed the students were ignoramuses and he could not help them. I was depressed.

Latin tutor and administrator

I took Latin classes in Secondary School. I knew it was an important subject for any aspirant to the priesthood. Another important subject was Literature in English. When I chose nine

subjects for my own West African School Certificate Examinations I included Latin and Literature in English. At the end of my Junior High school authorities dropped Latin from the list of subjects offered.

We had a wonderful Latin teacher whom we nicknamed "Quamquam." Some students called him "Mensa." He used these two words often and we admired his knowledge. "Quamquam" had dropped out of seminary after taking his General Certificate of Education exams. In most Secondary Schools in Nigeria French replaced Latin, which was considered an archaic language. French, they thought would be more useful to students. Although the Latin students regretted this development, I was not much worried. I knew what we had already learned was sufficient for a serious student to read, write and translate Latin classics and important Latin documents. I did not forget. I kept my Latin textbooks.

At Okpala, I decided to prepare students myself for the Latin diploma exams, since I couldn't persuade the other priests to teach Latin. I visited home, searched my secondary school textbooks and found my Latin textbooks as well as the numerous notes Mr. Quamquam had prepared for us. I found my old notes on Caesar's Gallic Wars and other classics. I was overjoyed.

After a few weeks of review, I stood before the boys and taught Latin. It worked perfectly. I removed a few poorer students and encouraged the rest to work terribly hard to prepare for exams in a few months' time. Class five Latin students enjoyed no break at Easter and worked late in the night.

The result was superb. The students themselves continued to recount the story whenever I later met them, whether priests or lay men. They were among my best Latin students those days.

The rest my time at Okpala must be described as a momentous period in my priesthood. I proved to the skeptical bishop that I was not a busybody, an incompetent or a good-for-nothing cleric. I acted as administrator and classroom teacher. I put into practice all I learned about educational administration and curriculum planning in London. I now taught Latin, Math, the two subjects I had cherished much in my high school days, 15 years earlier.

Preparing for the computer age

I knew the importance of "New Mathematics" in our high school system in Nigeria. I realized early the implications of "**Binary Arithmetic**" as the students referred to that part of New Mathematics. I warned my students both at Okpala and Osina that they had a lot to lose if they hated Math. Without knowing it, I taught my students something related to the modern digital computers. Everything a digital computer does is based on one operation - the ability to determine if a switch, or "gate" is open or closed, on or off - 0 or 1.

When we were playing with systems of numerical notations to base 2, in which each place of a number, expressed as 0 or 1 corresponds to a power of 2 and so on the students never knew that they were being initiated into the new digital computer systems. Binary system is a code; the alphabet of electronic computers, the basis of the language into which all information is translated, stored, and used within a computer. Any kind of information can be converted into numbers using only 0s and 1s. These are the binary numbers - numbers composed entirely of 0s and 1s. Each 0 or 1 is called a bit. Once the information has been converted, it can be fed to and stored in computers as long strings of bits. Those numbers are all that's meant by "digital information."

Most of the above stuff sounded Greek to most of my students and I couldn't blame them. I didn't even realize what I was doing when I asked my students in Math class to convert for example, 10001001, a binary number to ordinary number or 137 to binary number! When I got my first personal computer in 1994 the process became clearer to me. Some of my students later reported what I taught them helped them pass Mathematics in School Certificate Examinations.

I knew the computer would revolutionize the world and dramatically change the ways humans do certain things. Those who failed to keep up would be left behind. So I began early to introduce my students to the keyboard. I purchased old and new typewriters and introduced typing school in the seminary, forced the more brilliant students to register for lessons. Only a few

students saw sense in what I was doing. Others mocked and complained that I was overburdening or harassing them. The wise students still write to thank me for "making them what they are today." One of the boys wrote, 25th April 1999.

Rev. and Dearest Fr.

Greetings from Bonus Pastor Seminary - your "Brain Work." I am Hilary Umeoka writing. I am quite sure you remember me.

Father, I am writing to express my unalloyed gratitude to you for all you did for us when we were with you at Osina. You taught us Latin, and Math. You forced me to learn the organ and typing. By then I didn't know anything and did not appreciate your efforts. Now all those things have helped me.

Now I am posted to teach at Bonus Pastor Seminary after my Class Six at Umuowa. I passed out with 6 alphas including English and Math and Credits in Agricultural Science, Literature in English and Igbo. I am doing my one-year Apostolic Work at Osina. I am the Latin teacher and Music master.

What a wonderful thing you have done for me when we were at Osina those days!!! I am just trying my best to give out what you taught me in Latin language.

Dear Father, I am making a request. I want to learn more Latin and teach the boys well. I need good Latin textbooks. I need a typewriter and a small piano. If possible, Fr. I will be glad to receive help from you.

I am still thanking you again and again for forcing me to learn things. I remembered when we used to be on extension to learn these things. Now I am back at Osina teaching these subjects you taught us! Thanks be to God. Fr. I hope to receive words of encouragement from you. Thanks.

Your Seminarian

Hilary Umeoka

French and English Languages

Along with avoiding Latin and Math most students also hated French. One year at Okpala none of more than 150 students registered for French. Although French was compulsory for all students, they were not required to register for it in their final exams. Because of my experiences in Europe, I pleaded with the brighter students to put interest in French and to take the exams in their School Certificate. They all ignored me.

I applied force to compel three of the brightest students to register for French. They reluctantly agreed. All three made A's in French. They still thank me for forcing them to learn the language. As I was writing this chapter two are priests on mission in French speaking African countries while the 3rd is pursuing language-related studies in the United States. They speak and write perfect French.

When students performed poorly in English, this usually affected their future career as priestly candidates or lay persons. I revived the dead library. The seminary purchased new books and novels in large quantities. I encouraged seminarians to borrow books and read on regular basis. The seminary also subscribed to local magazines and newspapers. Many students benefited a lot from our library program. Without blowing my trumpet too loudly I believe the legacy I left at Okpala would not be easily surpassed.

When the new diocese of Orlu was created I was ready to move to my native diocese and work for its development. By then the old bishop regretted his persecutions and distrust of me. He called me one of his best priests and tried to persuade me and 2 others from Orlu to stay to help him in the old diocese. But none of us gave in to his pressures and tricks. We quickly packed our belongings and settled in our new diocese.

I have continued to receive numerous letters from my past students - priests and laymen. Most of the ex-students are studying or working in Nigeria and overseas. As I learned from one of them, the ex-students of Bonus Pastor Seminary, Osina had formed an Association of ex-alumni of their cherished

seminary. I would be glad to attend their meeting one day and address them.

It is impossible to publish even a small number of their letters here. One such letter speaks for many.

Dear Father Rector "Dr" Ndiokwere

I must start by thanking God for his infinite mercies in letting me come across one of my classmates at Okpala where you were our rector and guardian. Father I was overwhelmed with joy when Francis visited me at my home and told me that you were presently spending your sabbatical in the United States of America. I decided immediately to write and express my immense joy and thanks to you for what you did for us and particularly for me at Okpala - how you baked us, molded us and gave us sound education. We cannot forget you.

Some of us who understood what you were saying benefited from your instructions and guidance. I still remember most of the things you told us. Once you warned us: "After I have taught you, after the seminary career, whether you succeeded as a priest or not, you must have learnt a lot from me, something which will guide you through life. Anyone who refused to understand will have himself to blame. Such people must move down to the Okpala River and weep their tears into the running waters!"

Father those words, the idioms and parables you told us have continued to guide most of us who listened to you. Father, God will continue to bless you in Jesus name. I feel so proud whenever I remember you - why because almost all those things you told us are happening every blessed day. Thank you very much.

I am now in Abia State University, doing Public Administration. I am in the third year now. You really prepared and cooked us well. Father more grease to your elbows. I am so overwhelmed not only because you were our rector; Francis told me you are now author of many books. I shall be proud to promote your publications and tell people the author was once my rector. I will be happy to have your works in my library.

At the Crossroads

I have neither gold nor silver to offer you, but may the good Lord reward you abundantly for what you have been to most of your children. I am proud to remain a happy, proud student of yours and promise never to let you down.

Your former student

Ejeah Maurison E.

CHAPTER 13

PROBLEMS OF LEADING BY EXAMPLE

There is nowhere to hide. Any officer entrusted with authority whether in the private or public sector carries a lot of responsibilities. He is expected to lead by example. The matter may be more complicated for him if his burden includes that of seeing to the moral, social, cultural, academic, and spiritual development of those under him. The burden becomes even more serious if it has to do with forming or nurturing the future religious and church leaders.

The burden of being a rector and spiritual formator of would-be Catholic priests has been a great responsibility for church leaders of every caliber and level of authority. The leader or the spiritual guardian of young people - like seminarians or aspirants to the religious life - has great influence on the young ones. He is the master, leader, and father that they must emulate and love. He is their mentor, the light, the salt. And when the salt becomes tasteless, it is worthless and could only be thrown into the trash bin.

There are many church leaders involved in the spiritual formation of seminarians. In every parish community these leaders include the catechists, station teachers, Christian mothers and fathers. Many pious associations also take interest in the spiritual formation of seminarians. But the most important person who exercises an enduring influence on seminarians is the priest. He has the best contact with them and the young fellows know him very well. Seminarians sometimes spend vacations with their parish priests.

They, along with house servants, are the priest's nearest "associates." They observe his life. They know who his friends and enemies are. They know what he eats and how he spends money. Most importantly they know his weaknesses and when he goofs. If the parish priest would be held partly responsible for the seminarian's success or failure in life, the rector may be fully held responsible in the same case. It has always been a big challenge to all seminary formators.

Leading by example - "Do what they teach?"

I have always been troubled by many paradoxes I see in the public and private lives of people entrusted with authority. Jesus' words on scandal are indeed scary: "If any of you put a stumbling block before one of these little ones who believe in me, it would be better for you if a great millstone were fastened around your neck and you were drowned in the depth of the sea" (Matt: 18.6). How could one preach what one cannot practice? This, surely is part of the dilemma of the Man of God.

In denouncing the Scribes and Pharisees, Christ points out the seriousness of this dilemma: "They tie up heavy burdens, hard to bear, and lay them on the shoulders of others; but they themselves are unwilling to lift a finger or move them" (Matt: 23.4). Christ further recommended "Do whatever they teach you and follow it; but do not do as they do, for they do not practice what they teach" (Matt: 23.3). The leader is the guide, the light, and the way. He is presumed to "see" better than those he leads. The consequences can be catastrophic if the leader becomes blind. Christ pointed out "And if one blind person guides another, both will fall into a pit" (Matt: 15.14).

Giving up smoking for the sake of the Kingdom

When we were studying overseas some of us experimented with smoking. Cigarettes cost little in the Vatican shops. Priests and seminarians studying in any of the Pontifical Universities in Rome enjoyed many privileges. They often purchased their needs from Vatican related business houses, paying little or no taxes. Unlike in many Nigerian major seminaries where smoking is forbidden, the practice was allowed by the Roman authorities. In Urban College the vice-rectors sold cigarettes to students. While in Rome I joined the crowd and smoked.

I was not an addict but kept smoking for a while when I got back to Nigeria. There was a snag with this habit as I moved to the seminary. I knew it was an expulsion offense to smoke in

the seminary. But in the major seminary I had observed some students, including deacons smoked. They always hid in the toilets, but the smell permeated most places. Some went into the open field at dead night to smoke. Others did so when they went out on a walk.

I had to give up smoking; otherwise I could hardly forbid students. It was not an easy decision. I dillydallied when a weekend trip home forced a quick decision. My mother confronted me: "You people are supposed to teach young people to avoid smoking. You know the diseases associated with smoking." She enumerated some: lung cancer, asthma, and heart diseases. "Since you returned from Europe I have noticed you are smoking. You never did it before you went overseas. Now you have acquired this undesirable habit. Each time you return home you pollute the whole house with your cigarettes..." My mother's admonishment convinced me to end my procrastination and quit for good. I had to lead by example.

Controlling female visitors

How the Man of God relates with women has long been a controversial issue in the history of celibacy in the Catholic church. It also has great impact on the attitude of seminarians as they struggle to live up to expectations. During my tenure as rector of St. Peter Claver Seminary Okpala and Bonus Pastor Seminary, Osina, I supervised two to five priests in the teaching staff. Some were older than I, so reprimanding them was especially difficult. But we leaders had to follow rules we made for our students, even concerning priests' relationships with females.

A Father's female visitor was beaten up

The priests of the Okpala seminary agreed that female visitors should not stay overnight in the seminary. If necessary female visitors should find accommodation in the town. Female visitors should be received only in the fathers' visitors-room. Like Caesar's wife, the priests should be above suspicion. But not

everybody observes rules or keeps laws. Some break the rules with reckless abandon and suffer the consequences.

One particular priest on the staff was known to be friendly with a notorious girl in his former parish. Those who knew their story claimed the bishop removed this young man from his parish and brought him to the seminary to salvage his reputation. The girl had allegedly ruined the priest's life, by controlling and ordering him about. The priest always obeyed. She took money from the parish funds.

But simple removal of the priest from his former parish did not solve this problem. The girl followed him wherever he went. Now she regularly visited him at the seminary. Everybody from students to house-boys knew.

Reports circulated about their affairs exploits. When I was in, she never approached the seminary premises because she feared me. But when I was away, particularly on extended trips overseas, the girl usually moved right in. During my long vacation spent in Germany, she moved into the seminary and ordered the house-boys about. The boys were to provide everything she needed - food, drinks, and sundries. They washed her clothes and ironed for her. If the food was not prepared in time she yelled at the boys and even spanked them.

The seminary orchard

The seminary had a magnificent orchard with many orange, mango, and fruit-bearing trees. The white missionaries had planted them and most bear much fruit every year to this day. Although I didn't agree with planting fruit trees, because they tempted seminarians to steal, I never expelled anyone for the offense.

When the fruits ripened, students plucked them collectively and shared. We also shared the corn seminarians harvested from the seminary farms. Because they enjoyed the food, they were always willing to plant more and regarded the fruit trees and our farm products as their own to protect from destruction and thieves.

Students particularly liked one variety of oranges called "tangerine," small in size and very sweet. The girl also liked

tangerines. During her visit, she ordered a house-boy to pluck large quantities. The boy argued that she should be the one to bring oranges and fruits to the fathers and not the other way round. As a result the boy received a severe beating from the girl. Neither that house-boy nor the others forgave her. Instead they waited for an opportunity to revenge the many insults and humiliations they had suffered in the hands of this unwanted visitor.

The day of wrath and retribution

One Sunday morning, the house-boys' opportunity occurred. They even included a few seminarians in their plan. The four fathers on staff including the rector had left for various stations where they celebrated the Sunday masses. Only the boys and her friend knew that Miss X arrived the previous evening and had quietly slipped into her friend's room. Everywhere was quiet. Then one house-boy raised alarm: "A thief, a thief!" The boy claimed he heard sounds in the fathers' room and was sure a thief was robbing the father. A small group of students and house-boys converged on the front of the father's room. They banged on doors. They ordered the "thief" to surrender or lose her life. They carried clubs, sticks, and knives. They would punish the "thief" before the rector and other fathers returned. The boys were prepared to shoot first and let questions be asked later!

Sensing great danger, Miss X slipped under the bed in the father's room. She screamed loudly, as the boys forced open the door and shoved sticks under the bed to injure the "thief." When she came out from her hiding place, she begged for clemency. The boys did not listen to her appeals. It was their turn for revenge. They tore her clothes. They dragged her out of the building and made it clear to her that the father's house was a holy place, where reckless, shameless, and wayward fellows were not welcome.

Aftermath of vengeance

When everybody came back from Sunday mass, the priest whose girl had been assaulted (not the boys) reported the matter to me.

He was almost weeping as he recounted the ordeal the girl suffered in the hands of the boys - how they had beaten her and tore her clothes. The priest claimed the girl had visited someone in town and was stranded as night approached. So she had to take refuge in the seminary to avoid armed robbers.

I did not fall for his excuse: "She could have slept in the town. She should not have hidden in your room. You have yourself to blame. You have not kept the rules we made. You have scandalized the house-boys and the seminarians. It is a terrible thing." I said I would investigate the matter. I never did.

Secretly I was happy with the boys' action. I granted their "chief" a four-day break to visit his parents. The offended priest and others on staff at first thought I had punished the "ring leader" or dismissed him. Instead I promoted him for his gallantry. I tried to explain that other "intruders" should learn a great lesson from this episode,

Later I learned the "chief" did not express complete satisfaction with their "operation." He grumbled, feeling their goal was not fully achieved and vowed more damage if the girl ever mustered courage to visit again. He reportedly said "That girl should thank her God that I restrained some others in our group from doing her much harm. We had planned to pluck out her genitals to teach her a bitter lesson of her life."

No weekend female visitors

Visitors - male and female - were allowed for seminarians and priests in the seminary, but a category of female visitors, popularly known as "Weekend female visitors" were outlawed. "Weekend female visitors" is a euphemism for women, usually relations and friends of priests who collect money and gifts from priests. Most Nigerian parishioners believe that priests accumulate a lot of money and gifts on Sundays. In addition to regular offertory collections, many parishioners bring along goats, fowls, yams, and fruits to the altar of the Lord. The "chief priest" receives these gifts, but female visitors to the parish house often take advantage of the bounty. But collection box money is the most sought after prize. Some visitors steal

outright. Others attach themselves closely to priests and loot at will.

Such "weekend visitors" are usually not liked by the fathers' house-servants, who rightly believe the unwanted visitors come mainly to harvest what they never sowed. "She went on weekend" has therefore acquired a notorious connotation in most parish communities in Nigeria. Because of these abuses natives despised and even persecuted legitimate female visitors, calling them parasites, interlopers or prostitutes. During my tenure as rector, this category of female visitors was banned.

Rector's visitor at the center stage

Miss Y had arrived mid-day one Saturday, looking for the rector. But I was gone, not due back till late in the evening. I had previously instructed the boys to treat all visitors well, offer them seats in the parlor, as well as drinks and food. Seeing that the rector's visitor had a suitcase the boys suspected she was "on weekend visit." Courageously they inquired whether she was my sister. Her answer was illusive and they were not happy. But she didn't resemble me in any way and the boys knew very well I had no real sister. They asked her whether she wished to pass the night in the seminary. Her response was even more illusive.

Angered by her uncooperative attitude, the senior house-boy spoke up: "Miss, please, we are asking you because the rector does not allow female visitors staying overnight here. He won't be back until late in the evening. He went to a meeting and some shopping. We are telling you so you could go back home before it is dark or find somewhere to sleep until you can see the rector tomorrow..." The girl was perplexed and could not understand their unfriendly attitude. She threatened to report their rude treatment to the rector when he returned. She sat quietly in the parlor waiting for her "boyfriend" to return.

Who was Miss Y?

I had met Miss Y many years ago when I was still a seminarian. Before I went to study in Rome, I visited a friend who was already a young parish priest. I met this girl in his house when I

went to tell him I was leaving for overseas in a week's time, and asked him for some pocket money. A few months after I arrived in Rome for studies, this same priest wrote me, telling me that Miss Y had been seriously asking to have my address. I learned she was an aspirant, nearing her religious formation and might be professed in few years time. The Father wrote: "That girl you met in my house has been asking for your address. I have been reluctant in giving it to her, because I know who you are. If I don't get your approval I know you will persecute me and embarrass me. Please reply as soon as possible and tell me what to do..."

I answered: "Give her the address." An aspirant would not be a harmful "girl friend." Besides I wouldn't be back to Nigeria in the next 8 years. Nothing to lose and perhaps a friendship to gain! I thought.

Miss Y wrote me a couple of times. I replied. We exchanged photos. The "brieffreundschaft" (friendship expressed only in letter writing) continued until I returned from Europe. But her letters bored me. Once she wrote: "You have told me in your letters that you are a student and have no money. What do you want me to do? I need money for many things." After my ordination she wrote: "Now that you have been ordained priest, I hope you will begin to treat me better. Most of my mates receive a lot of money and gifts from their priest-friends."

Miss Y wants more

I did send money a few times. She acknowledged and requested more. There was nothing strange about that. I often received such letters and requests from seminarians and sisters to this day. Money, money, money! Whether a would-be priest or a would-be woman religious, both need help. It is the work of God to help them achieve their goal.

Then Miss Y dropped out or she was expelled from the convent, took up a teaching appointment in a Primary School in her village. When I returned from Europe, I met her as a teacher and not as a nun. I heard many upsetting stories about this lady.

One day she remarked that I was not treating her well - no necking, no petting, no kissing and stuff. I tried to explain:

"No I don't like this kissing thing. It is dangerous. You can get an infection. You can contract diseases such as asthma, chronic catarrh, lung cancer etc..." She was not impressed. "But others do it and they are not dead yet," she retorted. "Yeah, well, they may be lucky. Perhaps they clean their mouths well, with toothpaste and other mouthwash chemicals before..." I decided to end the association.

Punishment for the weekend visitor

I had told Miss Y never to visit as I packed over to the seminary at Okpala and became the rector. She wrote many letters, none of which I replied. She did not take me seriously, hence her weekend visit on that fateful day.

When I returned to the seminary at about 6 PM that evening, the boys informed me about her and how they had advised her to go back home but she refused. They reported she was angry and had threatened to report them when I returned.

I sent for the prefect. When he came I ordered that he should send me four big boys immediately. They arrived and I gave instructions: "There is a lady in the visitor's room. We are going to bundle her into my car and drive her to the Okpala/Aba road junction from where she should pick up a taxi to her home. Okay. When I am ready, grab her firmly, four of you - two on each side. You should guard her on the back seat of the car while I drive off." "Yes father."

Everything went according to plans. Miss Y was dumbfounded and could not believe what was happening to her. But she learned her lesson and never came back. Some students who heard the story were so pleased, while others expressed sympathy for the unfortunate victim. I meant Miss Y no harm. I was only trying to "keep the rules and to lead by example." Two boys who participated in this operation became priests, while the other two settled overseas as lay men in Search of the Greener Pastures.

It has never been easy to live by example. There have been scandalous incidents in high places and the young people are often scared. Should the efforts to live by example be given up on account of occasional failures of leadership? There is

nothing wrong in relating some of the incidents in this chapter. They illustrate the pains and joys of working with young people, as well as the price leaders have to pay if they seek role model positions in society.

CHAPTER 14

THE OSINA MISSION

It could be described as a saga - an adventure, an enterprise, and a challenging experience. It was also a nightmare. It was a mission - an assignment with a purpose that was bound to bring to life the reminiscences of the old missionary days of the whites. However, this time the missionary was a son of Nigeria although necessarily not a son of the soil.

When the Orlu deanery was carved out of the old diocese of Owerri and raised to the status of its own diocese, there was great jubilation wherever Orlu sons and daughters lived - Nigeria, Europe, America, even far away Asia. The city of Orlu, an old district and provincial headquarters of the colonial administration, together with Okigwe, also an old colonial outpost, had long been despised by their neighbors as unprogressive.

As one Igbo author observes in his book *Go Ye Afar - The Catholic Church enters Igbo Heartland*, (Jude M.T. Okolo, 1998): Igbo people in general although somewhat conservative are not afraid of change. They are receptive to change and this is constantly explained by their idea of progress or "opening up" "mmeghe" - openness to change and growth. Whatever improves the individual's and community's status is acceptable to the Igbo. This is the key to their attitude toward innovation. "Unfortunately, the end began to determine the means. Communities which did not measure up in making remarkable efforts were considered sluggish and torpid. There was a famous tune for two such sluggish towns, intoned Okolo: "Obodo nile emeghechala ofo ndi *...na...* Ndi ano akpo ...* amaghi akwukwo..." (All the cities have developed but it remained only...* and ...* The ...* people were illiterates.)

Orlu and Okigwe people will no doubt realize that the author was referring to them. In a footnote the author gave his reasons for not mentioning the names of the two towns in his citation. "Due to the sensitivity of the matter, the towns are not mentioned, although they were notorious in the region. With the

passage of time situations have changed and these towns have produced eminent sons and daughters." (P. 21)

The new diocese of Orlu

With passage of time Orlu and Okigwe changed and have produced eminent sons and daughters. The two cities are senatorial districts in the new political setup in Nigeria. Both have requested creation of a state in that region. Orlu and Okigwe are now seats of bishop's government. Okigwe is as well a university town. Orlu people have not ceased requesting any successive government - civil and military - that one of the two oldest colleges in Nigeria - Bishop Shanahan Training College (B.S.T.C.) be raised to a University College of Education. They want its counterpart - Bishop Shanahan College (B.S.C.) - my alma mater - to be raised to the status of a full-fledged technical university. B.S.C. is one of the best High Schools offering technical education in Nigeria. Wood Work, Metal Work, Technical Drawing remain areas of specialization. The school is also known for its wonderful performance in science and mathematics.

Ironically neighboring towns that despised Orlu and Okigwe for their alleged lack of progress, have remained dormant for decades. None of these old missionary posts and great parish centers, including Ihiala, Adazi, Ozubulu, Nteje, Emekuku, and many others have been elevated to the status of diocese, nor have they fared well in the political dispensation.

How the Osina mission was conceived

Most Orlu sons and daughters were eager to help their new diocese and offered their services. I went to the newly appointed bishop of Orlu to request my assignment. The following dialog took place:

Nathaniel: I have come for my own assignment. I want to contribute to the development of our new diocese.

Bishop: What would you like to do?

Nathaniel: My Lord, it is your duty to assign me a job.

Bishop: You are good in academics, maybe you will like to teach in any of our universities or colleges of education.

Nathaniel: (displeased with this suggestion) Is there no place, no area within this new diocese where my services would be most needed?

Bishop: Perhaps in the seminary, since you have been rector of the old diocesan minor seminary.

Nathaniel: Which one? (One at Umuowa or Osina?)

Bishop: I guess the one at Umuowa. With our boys returning from the old seminary there might be much work re-settling them and so on.

Nathaniel: What of the new one at Osina?

Bishop: The good people of Osina have donated land and are already putting up some classroom blocks. Do you think that place suits you?

Nathaniel: Why not, My Lord. I want a place where there is much work to do. I want a place where I can initiate new projects. I have been longing for such opportunities. We may forget any university appointment for now.

Bishop: Good. I am sure there will be enough work there for you.

Earlier in June I had attended the opening ceremony of the new seminary at Osina, named Bonus Pastor Seminary (Good Shepherd Seminary). Two other bishops attended and our bishop lavished praises on the Catholic community of Osina. They not only donated the land, they had also started to put up classroom blocks, Fathers' house, refectory, and a small chapel. The people of Osina had for long wished for their own parish. From the days of Father Michael Forley, one of the most renowned pioneer Irish missionaries who lived at Urualla, Osina had been only an out-station. Whenever a bishop came to the community on pastoral visit, people entreated him with their requests.

Even though Osina had great sons and daughters who were rich and had high positions in business and government, there was one handicap. Except for a nun and a brother, Osina had produced no priest. Whenever they requested the status of parish the visiting bishop would demand to know the number of priests the town had produced. Osina could not match their neighbors when it came to the number of priests the town had given to the Church. Urualla, Akokwa, Ndizogu and others had more population and could boast of countless number of women religious, too.

By initiating the Seminary project, Osina Catholics planned to kill two birds with one stone. With the presence of the seminary - an important diocesan institution in their community - they hoped the bishop would grant them parish status. It worked.

Overwhelmed by the community's magnanimity the bishop granted their request. There was great jubilation among the people. Their joys knew no bounds and they greeted the announcement with a 21-gun-salute and much merriment.

The Seminary Project

When I landed at Osina from Okpala, there was truly much work to accomplish. I did not want to be intimidated by the enormous responsibilities of the seminary project. More land was needed for expansion. The master plan for a full-fledged Seminary High School had to be examined immediately. Development of Virgin land needed heavy machinery, bulldozers, caterpillars, and graders to widen the footpaths. We would construct football fields, tennis courts, and other sports facilities. We would plant fields, flowers, and trees to make the seminary look as beautiful as those I had seen in Europe.

Our ambitious dreams did not elude us. We achieved most of our goals. Osina people remained ever grateful to the ecclesiastical authorities for what most people refer to as the "Osina miracle"

The Osina Seminary project inspired other developments in the town. Anglicans quickly realized the numerous blessings the Catholic seminary had brought to their town. They thought they could benefit more if they embarked on their own seminary project. St John Chrysostom Anglican Seminary became the counterpart of Bonus Pastor Seminary. Who says that competition is not an essential factor in development?

The presence of two top Church institutions in the small Osina community also attracted a Hospital Project, a Community Bank, a Post Office as well as the pipe-borne water project. As a result of these projects the National Electrical Power Authority (NEPA) established one of its sub-stations for rural electrification projects at Osina town. Osina people provided the buildings that housed the offices of NEPA.

The era of the "Great Depression" in Nigeria, which began with the overthrow of Shehu Shagari's government in 1983, triggered an unprecedented proliferation of international, national, state and community banks in Nigeria. Banks sprang up in every nook and cranny of the nation, sometimes established by people who had dubious and fraudulent motives. As quickly as they sprang up many soon failed and rendered their hundreds and thousands of customers poor. Government intervened and closed most. Their managers and owners were thrown into jail until they paid back their loot.

Among the few surviving community banks in Nigeria today is the Osina Community Bank, well managed and controlled by Osina people, revered by their neighbors for their hard work and community development efforts.

Osina Community Hospital, one of the best in the country, was administered for many years by a German organization. After the Germans left, the hospital continued to maintain good health services in the area.

In the history of community development and self-reliance, Osina people and their little town can never be rivaled. Osina people built the first modern post office and handed it over to the government. They were the first to embark on the electrification of the streets of their town.

Unfortunately poor condition of roads slowed their rural development efforts. United, progressive, and generous, the people pulled their resources together to accomplish what other bigger towns and cities in Nigeria never dreamed about. Thus it was no surprise when Osina pulled off the seminary project, the first of its kind in the history of the missionary Church.

Seven years of nightmare

The era of tremendous missionary activities and rural development in Osina, which began early 1982, was cut short by a political turmoil, which engulfed the town. It was a 7-year period of community conflict. Terrible misrule ended the Nigerian experiment on democracy during the Shagari regime. The gloomy dark clouds that set over the entire nation lasted 17 years (1983-1999) only started clearing up in 1998 with the

death of Sani Abacha and the enthronement of Abdulsalami Abubakar who organized democratic elections and handed over power to a democratically elected government of Obasanjo on May 29th 1999.

The "Arab" & The "Taiwan"

For Osina the era of political acrimony started in 1983 and ended in 1991. The town divided into two political factions cynically referred to as "Arab" and "Taiwan" by each other. The "Arabs" represented the "orthodox" conservative "majority" who belonged to the Nigerian Peoples Party, NPP. The "Taiwans" were the more liberal minority political elite who embraced the central ruling party (NPN) or National Party of Nigeria identified with the Hausa-Fulani oligarchy, the traditional political enemies of the Igbo.

Bitterness had long existed between the two parties and came to a head during an electoral fracas when an Osina youth was killed. The young man belonged to the radical youth wing of NPP, who believed his death was a political assassination by NPN.

The controversies that ensued and got worse would need a more voluminous book and is not within the scope of this chapter. The court cases, the interventions by various groups - bishops, priests, government bodies, and traditional groups - point to the magnitude of the problem. Thanks be to God that it ended and the two groups were reconciled and the work of development continued. But I must observe that throughout those years of acrimony, the people of Osina never stopped supporting their church and the seminary. The seminary never lacked whatever the generous people could provide for its survival.

The crisis period was a nightmare for me as rector of the seminary and parish priest. Since most institutions and development projects could not function, the church remained the only forum for any meaningful community activities. My bishop and I succeeded in keeping our people together until a final solution was eventually reached.

Mission of liberation

When I took up assignment as rector and parish priest I told the people I felt like a true missionary in Osina. I remembered stories about hardships endured by white missionaries as they penetrated the jungles of West Africa into the Igbo heartland.

But for the black missionary in his homeland, problems could be more serious. The Gospels make it clear: "A prophet does not find acceptance in his own country." I encountered fierce resistance from some people who thought I came to grab their land from them. Among the Igbo, land is a cherished commodity and very few are willing to exchange land for anything. The seminary and the parish, both needed land for expansion. After exerting great pressure and investing much money the church got the land but not without bitterness.

Like religious fanatic, I fought hard to stop all pagan practices. In iconoclastic frenzy, I chased away the evil spirits the people said dwelt in the evil forest that stood adjacent the seminary. During the inter-tribal wars a lot of sacrifices had been offered in that evil forest and potent medicines were planted there. People who died 'bad death,' as well as twins were buried there.

The trees in that forest had not been cut or trimmed for the past 50 years at least. I went about my mission with little or no caution. At last, the fetish priests who supervised the evil forest gave up the struggle. I cleared a portion of the land and built the students' hostel there.

Bishop's support behind our success

I must confess that the bishop of the new diocese with whom I had to work was a different superior from the one I experienced at Okpala. Our bishop was more supportive and sympathetic. He provided whatever the seminary needed for the takeoff and survival. We never lacked money or other material needs. The bishop's attitude encouraged me to work harder and to contribute equally financially to the seminary development. I never hesitated in putting at the disposal of the seminary some of the financial support I received from my benefactors in Germany

and Switzerland. Before they died two of the old ladies willed that a percentage of their money should be given to "Nathaniel and his seminarians." I did not fail to carry out to the minutest detail the wishes of the dead benefactors.

The bishop was most helpful during the Osina crisis. He understood the situation more than most other people and continued in his efforts to see that our Osina mission did not fail. His support during those difficult times helped to erase most of the poor impressions I had about bishops and religious superiors who never cared about the welfare of their priests who worked in difficult situations such as the seminary. It was a great consolation and I thought I would use this opportunity to express my pleasure and gratitude to the bishop.

Departure from Osina

After 13 years of missionary enterprise in Osina I left the city and the seminary on the 27th of July 1995 for the United States of America for another mission. The students were on long vacation and few people in the town knew about my departure. I was not surprised however to see small groups gathering around the seminary avenue that morning. They must have got the hint I was leaving soon. Most of the faces I saw were sad. I waved to them as I drove away to the airport.

The bishop after obtaining a suitable replacement had granted my request for a sabbatical. I left with no fanfare - no announcements, no parties, no send-off - and most of my friends resented my attitude. I received several letters from them. But after I had settled in the United States I wrote them the following letter:

My Dear people of Osina (30th January 1996)

I am happy to write you after about 6 months I left you for the United States of America. I hope the parish priest would read this letter to you in the church or he may delegate some other person. There is no doubt that I left Osina without fanfare after 13 years of service among you. As I have been made to understand from some of the letters I have been receiving here, some of you were not happy that I left you without

"official information." The answer is simple. Father Ndiokwere likes to do his things that way. He didn't think it was necessary to organize a send-off party in his honor. If he did work well at Osina, it is the Good Lord who will reward him sometime. So forgive me if I failed to act 'in the Nigerian way.'...

Surely it will not be easy to forget our contributions toward the development of Osina. Bishop G.O. Ochiagha and Father Ndiokwere through the seminary and hospital projects did contribute significantly to make Osina what it is today. Some may not agree. But we don't like to blow our trumpet. We are sure most of you acknowledge the facts. I have done what I could to establish the Bonus Pastor Seminary. I have gone and will not return there again. It is your duty as our 'co-workers in the Lord's vineyard' to continue to protect and support the seminary because you, too did contribute your quota at the beginning of the project....

I will not fail to congratulate you on the successful ordination of your son and first priest at St. Mary's Osina. Thank God that our campaigns for priestly and religious vocations have yielded fruits. I will continue to encourage your sons and daughters to join the priesthood and religious life. We must thank God the seminary project yielded good fruits

I thank you for whatever good cooperation you gave me when I was with you. Though I suffered a lot during your political crisis, I am not bitter. That could be the fate of any missionary. My missionary days now over at Osina, I am presently in the white man's land carrying out the same injunction of Christ, the Lord, "to go and make disciples of all nations...." I wish you God's blessing as we continue to remember one another in prayers.

I was informed the parish priest read my letter in the church and most of my former parishioners were there. I received several replies. Some still expressed disappointment there was no celebration before my departure. Others expressed joy that I remembered to write the people. One group spoke for many. The letter was captioned: **Leaving Osina without fanfare after 13 years of service.** Part of the letter read:

Dear Rev. Fr. Rector Ndiokwere,

We can only try to appreciate the reasons you gave for leaving Osina after more than 13 years of fruitful service without letting us know officially. Whatever argument we bring forward now, it is true that it is all too late, as you have already left.

We can only pray and ask the Almighty God to bless you and His Lordship Bishop Ochiagha for your contributions in the development of church and Osina community. These contributions can never be forgotten in the history of Osina when such history will be written

We don't know where we could begin to recount. Will one start with your work in making our parish one of the best in the diocese? The day Bonus Pastor Seminary Osina was opened was the beginning of a new era of development and progress for our people. The Osina Community Hospital - part of your efforts and those of Bishop Ochiagha is one of the best in the country today, as the Federal government has awarded the hospital a certificate as one of the best in Nigeria! St Joseph's Vocational School, which you helped to establish, is flourishing and is among the best in the state.

You can never be forgotten. We still need more Ndiokwere and Ochiagha in our community. Your letter brought a lot of relief to many of our people. Since the letter was read in church, it has been the talk of the day. We were happy and thankful. You are no doubt a wonderful priest and we know that anyone who comes across you will never allow you go. The people of United States will not be exempted from the benefits your presence offers everywhere you go.

We hope you have not abandoned us. We will be glad to have you celebrate for us again whenever you visit home or finally return from America.

CHAPTER 15

THE AMERICAN MISSION - Part 1

A complete account of my 4-year extended sabbatical and mission in the United States would not fit into the present write-up. That was why I wrote, "**Search for greener pastures and The Third Millennium Church**," which I believe have taken good care of the detailed experiences of my sojourn in the United States. However there are some subtle areas and issues I believe should be examined here to complete the picture of my experiences in the priesthood since the past 25 years.

Early memories of America

I had never developed much nostalgia toward America. Throughout the period of my studies in Europe I had opportunities to visit America but did not undertake any trip to this land of promise. I had my prejudices and illusions and had to delay a visit to America to a later date and during an extended sabbatical. The United States of America is a vast country that would require more than a few months to explore.

In High School we had learned much of American history and politics. In the early sixties I started subscribing to the American **Time Magazine** through our local newspaper vendor and I never missed an issue of the magazine. I also read its sister, **The Newsweek**. I could even boast I knew more about America than Africa. We also had many American Peace Corps in our School who told us much about America and its people.

Most African students of pre-independence era knew almost by heart the names of most American presidents, Supreme Court judges and even governors of states. The map of America was always drawn within seconds and the names of the states meticulously inserted at their respective positions in the maps. We learned about slavery and oppression of black Americans, which caused resentment in my soul.

Black & White America

There was in fact the tendency those days of the civil rights movements to see every white man anywhere as an enemy of the black people. And I did not hide my feelings when I met my first American family friends in Rome in 1973. They came from Detroit, Michigan. I met them at St Peter's square as they were heading for the Vatican's Sistine Chapel. They were pilgrims and wanted me to direct them to the gate leading to the Chapel. During a short introduction, they were surprised that I knew a lot about the United States and inquired whether I had been to the States. My answer was no. I went further: "I don't like America. You people talk about democracy, equality and freedom, yet you oppress the Blacks in America. What you people do is terrible and I am sad. Even whites don't admit blacks in your universities..."

Incidentally, the case of one Vivian Malone Jones (widely reported in the Time) came to my mind. I exploded, as the couple pleaded with me to let them explain to me: "Imagine a black lady and a black gentleman were not allowed to study in the University of Alabama. And it was a governor who tried to prevent them. What a scandal; just because they were black."

As I thought I had avenged my anger, the woman burst out in tears and urged the husband: "Please tell him, it didn't happen in the North. We were not involved. We never persecuted the Negroes." But I never cared to know whether Southerners or Northerners discriminated against blacks and enslaved them. Overwhelmed by my aggression, and sensing that no explanation would satisfy me, the Detroit man said: "Okay, if this is your stand, you're not coming to the States."

We had become big friends the first few minutes we met and they had made up their minds to invite me to the States after my studies in Rome. They were good Catholic couple and continued writing me until late eighties. They often sent me money and gifts.

Before I left Rome in 1977 for London, a priest invited me to Brooklyn, New York. I declined the invitation, fearing I would not receive good treatment because of racism in America.

Since those early days I have always harbored grudges against racists and never believed I would be happy living in America.

Early disappointments

My experiences after four years in America did not differ much from my early impressions, predictions and prejudices. When I arrived South Dakota in September 1995 on sabbatical, I was full of hopes, faith, energy, and zeal to accomplish all the assignments that the bishop of the diocese would give me. Indeed the laborers were few in the Lord's vineyard in that part of the world. But I never got any impression that the authorities there needed laborers desperately, particularly those from Africa. I had to wait for more than two months before I was asked to go to one remote parish far north of the state to assist a younger priest who was in trouble and was contemplating on leaving the priesthood. I was with him for three months and he survived.

Then the bishop sent me to one abandoned parish in the western part of the diocese.

With this letter I am transferring you from temporary assignment in Mellette, South Dakota to be the Canonical Administrator of St. Boniface Parish, Idylwilde, St. Mary's Parish Marion, South Dakota, and St. Christina Parish, Parker, South Dakota. There is a house both at Parker, South Dakota and at Marion, South Dakota, and you may decide which place you will use as your residence. The Parish Councils of the three parishes will work out the financial arrangements for a priest who has been ordained twenty years...

The former pastor had left the priesthood out of frustrations. He was accused of several sex-related offenses.

When I arrived, I settled in one of the rectories and extended pastoral activities to two other out-stations. I quickly learned the members of the second largest station were not happy. They evidently felt I should have settled in their own parish center where the last pastor had lived. When a small group of the people visited me a few days later, they did not hide their feelings and displeasure.

In the past I have seen parishioners quarrel over big and small matters - where the parish priest should live - which was the eldest of the many out-stations - when and where masses should be celebrated and so on. In my response to this group I made it clear I was not there to dabble into community and church politics. What was of utmost importance was the success of my mission.

Afterwards I consulted again with the authorities on the local and diocesan levels and was told to stay where I had already parked in. But that section of my church community was not impressed.

Troubles and frustrations

Most of the nasty experiences I had to put up with during the six months I stayed in this part of the diocese of Sioux Falls were well documented and would be reproduced where necessary. I must admit I was well received by the people of Parker.

One elegant woman in her thirties - Mrs. DMD - showed tremendous interest in me and volunteered to take me round the parishes and to any other places I wanted. We drove round the city and also visited the other two out-stations. One was about 30 miles away from the rectory where I lived. Later the lady told me to consult her always if I needed help. At first I was grateful to her for her generosity.

A lot of rumors circulated about this woman. I heard - *She exercises a lot of influence in the parish. She commands her husband who must obey her faithfully like her house servant. She has always written dozens of letters to the bishop in the past and is responsible for the "exit" of two priests from the priesthood. She is among the group that wrote petitions against the last pastor who was accused of homosexuality and so on.* One old lady who saw me in the woman's car driving round the parishes later phoned and warned me not to get close to this notorious woman.

From every indication I was convinced she wanted to be my adviser and surely too to serve her as a second husband. She made several advances, which I rebuffed. I was not ready for any sex-related lawsuits in America!

Some of my other actions enraged her. She was not happy with me because she did not like changes I instituted to resuscitate the parish. Her husband was in charge of the Sunday bulletin. The parish spent much money paying for the scrap he produced for them. When I took over the production of the bulletin, which cost the parish nothing, surely the man was upset.

Mrs. DMD was not happy that I taught the CCD class. She said my predecessors didn't do that and I was holding the children longer than normal. I didn't take extra minutes to teach the kids once their parents came to collect them. The children enjoyed the CCD more than anything.

Mrs. DMD sometimes directed the choir and played the organ. She complained since I took over the parish, rosary was being recited before mass and I interfered with her music rehearsals. When I suggested to the people that rosary should be stopped to please Mrs. DMD, there was uproar: "Over our dead bodies," the people vowed. "Who is she?" They asked.

She was surely embarrassed. Within 3 months of my arrival in the parish, she took her revenge by writing the following letter to the bishop.

Dear Bishop...

It is very disheartening for the volunteers who have to work so closely with Father Nathaniel during the celebration of the Mass and CCD to express sincere concerns to you and in return have you remind us he is so qualified and highly recommended. This means nothing if he can't treat human beings in a Christian manner! It is very difficult to accept the fact that you have assigned a priest to our parishes that could cause so much disruption and discontent in such a short time.

We pray that you have been informed of an incident that took place during a Mass celebrated at the nursing home in Marion. It was very difficult for us to believe, but we were informed by a very reliable source, that during the Mass an elderly woman from the nursing home fell asleep and Father Nathaniel felt it was necessary to **kick her in the shin** to awaken her! If this incident is as disturbing to you as it was to us, please contact Sheldon Jensen, President of the Parish Council at St. Mary to verify the accuracy of this report.

At the Crossroads

This Sunday (March 31st) in Marion, Father Nathaniel was addressing the congregation about the poor behavior of children in Parker when he said, in a very sarcastic tone, that "he did not want to break any of 'our' country's rules, but in 'his' country he would have thrown **them out of the window** for their behavior." As the parents of two children, we fear the day he does do physical harm to a child. We have already heard of verbal abuse by Father Nathaniel toward mass servers and CCD students.

This is not the way to build vocations in the priesthood. You know from experience how you looked up to certain priests during childhood, which brought you to where you are today. Father Nathaniel certainly presents a poor example of a priest to our children.

We were also very disappointed that you would not give us the benefit of the doubt concerning the incident we addressed in our previous letter. Hopefully, you will take the time to investigate the concerns included in this letter regarding Father Nathaniel's arrogant and disrespectful behavior!

(Signed Mr. & Mrs. J & DMD)

Wicked and senseless fabrications

One American quality I truly appreciated is openness. Unlike Africa, there are no secret accusations. Here in the West you can get any information you want - about your friend or enemy. A photocopy of such document is easily made available to you. There is nothing to hide.

When the bishop called me to his office to inform me what was going on in the parish, I demanded certain explanations. I wanted to know why in Mrs. DMD's petition letter the above words were in bold and underlined. The bishop said that **to kick old or sick people in the retirement homes in the shin** was a serious offense in the United States. According to the bishop it was often alleged that nurses or attendants used to abuse old people or kick them and so on. Thousands of lawsuits have been filed against nurses and owners of nursing homes

every year and millions of dollars paid in compensation. In short it was a serious offense that could be invented to cause serious harm to the accused. The same explanation was made about the second serious offense - **to throw a child out of the window.** I had no idea of the contents of the previous letters the complainant and her husband had written to the bishop.

My reaction and letter to the bishop

His Excellency

I think it will take time for me to recover from the shock I got at the last visit with you. I never thought that the devil could be so wicked and powerful and that some Americans could be so unfriendly. I doubt whether I would be patient enough to wait for so long as you have proposed before you transfer me. I will neither like to embarrass you by getting away without your approval. When this wicked lady started her unfriendly remarks and attacks barely two to three months after my arrival here, I did indicate to the chairman of the church community here that I would inform the bishop about this woman's attitude and the effects on my mission here. I even wanted to pack over to Marion to avoid her. But I was advised not to tell you yet. I equally thought it was too early to start complaining. It was reasonable to wait and watch. Although I was pleased with the reactions of the parishioners who got hint of Mrs. DMD's action, I hope you would take appropriate action against this couple.

Bishop, I don't want my pastoral work here to bring misery to my life. Instead of this to happen I return to my country or I could still help out in the work of Christ and His Church elsewhere. I would have loved to work with you even longer than expected, but I am afraid that my good intentions have been dashed to the rocks. I think however that you can remedy the situation. How you treat this case and even bring this couple to your office to advice them to change their lives would determine how things would work out with me. You may not believe the stories told about this couple. I am doing my work without showing any signs of stress or annoyance as I expect to hear from you on the outcome of your investigations.

Bishop's reply to my letter

Dear Father Nathaniel

I received your letter of April 17, 1996, concerning the letter that was received here at the Chancery from Mr. J. & Mrs. DMD. As I told you at that time because of the seriousness of their accusation, I wanted to talk with you immediately and hear your side of the situation. I am happy to inform you that my attorney has thoroughly investigated the matter, and you have been completely exonerated. I have attached a copy of the letter that I sent to the couple.

When we met in my office, I told you that I would be happy to move you from that situation if it was making you unhappy. In fact long before that letter from the couple arrived, I had talked to the administrator of the cathedral and had written to your bishop to see if he would mind if you were at the cathedral and the Prince of Peace retirement home. We have enjoyed getting to know you and would like to have you at the cathedral, so we could work more closely with you.

I realized that after the shock of the letter of Mr. J. & Mrs. DMD that this might have all left a very bad taste in your mouth and like the instruction from Bible you would prefer to "shake the dust from your sandals and move on." I assure you that this diocese has been very blessed to have you here, and we would like that to continue. It was because of your priestly zeal; kindness and wonderful style of ministry that I felt you could be very helpful to me at the cathedral and working at Prince of Peace, especially with the retired priests. I regret the pain that all of this has caused you. Please be assured of my prayers and know of my continued support. I am attaching to this letter beautiful notes of support that I have received from many of your parishioners.

Results of Bishop's investigations

Dear J & DMD

I received your letter of April 2, 1996, in which you raised certain accusations concerning Father Nathaniel. I have spoken with Kathy Robins and Darlyne Dains, both of whom were present at the Marion

nursing home during Father Nathaniel's Mass. Both women gave almost identical accounts of what happened. They stated that an elderly woman was asleep during Mass, and Father Nathaniel nudged the woman's foot with his foot because his hands were full carrying the Blessed Sacrament. Both women stated his conduct was completely proper, and Mrs. Robins also stated that the elderly woman is stone deaf, and if she had seen the woman sleeping, she would have taken the same gentle action that Father Nathaniel took.

Both women also agreed that "no scene" was created by Father Nathaniel's actions, and that it was not right that such a vicious rumor was being spread about Father Nathaniel. Mrs. Robins believes Father Nathaniel is devout and sincere. She also mentioned that there are a number of people both in Marion and Parker that are spreading rumors about him.

In your letter you stated that a "shin kicking" incident occurred. You mentioned that you heard this from a reliable source, and that Mr. Sheldon Jensen could verify this report. Mr. Jensen was not at the Mass and only stated that he also had heard the rumor.

Given your very serious but false accusations, I had our attorney, Mr. James Mason investigate the incident. He spoke to three eyewitnesses, all of whom collaborate the report of one another. We are absolutely confident that the incident did not take place.

Since you mentioned that you had a source, I would suggest that you inform the source that they are spreading unfounded and malicious rumors. I would ask you remind the source of the dangers of gossip and the spreading of rumors without attempting to verify their accuracy.

Signed (Bishop)

The Parishioners' reactions

Dozens of letters of protests flowed as most parishioners heard the news that I was leaving the parish. They heard the rumors and were terribly distressed. Some letters were addressed to the bishop and copied to me and vice-versa. Others were written to

Mr. & Mrs. DMD and copied to the bishop and me. Only a few letters can be reproduced here.

Dear J. & DMG.

Christ taught us that we will be forgiven as we forgive others. We pray for the grace to suppress our anger and to forgive you for the harm you have done to our parish, to a holy and gifted priest who sacrificed much to serve the parish and to us personally. We also pray that you will be given the grace to see your actions as Christ sees them.

Sincerely Jim & Kathy

Dear Father Nathaniel,

I just want to take a minute and say thank you for your dedicated service as Pastor during your stay here in Parker while serving the three parishes. I am not one for writing letters to the Pastor (or the Bishop), but I am sure I could say personally the message that I hope to convey.

You, and so many Pastors can use scripture quotes to make a point. I'm not good with scripture but I always read the Quotable Quotes page in the Readers Digest and find that many times those short passages give a quick charge to my attitude as I go about my daily chores. Sometimes the quotes that catch my attention I save to read again and again. And I give them to my kids in hopes the quotes will send a message more pointed and clearly than I could. With that in mind ---

Pearl Bailey is quoted to have said, "What the world really needs is more love and less paperwork." And a slogan or quote that I have heard and used many times goes, "Some people would complain even if they were hanged with a brand new rope."

In these past few weeks, I have heard a number of unkind comments and complaints about our pastoral situation in the 3 parishes. If only a few of them are true, they are far too many!!! I think that perhaps, "What we in the 3 parishes really need is a lot more love and lot less complaining."

Please believe that not everyone feels the way some do. I hope you have some good memories to carry with you as you leave these 3 parishes and my hope and prayer for you as you continue your work in our diocese is that God will bless and reward you for your dedicated efforts, and I know He will.

You had a scripture quote in this week's bulletin about God who takes care of His creatures. I believe that he does. I have a quote on my desk that says, "God does not always use the most able person --- sometimes he uses the one available." Father, I guess you were available. I consider you to be very able, but it appears some were not willing to accept. I also believe "we will desperately miss the water if and when the well ever goes dry!" I pray that does not happen and we are somehow able to attract men like yourself to the priesthood, and soon. God bless

(Signed) Al Roeder

Dear Father Nathaniel

We were so saddened to learn that you will be leaving Parker. We do not deserve you. You have sacrificed much, and suffered much, but like Jesus, you have been rejected. We feel just as though there has been a death in your leaving.

We will see you, but will not be able to benefit from your wonderful homilies and teaching. We will talk before you leave. Thank you for giving so much of your times so much of yourself to share the blessings of God's Holy Word. May God's love be with you always as you follow in His ways. Please, Fr. if you are able to offer the following masses for us. God bless you for your many sacrifices, Father.

George and Lisle Stabrawa

Dear Father Nathaniel

On behalf of St. Boniface Altar Society, I would like to extend a sincere "thank you" to you for the many services you have given the people of Idylwilde. We are especially grateful to you for saying Masses for us

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and for your explanations of the Scriptures. We can only begin to imagine the sacrifice you made to leave your homeland of Nigeria and come to this country to help spread the word of God. Again, thank you for your generosity. We invite you to come to our Church picnic on Sunday, July 28th after mass.

On behalf of St Boniface altar society, Karen Goettertz (President.)

Dear Father Nathaniel

Thank you for all you do for Holy Church. Thank you for celebrating Holy Mass according to the Church's norms. Thank you for washing the feet of men on Holy Thursday. You are a Holy and devout son to Holy Mother Church. May the Risen Christ keep you ever in His Sacred Heart.

Jim Connie Swansen & Family

Dear Father Nathaniel,

You are kind and thoughtful, so this card is meant to bring a sincere and very grateful word of thanks for everything. Thank you for everything you did for all of us who appreciated having you with us for too short a time. Thank you for sharing your culture with us. Thank you for giving me a few months of sharing my "old" Roman Catholic faith with you.

I feel like I am a minority in this modern day religious community but it only makes me stronger. I wish you the very best in your new assignment. We will all be stronger because you have ministered among us. May God grant you His choicest Blessings in the coming year. You will be in my prayers always.

Love & Prayers Mary Graber

Dear Father Nathaniel

I can't begin to tell you how much it has meant to me that you were our parish priest for the last 6 months. You have been a good friend to me and I will always remember you for that. I hope you enjoy your work in

Sioux Falls, think of me when you are at Prince of Peace. Please call me and write when you get a chance. Good luck and God bless you.

Mary Garry

Dear Father Nathaniel,

Thank you so much for coming to our parish and to visit with my family. We all had a wonderful time. I know I could listen to you speak for days. I am uncomfortable in social settings so it was a special treat to spend time with you in a private setting.

I enjoyed your masses, admired the work you did, and have a great respect for you. You are a very charismatic person and we all are fortunate to have met you. I hope the United States hasn't been a disappointment to you. I really wish we could be better example to the rest of the world.

May God bless you for coming to help us.

Joe, Stephanie, Randy

Dear Fr. Ndiokwere

Thank you for coming and sharing your culture with us and helping us in our time of need. We all enjoyed your mass and your help to our children at the CCD. They all express gratitude. We wish you the very best in everything you do. Please keep us in your prayers as we will you in ours. Matthew really enjoyed serving on the altar for you. We thought you would have stayed longer in our parish. God bless you!

Love, Marvin, Paula, Matt, Meghan & Trevor Miller

The end of the mission in sight

In spite of all their efforts to pacify me, it was clear to the bishop and most of my closest friends in Parker that I was greatly

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disillusioned by the events that brought my first missionary enterprise in America to a close.

There was nothing particularly exciting about my next assignment as chaplain at the Prince of Peace Retirement Community. I derived no pastoral or spiritual satisfaction from the assignment. It was like wasted months in my priestly ministry. Soon I received a letter from the chancellor. The letter dated February 14, 1997 requested to know about my next plans.

Dear Father Nathaniel

You had mentioned to me before you left that you would be visiting with your Bishop while you were on vacation in your homeland, and that some decision might be forthcoming regarding the length of your stay in the diocese of Sioux Falls.

It would be most helpful to the bishop to have some sense of that because of personnel issues, which need to be dealt with in the next few months. The bishop's priest personnel board will be gathering in just a week or so to begin to look at what needs to be addressed. It would be most helpful if you have some idea of your plans...

I didn't waste time sending my reply:

The chancellor,

The recent visit to my country and diocese made it clear to me that my services in Africa are still very much needed - especially in our minor and major seminaries as well as in our universities. I will not be surprised however if my bishop recalls me to take up any assignment in any of these institutions or in the pastoral ministry in our land. I will leave for Nigeria any time my bishop indicates I should return.

However on account of the terrible weather conditions here in South Dakota, I do not think I will be willing to stay beyond July 1998 in this part of the country. This will definitely depend anyway on whether my services are still required in your diocese. Where such services may not be necessary any more, I hope you will be kind enough to let me know.

The parting letter from the bishop

Dear Father Nathaniel

I received a copy of the letter you sent to the chancellor on February 19, 1997. It was helpful to me, as there was a meeting of the personnel board on February 25, 1997. This June, the diocese will have three priests returning from graduate studies and one priestly ordination. This will be followed next year with five ordinations, God willing.

I think it is fair to say that during your time here, you have been of extraordinary help to me and a blessing for the people you served in a variety of assignments. I am appreciative of your generous service and of the kindness of your bishop in allowing you to serve here. I now believe it would be possible for you to return to your home diocese sometime after July 1, 1997.

In the next several days, I will write your bishop and inform him of our changing personnel picture. He has been most generous in sharing his priest, and I do not want to take advantage of his generosity to us. If there is anything I can do to assist you with your travel or other arrangements, please let me know. I feel blessed to have met you and privileged to share ministry with you.

(Signed, bishop)

The Changing personnel picture

There was no doubt that the diocese of Sioux Falls, South Dakota was poor in personnel and needed missionaries. Although there was hope that new priests would be ordained, many already in the priesthood left, either from retirement or abandonment.

Clearly however the authorities there as in most other dioceses in the United States and Europe would have preferred other solutions for their predicament than to request help from outside the western world.

I attended the annual diocesan meeting where a decision was taken by the diocese to close down about one third of the

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existing parishes or to assign them to lay administrators or deacons who assumed the title "deacon/pastor." Some of the bigger parishes were merged, to be taken care of by one pastor.

But whatever solutions the authorities adopted to resolve the problem of "priestless Sundays," I thought it was time to return to my home diocese. That was what most of the early missionaries who worked in Africa did at the end of their pastoral ministry where they toiled to spread the good news of God's Kingdom.

It had been a tremendous experience working in the Lord's vineyard and far away from home. There was a lot to tell my students and people about my mission in the white man's land. I had even chosen a title for my book or at least a chapter of the book - **Back from America!**

CHAPTER 16

THE AMERICAN MISSION - PART II

I had no intention of staying longer than necessary in the United States. Whatever the needs of American and European Churches, I was convinced Africa and the third world churches have greater needs of personnel and resources. There was nothing wrong if those 3rd world countries blessed by God with many vocations in the priesthood and religious life, went over to "Macedonia" to help the European church. But for me that could not be a prolonged assignment

Come over to Macedonia and help us

Unlike Paul and his disciples (Acts: 16.9) I had no vision to cross over to another American diocese and no conviction that God called me to proclaim the good news to westerners. I prepared to return to my fatherland. I called one of my kinsmen working in the State of Montana to inform him in case he wished to deliver any messages to his family. He was surprised I planned to go home when there was great need of priests in that part of America. He told stories of how their parish priest - about 2 years old in the priesthood - told the parishioners after mass the previous Sunday that he couldn't continue in the priesthood. He wanted some time, somewhere to reflect on his life. He had just quit and bade the parishioners farewell. "Why don't you come over here and help us?" My kinsman pleaded.

I gave his appeal a thought and wrote the bishop of the diocese who invited me for an interview. During the interview I told the bishop I was willing to help out in the diocese for a year even though my bishop had granted the diocese's request to permit me to serve them for a period of two years. I was not willing to stay beyond one year. So I suggested to the bishop to invite another priest from Nigeria to take my place at the end of the year. The bishop considered my suggestion but his vicar did not like the idea of bringing another African to the diocese.

A strange new boss in a parish

During my meeting with the bishop and his staff, I noticed a man in the group who dressed in a cowboy jacket. He smoked and sipped coffee all the time and did not participate in our discussions. At the end, the bishop introduced the man as my new boss, the pastor with whom I would be working until further notice. The pastor had come from Butte, a parish about 60 miles away from Helena. After a month I reported and took up my new assignment. Part of the appointment letter from the chancery read:

Dear Father Nathaniel,

After consultation with the personnel board and other advisors, I am pleased to appoint you as associate pastor to the Butte Catholic Community North, comprised of Saint Joseph parish, Immaculate Conception parish, and Saint Patrick parish. This appointment begins August 1, 1997. The appointment is subject to review on regular basis during the time your bishop allows you to serve in the diocese of Helena. At the present time we do not project that the appointment will extend beyond 2000, when your bishop expects you to return to the diocese of Orlu. You are to work closely with and under the supervision of Father Joseph P. Moran, the pastor. You and father Moran will need to work out the specific details of your ministry in Butte. I know that your talents will be of great service to Father Moran and the people there...

Earlier the bishop had confided to me that he was greatly pleased with the recommendations he got from my bishop and gave me a copy of the testimonial, part of which read:

Dear Bishop Brunett,

I thank you for your letter of inquiry regarding Father Nathaniel. Father Nathaniel came out with my blessings, originally on a well-deserved sabbatical leave after twelve years of impressive service as the pioneer rector of the diocesan minor seminary. I have extended his stay to four years in the United States to further enrich his experience. He has already spent two of these years in the diocese of Sioux Falls, South

Dakota. He is expected back home for the celebration of the Jubilee year in the third millennium.

Enclosed herewith is a copy of the essential outline of Father Nathaniel's "curriculum vitae" culled from the diocesan records. He has demonstrated a high sense of responsibility, commitment to priestly life and ministry and a level of maturity. He enjoys the goodwill and admiration of fellow priests, staff and students of the seminary and members of Christ's faithful in his parish.

Please be assured that the record of his service is unquestionable. I certify that there are no moral or other impediments, which might prevent him from full pastoral ministry...

Dangerous to be uninformed

As I settled down with every enthusiasm to work with my new boss, one question lingered in my mind: "Why has the bishop appointed me to this parish?" Neither the bishop nor other members of his staff had said a word about my new boss or the parish we were to take care of. Lack of information initially upset me. Some parishioners told me three parishes had been administered by one priest for the last ten years and there was nothing particularly cumbersome about their pastoral care. Another priest had been in-charge of one. Why did this pastor in his early fifties need an associate? Before long, I discovered why I was there. Closed lips began to open up.

The delinquent boozer

As I settled down to work I noticed a lot of "irregularities" in my new boss's lifestyle. He smoked heavily filling the rectory with suffocating cigarette fumes. I figured out he drank at least 3 to 4 bottles of altar wine everyday. He rarely ate. I celebrated masses and took care of 95% of the pastoral ministry. He was a fragile personality who often staggered around, rarely left his room and tried to avoid everybody.

The boss sent off on rehabilitation

As the pastor's problems mounted reports reached the diocesan authorities. He did not answer phone calls, as he had his own private line. When the administrator called me, I gave him the pastor's private number and he was able to get in touch with my boss. The administrator arrived one morning, spoke with him and ordered him to leave the parish for rehabilitation. He left the following day and handed each one of us on his staff a letter indicating that he would be away for about 3 months or longer. The deacon was to be the administrator while I took charge of the Sacramental ministry. There was no official word from the chancery and I was puzzled.

Then the people wagged their tongues. They complained and lamented. Many gossiped. Others simply unveiled what had hitherto remained a mystery to me. The delinquent pastor and boss had been drinking for the past 20 years. He had been on rehabilitation exercise more than 20 times. He had taken "French-leave," leaving the priesthood for more than 7 years, before returning to active ministry. In 4 months their parish had witnessed an appalling deterioration in mass attendance and financial gains. At least 40% of the parishioners abandoned the parish for neighboring ones or had completely deserted the church.

I was terribly shaken. What kept me sad for the rest of my time there was the action of the diocesan authorities who refused to tell me anything about my boss and the place I was to exercise the pastoral ministry. Every concerned parishioner continued to ask the same question: "Why have the authorities allowed this man to function as a pastor?" No one spoke out publicly. Most gossiped. Perhaps they had written petitions to no avail. I could not tell.

The angry and frustrated boss

After the three-month rehabilitation the boss returned. His few changes lasted not more than one week! One day he called me to his room for the first time. I thought he wanted to discuss

pastoral event. I noticed he had taken a large dose of alcohol and the room was filled with smoke. Then he spoke:

Boss: I don't think you are helping me enough in this parish. You are always in your room reading or on your computer. I heard you are writing a book. Is that why you came here? You rarely talk to the ladies in the office...

Nathaniel: Oh no, father, you don't mean what you are saying. You just came back from rehabilitation a few weeks' ago. In your absence I took care of everything. Did anyone say I did not do my job? No, father, even though you did not speak to me about your problems, as a brother priest I understood everything. That was why I doubled my efforts. I go to the high school to teach the children. I visit the sick in their homes and in the hospitals. I have been working together with the deacon and he has been good. What is the problem...As for staying in my room, I don't like to stay idle. I don't like going out to eat. I cook my food...As for talking to the ladies, I didn't think I had done anything wrong. I talk to them when it is necessary...As for my book, it is true I am writing a book, but that does not distract me from my pastoral ministry. Do you think it does?"

For a few minutes he was full of remorse and apologized to me for his embarrassing remarks. Why he reacted that way was completely incomprehensible to me. I related this incident to some close friends in the parish. Someone said it's the way with alcoholics! They consoled me and encouraged me to realize then why I was sent to them. They wished that I had taken over the parish and the boss sent to a rehabilitation center for a much longer period. One diocesan official voiced his solution: He wished the pastor would leave the priesthood entirely!

The situation worsened

For the rest of the period I stayed nothing improved, and even deteriorated further. The deacon resigned. The religious administrator of the school resigned. Many more parishioners abandoned the parish and went to mass elsewhere. It seemed everybody was abandoning us. But I continued to minister,

substituting for my boss when he was too weak to do his part. Often he invited his retired friends to say masses. The parishioners became very angry as they saw his tactics unnecessarily drained on their already empty purse. Uneasy calm barely covered frustrations.

My boss became more upset when fewer people attended his masses on the rare occasions he was able to celebrate. Parishioners regularly telephoned to learn the mass schedule so that they could avoid my boss and attend my celebrations instead. It was a very sensitive situation.

A scapegoat to be found

My boss had a close friend, formerly interdicted priest, described by some parishioners as a wicked, morbid racist. The bishop had interdicted this priest, who lived paranoid self-seclusion for 10 years and never communicated with his brother priests. He accused them and the bishop of insensitivity to his problems. He cut himself off from everybody and had been prohibited from exercising any pastoral ministry in the diocese. He was accused of molesting children under his care. The lawsuit brought against him cost the diocese a fortune, according to rumors. Yet my boss considered him a good friend.

One day, a few days after Ash Wednesday my boss followed this man's advice and summoned me. Was he looking for a scapegoat?

Boss: I was told by a parishioner that you denied some people the ash on Ash Wednesday. And someone said you splashed ashes on people. Again I heard you preached about sex and masturbation...

I looked at him in amazement and I thought he must completely be out of his senses. I calmly tried to explain to him:

Nathaniel: I am surprised at these allegations. In the first place I did not deny anybody ashes. We had plenty of it. I did exactly what the deacon instructed me to do, namely to perform the ritual at the end of mass. They said some people used to leave the church immediately they took the ash at the beginning of mass. But that day I think I saw just one man

who left before the end of the mass. I couldn't remember if I ever purposely splashed ashes on people. But I saw many parishioners who carried the ash on their foreheads the rest of the day. I thought they liked the ash.

As for what I preached during the homily I didn't think I said anything any other priest could not have preached at the beginning of lent - penance, abstinence, prayer, fasting etc. I just rehearsed what I had been preaching on Ash Wednesdays for the past 20 years or so. But if anybody got offended by the stuff I preached, I could only say now that I am sorry since I had no reason to upset anybody with my homily. But if you find anything doctrinally and morally wrong about what I preached, I will be happy to be corrected.

The boozier boss dismisses the sober assistant

A few days after the above encounter with my boss, I received a letter in my box. As I learned from an impeccable source from the diocesan headquarters the letter was constructed and typed by the interdicted priest but my boss signed it and faxed to the administrator. Earlier the boss had said something to me. According to him "with the great number of retired priests around I am sure your services would no more be needed in Butte." I was surprised at this statement. When I asked for further clarifications, he said he was only talking about long-term arrangements. I did not understand until I received the following letter:

Dear Father Nathaniel Ndiokwere,

After much prayer and reflection over the past four months, I have come to the decision that I will relieve you from your pastoral duties at St. Patrick's and Immaculate Conception in Butte, Montana. I feel that due to cultural differences and language barriers that being in Butte is not enhancing your personal priesthood nor the growth of the faith community of the parishes in the North side of Butte.

You may remain here until June 1998 continuing in your priestly ministry. I am giving you this notice now so that you have ample time to

check with the administrator of the diocese of Helena, Montana, to see if there is another position open for you in the diocese, and if not allow you time to make arrangements back in South Dakota, Nigeria or wherever your journey leads you. I thank you for your help and dedication to our community. May God, in his infinite wisdom guide us both throughout our lives.

Signed Fr. Joe Pat. Moran - Pastor St. Patrick's and Immaculate Conception parishes, Butte, Montana, April 24, 1998.

My reply

Dear Father Joe Pat Moran

I was shocked to receive your letter of April 24, 1998. My first reaction was to ignore it because I could not figure out what prompted such a letter. My understanding however had been that I was sent to Butte Catholic Community North by the diocese to minister to Christ's faithful here. I thought the diocese would inform me when my services were no more needed. That you are relieving me of my duties is a strange phenomenon in the Catholic Church. If you were the person who brought me here, I would have moved out the same hour I read your letter. But I would be embarrassing the diocesan authorities if I were to take such an action and I believe it would be quite unreasonable if not irresponsible on my part. I am equally sure you have embarrassed them. But I like to wait and see. I assure you that I am not a fugitive. If the diocese of Helena, Montana, U.S.A. does not need my services any longer, the authorities will communicate that information to me.

The administrator reacts

As expected the reaction from the administrator was strong. He asked me to write a full report of my side of the story. I did. For serious reasons I have decided not to reproduce my letter to the administrator here.

After reading my letter the administrator came to Butte to hear from both of us together. He asked my boss to give his reasons for dismissing me. The boss said nothing tangible and quibbled over words. Turning to the administrator he said:

Father Nathaniel has been most helpful since he came to work in the parish. He has been a wonderful priest, very hardworking, dedicated, a zealous, and exemplary priest.

The administrator listened with amazement and asked: *If all is true, why did you write your letter?* The boss burst out in tears, apologizing to the administrator for causing him stress for the "past ten years or more." He confessed: "In the absence of a bishop I have added more to your burdens." Fr. Moran suggested that the administrator could transfer him or do anything the diocese wished.

But the administrator had already made up his mind. Concerning the letter of my dismissal he knew who had masterminded the plans. Father Finnegan was responsible. The voice was Jacob's voice, but the hands were the hands of Esau. The administrator said to Moran: *No, you will stay. I will transfer Nathaniel to another place in a couple of days.*

Most parishioners reacted almost violently when they learned I was leaving. Many called the parish office asking for explanations. Everybody - the parish secretary - the bookkeeper, the housekeepers and retired priests went into hiding. Parishioners wanted to know when a send-off was planned for Nathaniel. There was none and many wrote to express their grief. Later many more wrote and sent their gifts to me. Only a few of their letters - greetings on my **arrival, pleasure at my presence and departure** - can be reproduced here.

As for Father Finnegan, after a few weeks of further meddling with parish matters in Butte, he was summarily dismissed and once again he went into oblivion.

Parishioners react

Dear Father Nathaniel

My name is Helen Richter and I wanted to tell you how much I really love your masses. I never miss one. They are very interesting and very educational to me. I also think it is very nice how you are involved in the Catholic children's school. Thank you for making me enjoy mass a little bit more every Saturday evening. (Walter and Helen Richter)

At the Crossroads

Thank you for being with us and keeping St. Patrick and Immaculate Conception parishes going. It is very inspiring to attend your daily mass. The penance service was beautiful and we left feeling very happy and in God's grace. (Margaret Regan)

My deepest joy and gratitude that you are here among us in Butte. Your masses are beautiful and your homilies are always a source of inspiration and a call to holiness. Thank you for all your encouragement for mission work in Africa. Not only are you an excellent priest – you are a truly enjoyable human person with a marvelous sense of humor. God bless you. (Ruth Lee)

I just wanted you to know how much we all appreciate your being in our community and serving us so well. Your zeal and enthusiasm and great love of Christ and His Church are an inspiration to my family and me. I thank you and God bless you (Cathy Rice and family)

I send you my warmest wishes. I am happy that you are here helping us experience Christ in our midst. You are doing a great job. We thank God for his gift of you to our community. (Mary & Danny Kane & family)

You are such a gift to our parish! I really appreciate your enthusiastic approach to living a Christ filled life. You add a wonderful dimension to the Mass and I want to thank you for being here. You are wonderful and I like your homilies at daily mass. Thanks for serving our North Unit. You are doing a great Job. (John & Judy)

I had planned to write you several weeks ago, as you can see it did not happen. I have wanted you to know how glad I am, that you came to our parish. I find your sermons interesting and insightful. I find it remarkable that the people in your country celebrate the feast days of the Church for so many hours. I find that so many people in this country don't even want to spend an hour at Church.

I was very impressed that you noticed that there are not many children and young people at mass. Most of them don't even know and say a prayer. It was very nice of you to talk to the 7th Graders about vocations. Our Diocese and local priests don't seem to do much about encouraging young people to the priesthood and sisterhood.

I'm sure it hasn't been easy for you to be here, especially with Father Moran leaving shortly after your arrival. In my view you have done a good job. We feel very fortunate to have you at our Church. (Darlene Z. Prendergast)

Dear Fr. Nathaniel

I am struggling to understand why people can't make the very small effort to hear what you are saying. I believe that the main reason why some people must complain that they can't understand you is because they haven't heard the word "**confession**" from the pulpit in 30 years. That has them all disoriented. Also, they aren't used to priests challenging them to seek holiness, or do anything out of the ordinary.

I am convinced that Joe Pat is the reason for the drop off in the collections, and the people who don't want to hear challenges. I welcome every bit of it and I hope you can understand what I am saying. I am being a bit sarcastic. I am upset, too, that you are not being given due respect. Why should a deacon administer the parish when we have a competent and wonderful pastor like you? I, for one, thank God for allowing you to be sent to us. I appreciate all you are trying to do. Things may get tough. I also feel like complaining that it's time to hear from the **priests** and particularly **you** on Sundays, not the **deacons**. Although I do like one of the deacons but I think we need to hear from you. Who do I direct my complaints to? (Mellda)

Some reactions on my transfer

Dear Fr. Nathaniel

I was very sorry that you had to leave for your new post. I thought you were supposed to be here until the end of July. I was hoping to have you for dinner again. Your country is to be complimented on your devotion to God and the Catholic Church. I always enjoy hearing about what other countries do; your people seem to have a greater celebration for God and the Church. I don't think Catholics in our country have the

At the Crossroads

devotion that you all seem to have. I have always been interested in the cultures and history of other countries. I must apologize for the people of Butte. I felt you were not given the proper respect, while you were here. I hope and pray that your time in Columbia Falls will be more pleasant. (Jim & Ruth Deasy)

Thank you so much for serving us with your ministry. We hope you know how very much we have appreciated your service here. We wish you the best in your new assignment. We will miss you a lot. But we'll pray for you as you pray for us too. Keep in touch. (Carol & Watt Berry)

Thank you for all you did for Butte Catholic Community North. We need so many more like you. You are sadly missed. Thank you and God's love be with you. (Elise Bennett)

Just a note to let you know how sorry we are that you have been sent to Columbia Falls. We thought you would be here in Butte for 2 years. We want to thank you for spending this short time with us. We enjoyed your Masses very much. We are in hopes to take a ride to Columbia Falls and have Mass with you. You are in our thoughts and prayers. Thank you. The very best wishes are accompanied by a prayer that the Lord will always bless you and keep you in His care. (Your friends Walter & Helen Richter)

Good people will be remembered as a blessing. This brings a heartfelt thank you, but it really can't begin to say how much your help has meant, what a blessing you have been. As a member of Butte Catholic Community North I want to thank you for coming to the aid of our parish. We all like you, your culture, your personality, your wisdom and sharing, and your happy face - as well as your neat style. (Ms. Rita A. Casagranda)

CHAPTER 17

THE AMERICAN MISSION - PART III

A DIFFICULT MISSION INDEED

To be fair to myself, I have no qualms declaring that my mission in the United States was indeed a difficult one. Surely most of the erstwhile European missionaries who labored in China, the Far East countries and Africa could say as much. Right from my arrival in the United States I had been posted to **unpleasant** and **controversial** pastoral situations.

First, it was to stay with a disappointed young priest who was accused of so many things. Unable to cope he contemplated leaving the priesthood when the bishop appealed to me to help "resuscitate" the young man. A diocese that had suffered a lot of setbacks in the past and has continued to lose many of its clergy was in a precarious situation of going 'bankrupt.' My presence in the parish as well as help from counselors helped the young priest to regain consciousness and to hold fast to his vocation. He has continued to perform well as pastor and we have remained good friends since then.

My **second** assignment in Parker was no doubt the most challenging. The three parishes had remained empty since the young pastor who was there for a few years took a decision to quit. He was accused of many sexual irregularities and when he left no one accepted to replace him. Who would blame anyone? Many a time the good and the bad are lumped together in the many cases of the ongoing sex scandal imbroglios that have cost the Catholic Church in America a lot in cash and priests. Although I did not inherit any of the problems of the outgoing pastor, the other problems I encountered there were no doubt overwhelming.

My **third** assignment in Butte, Montana surely was one of the most perplexing. Working with a delinquent alcoholic priest was not an easy job. Since he was always unable to perform and upset that some close person observed his double standards and frivolous antics, he was bound to be suspicious,

untrustworthy, and angry. He endeavored to show he was still the boss and in-charge and had things under his control, in spite of his handicaps and miserable lifestyle. The outcome of that encounter with such a man could not have been different.

My **fourth** assignment in Columbia Falls, Montana had difficulties, too. I was posted to the Catholic Community of St. Richard's Church. Eight months after I joined the Christian community, the pastor had to retire prematurely due to Alzheimer disease. He was a friendly, holy, and kind man.

Fair and foul

Initially I thought it providential that I accepted the transfer to Columbia Falls, Montana where I spent the rest of my time in the United States and wrote my present and third book. Here things looked rather different. The people were more friendly and appreciative. The most beautiful landscape of Montana is located in this region and offered a conducive environment for a more fruitful adventure.

The famous Meadow Golf Course is located in the city and many golfers visit from all over the state and Canada. With Father Joseph O'Sullivan and other family friends I was introduced to the game and in many occasions we played up to the 18th hole! Who would have imagined I could learn the game of golf? What a blessing in disguise!

For the first time I was able to enjoy some leisure in discovering the most beautiful faces of America. There were many very friendly people I met in Butte and Columbia Falls, Montana who took me out to their beautiful parks, lakes, dams, industrial plants, and woodlands. There were many invitations to concerts, dinner and birthday parties and all these gave meaning to life and contributed much to the final assessment of my experiences and mission in America. In all, the ordinary Americans, the simple Christian people I met were good people. Problems for me and other African priests in America could always be traced to the Church hierarchy and some of our brothers in the clerical garb. After only a few months in Columbia Falls, I was glad to receive many favorable letters

from the appreciative people. One letter summarizes the general sentiments of the Church community whose favors I enjoyed:

Dear Father Nathaniel

Once during Mass a few weeks ago, I was overcome with gratitude as I watched you move about the altar. I thought of how generous God is to provide us with a wonderful priest, even for a short time. I thought of how generous you are to stay and help us in our need. I wanted to run over to you that instant and thank you for sacrificing so much, for saying "Yes" when God called you to the priesthood and eventually calling you here to Montana, so far from home. My whole family is so glad you came!

Nigeria has given the world many treasures, and you are one of the most precious. I have been meaning to tell you this for some time. During this time of Advent as we prepare to receive the gift of God's Son, I wanted you to know that Father Nathaniel has been a gift from God to Saint Richard's and to us. I, for one, am deeply grateful. May you have a blessed Christmas! (Sincerely, Kathleen)

A couple of family friends from Butte continued to make the long journey to visit me regularly at Columbia Falls. Some invited me to join them in their summer camping communities around the beautiful lakes and parks of this part of Montana. Some had invited me to spend a weekend with their families in Butte, while others promised to stop over at Columbia Falls whenever they visit this region of Montana. A couple from Butte wrote me after visiting Columbia Falls and enjoying Sunday mass here. They captioned their letter - **"Neglect not the gift that is in thee" (I Timothy 4.14).**

Dear Father Nathaniel

It was such a treat for us to attend your beautiful Mass at St. Richard's. It felt great to be in such a spirit filled faith community. How lucky for these people to have a wonderful pastor like you! We felt very comfortable there. The communion song "The supper of the Lord" is one that we had not heard until last Sunday at your mass.

We miss you here in Butte as you reached out to us in such a pastoral way - being true to your priesthood. We thank God for the time that we had you. We look forward to reading your books. God bless you.

Sincerely Madelyn Lafave & Family

Sacramental and Pastoral Ministry

Although I enjoyed my best moments in this part of the diocese and America, I had to put up with an unusual pastoral situation. I was not comfortable working under the directives of a woman religious who became my boss after the pastor retired. It was a totally strange situation in the pastoral ministry, as the following note from the chancery showed:

Dear Father Nathaniel,

I am writing today to notify you officially regarding changes in the pastoral leadership of Saint Richard parish, effective March 15, 1999. Father Joseph P. Sullivan is being relieved of his responsibilities as pastor of Saint Richard parish and is being granted senior status in the diocese. Sister Lorane Coffin, OSB, is being appointed as pastoral administrator of Saint Richard parish.

Your assignment is being modified to the extent necessary so that it is clear that the expectation is that you will provide Sacramental and Pastoral ministry for Saint Richard, under the direction of sister Lorane. (All the emphases are mine)

Since she is the pastoral administrator, the general administration of the parish will be carried out by sister Lorane. She is the one who has overall responsibility for the operation of the parish. At the same time, I know that you will work with her to assure that the sacramental and pastoral needs of the community are met. Please review the faculties, which were issued to you when you arrived and if you have questions or concerns, please contact the chancery.

Nathaniel, we appreciate very much your willingness to continue to serve Saint Richard parish and to assist sister Lorane. This will be an important time for the parish and your presence there is of great assistance! May the Lord bless you abundantly in all that you do.

(Administrator)

Though strange in some parts I had no concerns and did not complain to anybody. Outside the stated area of my assignment in the parish - **sacramental and pastoral needs** - I never thought the priest should have more burdens on his shoulders. I did not want to exercise any other power other than **spiritual, sacramental and pastoral**. So I did not find it in any way humiliating to serve under anybody - priest or woman religious, deacon or lay person.

I had only one reservation, which I never shared with anybody. It could be expressed in this form: "Under circumstances such as the above who should really take the responsibilities of any failures?" As long as the leader is equal to the task and is more knowledgeable, responsible, and efficient than those under him or her, there should be no cause for alarm! But truly not a few parishioners came to find out from me who was actually in-charge of the parish and from whom they should take orders - the Reverend Father of Sister? I never responded to their inquiries. This is no doubt one of the unusual situations any foreign missionary should be prepared to put up with in America.

"Nunc Dimitis" - Time to Go

Another letter from the administrator indicated there were new pastoral changes in the diocese taking effect from September 1st 1999. According to the letter, my former boss in Butte - the alcohol addict - would become the new pastor of Saint Richard's church!

In period of two years my former boss in Butte had been transferred three times! After a year in **Butte**, Father Joseph Moran had again been transferred to another parish - **Columbia**

Falls. The previous year he was transferred from **Shelby** to **Butte**.

Unfortunately, this had been the church's way of dealing with delinquent priests. While the Butte parishioners would heave a sigh of relief, Columbia Falls Catholics must put up with the burdens of a delinquent pastor.

In reply to the administrator's letter, I informed him I was ready to return to my diocese in Nigeria. Instead of waiting till September when the new location of priests would take effect, or accepting a new assignment, I decided to leave earlier - **July** - instead of **September**.

Serving in American parishes was a boring pastoral exercise for me. I had sat idle hours, days, weeks, and months with few challenging activities. It was time to liberate myself from this self-imposed exile.

Like the prodigal son in the Gospel parable who had to put up with starvation and great deprivation for many years in self-exile, it was time to return home. "How many of my father's hired hands have bread enough to spare, but here I am dying of hunger! I will get up and go to my father" (Luke: 15.17).

Although I was in no way a prodigal son, deeply in my heart, I felt that from pastoral perspective my four years of mission in the United States parishes had not yielded the desired results. I had watched helplessly - men and women, ordained and secular - instruct me on a profession I knew better. It was indeed a frustrating experience.

I did not see why I should be an assistant pastor in a parish of less than 100 families when in Nigeria there was work for me in the flourishing large parishes with more than 2000 families. I did not see why I should teach a few kids catechism in America, while In Nigeria hundreds of students in the seminaries, universities, colleges, and secondary schools needed my attention.

It was time to return to fatherland - Nigeria and diocese of Orlu. I had experienced America and summarized these experiences in my two books - **Search for Greener Pastures - Igbo and African Experience** and **The Third Millennium Church**. The present write-up is only a summary of the events that led to the publication of the two books and a reflection on

my life as a priest for the past 25 years. Four of those years had been spent in America.

On October 4, 1998 I had written my bishop and expressed my intention to return home. Part of my letter which accompanied the complimentary copies of my two books read as follows:

His Excellency,

I like to assure you, His Lordship, that I have appreciated the opportunity given to me to spend my sabbatical in the United States, mainly to study and investigate some issues. I plan to be back by October 1999 to take up any assignment you may reserve for me. It is my duty to help out where my services are needed.

It is a pity to let you know that my efforts to establish pastoral relationship with the diocese of Helena, Montana, USA, did not yield good fruit. Three months after my arrival here "a new king who did not know Joseph" took over the administration of the diocese of Helena, as the friendly bishop who invited me to the diocese was transferred to another diocese.

I recall the administrator - the then Vicar General - did not support the bishop's plans to recruit African priests to help them even though there was chronic shortage of priests in the diocese. I remember the reaction of the embarrassed bishop as he questioned the vicar "Why not? We need them here." Since the bishop left the diocese, all my efforts to re-open the discussion failed.

My bishop replied and in his subsequent letters suggested what I could do when I returned. Part of his first letter read:

Reverend and Dear Fr. Nathaniel,

I continue to thank God for the gift of you in our Diocese. May I use this opportunity to congratulate you on the publication of your two books. You have indeed put these years to a most fruitful use. You have continued to be a model and source of inspiration to our priests and laity. May God continue to bless your endeavor.

Thank you for being open and for your frank appraisal of issues pertaining to the Diocese. It is very gratifying that you are one of the few who are anxious to return soon. Your efforts to build up both physical infrastructures and human resources in the Diocese are highly appreciated. Keep up the good works. May God continue to be your support and Mother Mary protect you.

(Signed Most Rev. G. Ochiagha)

As I was ending the last chapter of this write-up - 18 months after the last bishop of Helena was transferred - a new bishop of Helena was named. He is Most Rev. Roberto C. Morlino.

In various ways the administrator showed his disapproval of a black missionary in a white church that was in desperate need of help. I recalled the saying attributed to Bishop James E. Walsh, a Maryknoll Missionary - "To be a Missioner is to go where you are needed but not wanted, and to stay until you are wanted but not needed."

My final letter and reply to Father Darragh

June 6, 1999

Very Rev. John J. Darragh
Administrator, Diocese of Helena
515 N. Ewing
P.O. Box 1729 Helena,
MT. 59624

I am writing to acknowledge the receipt of your letter of May 18, 1999 in which you informed me you have relieved me of my responsibilities as Sacramental Minister for Saint Richard Parish in Columbia Falls, effective September 1, 1999. You offered three options you wanted me to consider.

Immediately I read your letter I made efforts to contact my bishop and superiors in Nigeria concerning the latest development. Luckily enough

my bishop was in the States last week and I was able to talk to him and let him know of my next plans. We had very fruitful discussion.

As I made it clear to Bishop Brunett in 1997 I had no intention of staying longer than necessary in the United States. In fact I was moved by pity and pressure to extend my ministry at St. Richard's Church till the end of the year 1999. Fr. Joseph P. Sullivan's debilitating Alzheimer's disease and pressure from some parishioners made me change my earlier plans to leave at the end of July.

Having considered the various options you presented in your letter, I have the following in response:

I will not like to work with Joseph Pat Moran, your new pastor of St Richard's Church, Columbia Falls. It is in fact sickening to think that I would be willing to work with that man, who persecuted me and made life miserable for me in Butte. Surely you were aware of all that happened in Butte.

I will not be willing to wait until you are able to find another assignment for me, since the diocese has now sufficient number of priests to take care of all your pastoral problems. I am not looking for job because I have enough waiting for me in Nigeria. It is in fact pastorally a waste of human resources taking care of less than 150 families here as an assistant pastor when there are more than 2000 families that will keep me heavily engaged in a Nigerian parish.

The third option you suggested is the most appropriate and reasonable to me. I believe I have done my best to help the needy people of God in the diocese of Helena, Montana, United States. I am sure the people appreciated my efforts.

But such has been the fate of the missionary - past and present. Bishop James E. Walsh, the Maryknoll Missionary made the point when he said - "To be a Missioner is to go where you are needed but not wanted and stay until you are wanted but not needed."

It is time for me to go. You, the present administrator of the diocese of Helena have made it clear in theory and practice that you did not want

an African priest in your diocese. It is equally on record that for the two years I have served in the diocese of Helena my name never appeared in your directory. I have equally documented our correspondences.

There are hundreds of Nigerian priests and nuns ministering in various dioceses of the United States. We thought it was in the interest of the universal Church to help our needy brothers and sisters in Europe and America as they once helped Africa.

I have decided to leave St Richard's parish, Columbia Falls at the end of July, earlier than you suggested, precisely harkening to your advice "to return to Nigeria a few months early in order to prepare for the assignment your bishop is giving you."

I am overjoyed at the thought of going back to my fatherland to minister to my people I have missed for long.

I thank you and your priests and good people of the diocese of Helena for your hospitality and friendship. I assure you still that the diocese of Orlu, Nigeria will be willing to send missionaries to your diocese and other dioceses in the United States that might be in need of priests.

As you continue to administer the diocese of Helena, I pray that our God will assist you and your diocesan Personnel Board and College of Consultors.

Sincerely yours in Christ

Father Nathaniel Ndiokwere

The Bitter Truth - Parishioners React!

News quickly circulated in Columbia Falls, Butte and beyond that I was leaving finally for Nigeria. Many parishioners phoned and wrote. Most of them were anxious to know why I decided to leave earlier. I thought it wise to tell the whole story in the Church. Their reactions, expressed in their "protest letters" to the former Administrator of the diocese - Father John Darragh and copied to the new Bishop - Most Rev. Morlino - exposed their

anger and disillusionment. Only a few of the letters are published here.

Dear Fr. Nathaniel,

[Enclosed is a copy of the letter we are sending to Fr. Darragh, which expresses our opinions and feelings. Maybe it will in some small way help to "open the door" for our diocese to accept missionary priests in the future.]

Very Rev. John J. Darragh, Administrator
Diocese of Helena
P.O. Box 1729, Helena, MT 59624

It was with much sadness that we learned that Fr. Nathaniel Ndiokwere will be leaving us in two weeks. He has been a "breath of fresh air" to this parish. However, when we learned his reasons, we were not surprised that he has chosen to leave. By his own admission, the people in Butte and Columbia Falls have, for the most part received him well. Many, including ourselves, have welcomed him into our hearts and homes.

Unfortunately, it is the hierarchy and his brother priests who have not welcomed or befriended him. This news came as a shock to us. Our diocesan priests, who should be setting a good example for their people and who had a perfect opportunity to help break down the barriers of prejudice and racism, have done just opposite! Why is this? We can't even guess. They certainly are not following the example of Christ.

Fr. Ndiokwere holds a Doctorate degree in Theology from Rome and has studied in England and Germany, as well as the United States. He has been a priest for 24 years. He has traveled all over world. He lectured at the Catholic Institute of West Africa in Nigeria for 8 years, served as the Rector of his diocesan Seminary, and for a number of years was pastor of a parish of some 2000 families with three priests under him. He is a man of extraordinary tolerance and humility.

Yet, in Columbia Falls, you relegated him to assistant to the Administrator of St Richard, who is not even a priest. What an insult to a man of his education and experience! He has the qualification to be a bishop almost anywhere in the world!

At the Crossroads

There are those who complain they can't understand Fr. Ndiokwere, but how hard have they tried? We had a little trouble at first, but we persevered and were well rewarded for our efforts. His homilies are among the best we've ever heard - and certainly the most inspiring. We will miss him greatly. We can only hope our new pastor will measure up even half so well.

Only a couple of weeks ago Deacon Rudi Bullman gave us the sobering statistics that 13 priests in our diocese are ready for retirement and only 4 candidates are presently studying for the priesthood. Who knows if these 4 will even persevere to ordination?

Yet you say that there is "no place for Fr. Ndiokwere (or others like him) in our diocese! In his diocese in Nigeria there are plenty of priests - enough to send some out as missionaries. What his diocese is doing right, that our diocese is doing wrong! If the hierarchy won't accept missionary priests when the diocese fails to produce its own priests, we all lose. The flocks must have shepherds or they will scatter.

We are thankful to be getting a Bishop. Our diocese has been without a leader too often and too long. We pray that he will be guided by the Holy Spirit to do what is best for the people of Western Montana.

Sincerely

Emi & Rich

Very Rev. John J. Darragh, Administrator
Diocese of Helena
P.O. Box 1729, Helena, MT 59624

I am terribly sad at heart that Fr. Nathaniel Ndiokwere is leaving us. My only consolation however, is that I know his people will rejoice at his return and he will be happy. A great many of the other parishioners whom I have talked with are also quite sad! However, we are even more sad at heart, in the way and manner which this Good Priest has been treated by our diocese, by his brothers in the priesthood!

You isolated him from yourselves. None of you have been to visit him or welcome him or thank him for helping out during this tough time. You humiliate him by putting him under Sister Lorane's guidance, making him assistant to her and not allowing him to be the Pastor as

any of you would have demanded as your right! Which of you would accept such an assignment?

Why has it been said, "we don't want Africa to send us more priests"? Who are we? You? The other priests? Do we have so many priests here that more are not needed? Do you think we care that his skin is different from ours? NO! We are not that little! Do you think we care that he has an accent? NO! We are not that ignorant!

We do want more priests like him from Africa to come to us, I assure you! What are you all thinking of when such things are decided? Are you considering us, or politics? I tell you, souls are hungry and thirsty and struggling to survive in parishes such as this one, which is dry and cold and dead, yet you would have us starve when Africa offers us her richness and blessings in her priests!

If you think I am judging this parish or diocese harshly you are mistaken. I have witnessed too many other examples in the world to know better! I have witnessed many priests from all over the world. I have not been isolated to Montana's Few! I have never seen one outsider welcomed here with open arms! No, I am not judging harsh.

I cannot begin to grasp, why you put this wonderful priest under the restriction of being Sister Lorane's assistant! Is she our pastor?

I am going to write to Father Nathaniel's Bishop, and tell him what a tremendous blessing he has been to us! Christian charity would see you (his brothers) do the same!

May God send us more priests like Fr. Nathaniel Ndiokwere from Africa to shepherd this hungry flock and be a guiding light!

Remember, Fr. Darragh, the Holy Spirit has no color, no culture, no origin of birth. He fits in no matter where he is doing his work! We ought never complain to our Lord Jesus of being overburdened with work a single day or hour, or having help, if we reject the help he so freely offers us now!

Remember Simon, who carried the cross for Jesus, yes he was pressed into it, but now Jesus has heard the prayers of us who cry out to him "send us priests and sisters" and he is testing you. Will you reject what he offers us? I beg you, do not cause us to be hungry because of your own personal likes and dislikes. Our Lord is ready to help us. Are you?

Sincerely - Jean

Father John Darragh
Diocese of Helena
Helena, Montana

I am writing to inform you as a parishioner of St. Richard's parish that I am greatly troubled as to your decision regarding Father Nathaniel. I have sat quietly as I have watched the dynamics of the Catholic Church in action since he has arrived and I must say I am ashamed at the men of the cloth, the elders in the parish and the ignorant people who cannot be thankful for what we have. The fate of the Catholic Church is not in its elders, but its youth and I am writing to represent the youth of the Church.

For years I couldn't understand a sermon Father Sullivan said due to his Alzheimer's, always mumbled-jumbled and meandering. Did I keep going to Church? You bet I did. Do you want to know why? It was a place to celebrate. To be with my Christian brothers and sisters in my Catholic community, to worship Jesus, ask for forgiveness and to receive the Holy Spirit. I ask you, is this not what I just taught my eight year old daughter who made her first communion what Church is all about, among other things? Going to Church is not about the color of your skin or the way you speak.

My children and I enjoy Father Nathaniel. You see, in his sermons he speaks of a culture and land that my children and I may not see. For that short period of time we get to go someplace different and see how Jesus' life affected an entirely different culture. That, in itself, is priceless. Even the music since Father Nathaniel has been here has been more upbeat. I'm not saying he has anything to do with that, but all I know is that it is not the monotone same-old hymns every week.

When your representative came and told us not to point our fingers at him regarding who is going to send us a priest because we had three pointing back at us I agreed with him. We need to send some of our own boys to the priesthood and until then we

should be grateful with what we have. Well guess what Father, I was grateful and now look at what you're doing.

Sincerely
Lizzy

Dear Fr. Nathaniel,

My husband, myself and our 3 adult children and their families attended Holy Mass July 3 in Columbia Falls.

We were shocked and stunned by the story of "rejection" you experienced at the Administrative/Priests level. It is unbelievable.

We are in the other Montana Diocese - Great Falls, Billings. The shortage of priests is acute here!!! That particular weekend and the last our parish had "Word & Communion" - no Holy Mass!!

This letter is to convey our love and appreciation for the 'Yes' to God that your priesthood represents, your 'Yes' to going away from home and families to help us Catholics of the United States and to ask forgiveness for those who did not appreciate your vocation & dedication.

Now that Helena Diocese has Bishop won't you reconsider your decision to go home? Surely the Diocese will be blessed with a bishop who will appreciate the help you could give him.

Please pray for vocations in Montana and we keep you in our prayers wherever you are.

In Jesus Name,

Don Max & Mrs.

More Letters as I prepared to leave

Fr. Nathaniel

I was so happy when I heard you are going home soon and then I was so sad. I started to miss you and you haven't even gone yet. It was like hearing about someone I care for that is dying. I know you will be

happier in your country and among your people, yet I want you to stay for our own sake.

It has been so wonderful having you here. You have been the rain needed to end the drought. I've heard some people say, "I can't understand him, can you?" And my thought was "then you must not want to know what he has to say!"

I feel sorry for the few that don't understand. Those of us who do are very grateful to you for all you have given us. Your experiences, insights and perspective have been a deep breath of fresh air.

I know something good will come from the suffering you endured during your four-year stay in the United States. Even if you weren't a priest, you would still be welcome in my home. I would be a fool to reject someone as amazing as you. I'm sorry there aren't more people in the world like you.

Thank you so much for sharing yourself with us. I wish you all the joy and happiness your heart can hold and more. With great admiration.

Dawny

Dear Fr. Nathaniel,

I was sad to hear that you are leaving for your homeland. I thought and had hoped a new Bishop being appointed might have added more time in this country for you. You have been a blessing to us.

I had to see it to believe the many times you were ignored by our clergy and how heartbreaking it had to be for you. It took the hand of God and your great strength not to have walked out on them.

Hopefully some more priests from Africa will come to our country and rescue as they are so needed. I do believe they should be selective about where they will accept an assignment. Many larger cities will welcome them. Smaller cities like Butte and Columbia Falls and many Montana cities are not the place for them now.

The Church in the States has problems now. Too many people are trying to run the parishes instead of the pastor. There must be a 'headman,' a leader with kindness and understanding whose word should be law and followed. Maybe our new Bishop can change things for the better.

May your future hold much happiness for you and above all stay the Great Priest you are.

Sincerely (Margaret)

Obligation to minister in fatherland

In Search for Greener pastures, I blamed Igbo people, Nigerians, and Africans - clergy and lay persons - in Diaspora for abandoning our people in Africa. In Europe and America many talented Africans are contributing immensely to the development of the "First World" while our people languish in want.

I would not join the group of African priests and religious who have betrayed their trust. I was one of those who received best education. These privileged priests should be the vanguard of new African Church, contributing their quota in the development of our people. Working among our people in Africa should be the best way of showing appreciation for the favors we have received.

It is shameful to flee our fatherland where work is abundant, searching for mean jobs in other lands where our services though needed, are regrettably not appreciated. It is a tragedy that the Man of God should be begging for job in America, when laborers in the African church are overworked.

If the facilities - the paradisiacal state - Africans are seeking in America are non-existent in Africa, it is our duty to use our good offices to get them established and make our land sweet home. It is our duty to fight poverty, corruption, insecurity, joblessness, and other evils that drive people away from their fatherland.

All that glitters is not gold

There is not much to enjoy in America. I have had better time and happier days in Nigeria. Nigerian Christians are most generous people. I received money and gifts from friends,

parishioners, and parents of my students and seminarians. They appreciated my work. I lacked nothing.

In Nigeria, I enjoyed respect from all and sundry. I didn't need to cook, wash plates and clothes, or go to the grocery stores. My house-boys, nieces, and nephews provided all my needs. I was a king.

African missionary in Europe and America must put up with loneliness and isolation. Mother Teresa was right when once she observed: "In the West there is loneliness, which I call the leprosy of the West. In many ways it is worse than our poor in Calcutta." While American rectories and churches are cold isolated places; in Nigeria the Father's house and parish church are beehives of faith community activities. Nigerian priest does not languish in loneliness and isolation.

My experiences and stories are only a tip of the iceberg and had been documented for a purpose. Surely many African priests in America will discover themselves in this write-up. Some might have more bitter experiences to relate.

After enthraling his audience with a hilarious or disconcerting piece, the Igbo orator often ends his story abruptly, leaving his audience with mix feelings - "**Obu uka, burukwa ilulu.**" - "This is a simple story, and a proverb as well. Think about it. Draw your conclusions"

What the author of John's Gospel wrote about his testimony points to the same reality:

This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them, and we know that his testimony is true. But there are also many other things that Jesus did; if every one of them were written down, I suppose that the world itself could not contain the books that would be written (John:21.24-25).

CHAPTER 18

BACK FROM AMERICA - IN LIGHTER MOMENTS

America is a land of opportunities and people from all over the world flock the nation's borders for various motives. When I arrived and introduced myself to my first Christian communities, not a few parishioners were curious about my motives for coming to America. I never hesitated telling them: "I came to America to experience America." I wanted first hand information about stories that have been told about this wonderland. I had no other objectives, no hidden agenda. I would not like to prolong my stay or decide finally to settle in America. At the end of my sojourn I would return to my fatherland and diocese and work among my people. I would tell stories. I would write some of them down and that was why I started in time, right from the day of my arrival to take notes and store important documents that would help me in my write-up. A chapter, titled "**Back from America**" would seek to put my students and friends back home in Nigeria in a lighter mood as they read through this book.

Some amazing phenomena

America is a capitalist state and money is the center of life. There is job for everyone and you are free to hold more than two at a time. Outside some of the committed and morbid racists found in the political and ecclesiastical circles, the ordinary Americans are very friendly, kind, and loving people. But as for generosity - free gift - or what Africans refer to as "dash," the Americans generally fall below standard when compared with the awesome generous Germans. I was not surprised each time I received a miserly cash gift of \$5 (usually in check) from some of my friends at Christmas and Easter. The least cash gift I sent to my students in the minor seminary in Nigeria has been \$20, but each time I apologized for the smallness of my gift! The explanation for the low cash gift among Americans lies in their

capitalist political and social security culture and individualism. Only a few give "big money."

Religion, Family & Life

Contrary to some gossips I picked up before I left home for the mission, I believe that most Americans are committed Christians and are in some cases more orthodox and morally upright than most Christians in Europe and elsewhere. One can find in the strong Christian communities ultra conservatives as well as extreme left radicals. But the total exclusion of religion from school and from the social and political culture of the nation is a terrible blow to the Christian faith and moral values! School children know more about the theory of evolution and little about the bible, Christian faith and morals. While I may have to avoid any exaggeration, I guess that nearly every married American man and woman I had ever talked to has been **divorced at least once**. They talked to me about their ex-husbands and ex-wives. It is a strange phenomenon. Many don't believe that marriage is a permanent institution.

There are equally a lot of aberrations in marriage contract, like same-sex marriage. There is a famous reference to this phenomenon in "**Heather has two moms!**" Some people marry today and divorce in a few weeks' time! The divorced find it easy to get new partners for there are many birds of the same feather. They usually flock together.

There are some bizarre family relationships where the great-grand mother was a single mother, the grandmother, a single mother, the mother talking to you, is also a single mother. Her two or three other daughters are also single mothers! Wow! There is no reason to doubt that more than 60% of the girls - black and white - above the age of 14 have got at least a child or had been pregnant many times. They suffer from AIDS as well as many types of STD. Condoms and pills help little. Their obsession for sex and sex-matters is excessive as most sex-related matters are given wide coverage in the news media.

But no matter the dept of their spirituality and religious practices, more than half Christians in the United States attend Sunday services **only** twice in the year - at Christmas and Easter.

Some attend funeral services. Many attend the Ash Wednesday and Good Friday services during lent and Holy Week merely to receive the ash on the forehead or to kiss the cross. Some leave for their homes immediately the ritual is over and never care about the Eucharistic banquet!

Obesity and overweight

As a result of their booming economy, food is abundant and no one should be surprised that many Americans are obese and overweight. Some can be larger in size than ten normal men put together and can weigh between 900-1000 pounds! So they spend much money on weight-reducing drugs and therapies. Those who succeed in reducing their weights by half or more are revered like "celebrities" who have accomplished incredible human feats. Most of their kids are over-fed and lack little except perhaps the most essential commodity, namely parental care. Most of their children are spoiled and don't show respect to their parents and adults as African children do.

Culture of violence

America is not a safe place to relax and enjoy a living. Except for a few safer zones or rural communities, the cities are full of danger day and night. Armed bandits make life miserable for people and children are affected much by the culture of violence in the news media and television in the name of entertainment. Shooting sprees in schools, parks, churches, streets are regular scenarios. School children often carry out commando operations and massacre their schoolmates and teachers. There are too many guns, ammunitions, bombs, and other weapons of warfare that are available everywhere. The easy access to drugs and intoxicating drinks by teenagers helps to complicate matters for the nation. Murder of victims of rape is a regular phenomenon. There are many bizarre "fashions" typical of the American youth. Some tattoos and rings worn on any part of human body, including the tongue and nose point to a primitive hippie culture of a disgruntled generation of youth. It is a sign of protest for a return to the unknown.

The American cuisine

I was disappointed with the American food, which mostly is composed of fatty and dairy products. There is sugar or other forms of sweetener in most food products. The rate at which Americans consume huge chunks of ice cream, cakes, cookies, and milk products is amazing. They have ravenous appetite and passion for dessert. In general coffee replaces water. As for their younger children pop, soda, or other mineral drinks take the place of drinking water. Although their menu is European in content, it is however different from what I saw in Italy, England, Germany, and France. While most Europeans consume their salad (what I used to refer to as "grass" and "flowers") at the end of the main dinner, the Americans consume their "grass" and "flowers" at the beginning. It was intolerable to me and I did not stop to show my displeasure. After such meals at the American restaurants and families I used to suffer from stomach upset, constipation and mostly running-bowels. So I had to invent a rule to avoid unpleasant meals when invited by families. I announced in church that I would not like any "grass" when invited to any meal. My parishioners and friends got the message and the news spread through the neighborhoods.

It was unfortunate that for the four years I spent in America I never had the opportunity to minister to a mixed racial community. My communities were always hundred percent Caucasian. There were no African or Nigerian restaurants or groceries and I had to rely for supplies from my people living in California, Chicago, New York, and Texas. In these places there are large numbers of Nigerians and Africans who operated eating-houses as one would find in Nigeria or elsewhere in Africa and Asia. I was bored by the bland American soup and their insipid chicken, pork, turkey, and lamb meats and was always on the lookout for goat meat and stockfish. Unfortunately I could not prepare the most delicious stockfish or "okporoko" soup. Our white friends find the odor very offensive and would not tolerate the cooking of stockfish in their kitchen. I didn't want to offend anybody, and so I had to suffer that deprivation of

the most delicious Nigerian cuisine! Who does not understand that "one man's meat is another person's poison?"

The American English

Nigerian priests who studied in America had warned me for the first few months and even longer I would not understand the Americans. The Americans, too would not easily understand me. It was a similar phenomenon, which I experienced when I was in London some 16 years ago. It was never easy to understand what the English people spoke in the streets. I understood only the professors in the classroom and almost needed translators or interpreters when I went to buy things in the local shops in London. It did not take long however for me to discover how far apart our English world of the British and the Irish was from that of the Americans. I found the scenario in England and America almost the same. Colloquially they never observed the rules of grammar and most of the "Americanisms" and "Pigeon-English" are confusing.

In Secondary School in Nigeria, English teachers usually discouraged students from using abbreviations like don't, can't, won't, isn't, 've, etc. In America abbreviations are lavishly employed in written and oral speech. But what perplexed me most was the true American style, namely expressions and words like "I gonna," "I wanna," "ain't," and many others. In Primary or Secondary School we never met an expression like **ain't** except in American novels. We were warned never to use it. Webster's unabridged dictionary defines "ain't" in the following terms: "Nonstandard in the United States, except in some dialects; informal in Britain "am not." In everyday use, meaning - "are not, is not, have not, or has not..." I had great problem understanding my friends when they spoke dialect.

Foreigners like me in America usually got confused with certain English expressions. What are they saying? What do they mean when they indiscriminately employ certain expressions, phrases and clauses:

- "I guess," "I suppose" - Why are they never sure of something? Why do they "guess?" Ask someone when the

game would begin. "At 4.00 PM, I guess." Where will you be spending the summer vacation? "In Hawaii, I guess." The same can be said about the use of "**I think**," "**I probably think...**"

- "**And stuff**" - What is "stuff?" There is too much quibbling and inability to give a systematic account of an incident or relate a story without stumbling here and there and making up with "and stuff." All sentences are kept hanging and are never finished. Most often the phrase "and stuff" is employed to fill in missing links and forgotten details. The listener is confounded when no required details are supplied and the story ends with "and stuff." "We were playing together, and he said... and then we asked for a ball and stuff... The same applies to the expression "**Or something!**"
- "**You know**" - The expression "you know" is excessively used in everyday conversations, interviews, and addresses that it bores listeners. There is no doubt that many Americans and their imitators are addicted to "you know" syndrome. This is related also to "**Like I said**" disease.
- "**Pretty**" - The hackneyed expression "pretty well" can be very confusing. In its normal use 'pretty' refers to beautiful and likeable things. In the United States it is loosely used to mean many different things. "How are you doing?" "**Pretty well.**" "**Pretty bad.**" The weather is **pretty nice**. The weather is **pretty nasty**. The woman is **pretty ugly!** The story is **pretty long** - Meaning "rather" or "somewhat."
- Their **pronunciation** of certain words is horrible and confusing. An old lady invited me to a meal. She explained that she had prepared many types of meat - brown, dark, soft-cooked etc. She asked whether I liked the **dark meat**. I was displeased with the offer and replied: No! We don't eat **dog meat** in Africa!" In another occasion a young man who came to pick me up to a party in his car told me to enter the **kuaa**. I stood looking at him until he motioned me to enter the **car**. Once a parishioner asked me whether I could say a **meeas** for her dead husband. I didn't know she wanted me to celebrate **Mass** for the dead person. Once I lost my way and when I asked a gentleman around a street corner, he told me to walk a few more "**blacks**" up the street. I thought he

didn't like me because I was a black person. I also thought he wanted me to ask a black person instead of a white. But later I understood he meant a few **blocks** away!

- Once I told my parishioners that in Africa black politicians are **in-charge**. One old lady later told me that she understood that in Africa many people are found **in church**.
- **Double negative**: "You have not seen nothing." "I have not eaten nothing." "I did not see nobody"
- **Strange predication** - "I says" "I am it." "Where was you?" are common in colloquial American English.

Ebonics or Black English

An African visitor's English problem can be compounded when he speaks with African Americans. It is claimed that most of them speak Ebonics or Black English. Ebonics is contemptuously referred to as *ghetto language, nigger talk, gutter language*. It is also characterized as *slang, lazy, defective, ungrammatical and broken English*. There is nothing respectable about its use outside black environment. Although useful at home, most African-Americans vehemently opposed the introduction of Ebonics in black schools to help black kids learn easier and faster during the controversial Black English debate.

Many aberrations in English language usage in America are bound to affect foreigners. You have to be smart to understand them so must they be to understand you. Both the Americans and their visitors are at the risk of misunderstanding one another. When the Americans complain of the foreigner's heavy English accent, they fail to understand that they too help to complicate the matter. It is painful when the people fail to appreciate the efforts of the foreigner who struggles to make himself understood.

Americans make little effort to listen and understand. For me it was difficult to attempt to pick up a few of these American English expressions in order to communicate effectively with the people. Back home in Nigeria, the consequences of imbibing and employing Americanisms in English language are usually unpleasant and humiliating. Most Nigerians despise their people who mimic Americans and rate

them low as intellectually bankrupt. To be rated high as an educated gentleman in Nigerian society you must speak good English, the Queen's style!

Africa in the American news media

It is foolhardy to attempt to refute the impressions of Americans about Africa. The American news media have damaged the image of Africa beyond repair. While some of their reports about the black world may be true, most of them are outlandish blatant lies and concoctions of prejudiced minds.

Wild life, airports, roads, cars

The impression shared by millions of Americans is that much of Africa is jungle, inhabited by ferocious animals and less than 2% of Africans live in cities. Since the interest of the cameramen is always on the bad side of Africa, there are few good reports about city life.

Once, one of my family friends promised to buy a bicycle for me so that I could easily reach my vast remote parishes in Nigeria. Why not a car? The old lady was convinced there were no roads in Nigeria, and Nigerians did not need cars. So a bicycle could help a poor priest like me.

Most American airports post a notice that the airport in Lagos is "not secure." So Americans are given the impression that they should be plenty apprehensive about flying into Nigeria. At the third-world airports, they believe, there are mobs of dubious character offering cab service, but visitors don't want to trust their lives to them.

I assure both innocent Americans and my countrymen in Nigeria that no airport anywhere is secure. There are mobs of dubious character everywhere - in New York John F. Kennedy International airport - O'Hare Chicago International airport, name them.

Armed robbery is everywhere. Cab drivers in the United States carry passengers and on the way shoot them, drag them out of the cabs and disappear with their luggage and money. This

is daily occurrence. In front of cameramen and armed policemen armed gangs, in broad daylight rob people and banks. It is not safer to travel and live in the United States than in Africa. It is not only in Africa that visitors should beware of con men. No country can boast of absolute security within its borders.

American journalists report that Nigerian cities are full of old cars. The roads are thronged with hawkers, , and miserable people.

As for old cars, I assure you that there are too many old ones in America, too. An American friend of mine told me his long Cadillac is more than 20 years old. He bought it from its third owner for \$50! There are too many of them and are long overdue for the "auto friedhof" - "car cemetery!"

As for hawkers and beggars, America has them in abundance. Visit the streets of New York, Chicago, Maryland, Washington and others. There are more street kids, beggars, poor and homeless people in the United States than one may find elsewhere, in Europe or Africa!

An American reporter who visited Nigeria wrote the following about the people he saw:

Even though Nigerians are poor in cash, they are well dressed and apparently well fed. It's obvious they like bright clothes and they like to dress up. It is astonishing to me to meet a woman on the path balancing a huge load, but wearing a stylish long gown and jewelry. Of course, it's easier to dress this way in a warm climate, but they do seem to have good taste in clothes.

What a pity, this visitor, like a 15th century colonialist explorer and missionary was disappointed he did not see naked, primitive people roaming the streets. He must have read western storybooks and fairy tales about the primitive tribes of Africa, about Africans who spoke through their nose and had tails or slept on top of trees. He must be among those who believed Africans liked human flesh better than the millions of wild and domestic animals that swarm jungles of Africa!

That Nigerians have good taste for nice clothes baffled this visitor. That Nigerians look happy, healthy, and not poorly

fed must have disappointed him. Thank God that our visitor did not contract AIDS in Africa. American news media and experts on AIDS report that more than **One million Africans** die of AIDS every week! By the year 2000, they say, no human being will exist in Africa. We watch and see.

The weather condition

Much of newspaper reports about hot weather conditions in African look ridiculous. Much imagery is used to describe this near hellish, worse-than-death weather condition.

Africans, who have not stepped out of Mother Africa will only pity their American visitors who are not used to the African heat. But Africans who live in Europe and America and who care to read reports about African weather conditions are amused. Do Africans living in America prefer the tornadoes, hurricanes, blizzards, flooding, winter, snowstorms, and other terrible weather conditions in America?

Thanks to God that American experts could rescue millions of lives every year through their well-advanced weather forecast systems. Without extreme measures taken to warn people in time, surely Americans would be counting their dead in thousands. Many religionists believe that the gods are angry with America. For them America is already engaged in the War of Armageddon, predicted as one of the signs of the end of times. Only one who has not experienced these extreme weather conditions would doubt that the doomsday had not arrived! Devastations caused by terrible weather conditions in America cost the nation billions every year.

Will Africans prefer the snowstorms that ravage and close airports in America? What of the horrible cold windy weather conditions? I lived in South Dakota for almost 2 years and nearly froze to death. I watched cities swallowed up by floods. Not even the technologically advanced fire-fighting equipments could help. I fled South Dakota, passed the most detested North Dakota to Montana.

In Montana I pitied the miserable people who must heat their rooms for 10 out of 12 lunar months. For the 2 months of "life" in some American states, the way people rush to the streets

and beaches to enjoy hot sunshine shows what they had been missing. Some go naked in wild excitement!

But another side of the story is that some States in America are even hotter than Africa. In these desert regions of America, temperature rises beyond 100 degrees Fahrenheit throughout the year!

Measure of judgement

The worst tragedy is that some people think that their own systems, cultures, and lifestyles are the best. Any other system that does not conform to their standard is rejected as "evil. In their judgmental attitude, they fail to see that some of those people they think are less fortunate in the world might in fact be the happiest of all peoples. Those things people think are most essential for life are often the poison and fetters that prevent many from self-realization.

Most of the so-called modern life comforts for which America is so much revered are in most part sources of misery and self-destruction. The television, guns, and drugs, for example, are responsible for many deaths and tragedies in many American families, schools, and streets.

Surely most Americans are not aware of what is happening in their fatherland - before their very nose - in their neighborhoods! Otherwise those nosy journalists would hesitate to write about other countries. The indictment in great: "Why do you see the speck in your neighbor's eye, but do not notice the log in your own eye...First take the log out of your own eye, and then you will see clearly to take the speck out of your neighbor's eye."

Americans accuse other countries of trafficking in dangerous drugs. There is no doubt that drug traffickers have learned their trade from their foreign-counterparts in America. Who taught poor Africans that the stuff called cocaine, heroine, crack, marijuana, hemp, grass, hashish could yield fantastic sums of money? From where would poor Africans get fabulous sums of money to buy even an ounce of hard drug?

At the Crossroads

The consequences of scandalous and fraudulent activities emanating from the rich industrialized world should worry the Americans more than the "mess" they find in Africa.

Charity must begin at home. It is easy to assume the leadership and the policeman of the world. But many critics would not fail to remind the leader his first duty: "Physician cure yourself. Do here also in your home country the miracles that we have heard you did in other places" [Luke: 4.23].

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