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SIGNS OF THE TIMES: PENTECOSTAL MOVEMENTS AND THE HEALING MINISTRY

This has for long now been a recurring and worrisome theme in most theological gatherings in the Catholic diocese of Orlu. We may not easily conclude that the situation is different in the other religious circles and dioceses of Nigeria, Catholic and non-Catholic. Is the African Church in Nigeria or Igboland losing focus? Has the Catholic Church joined these ever-growing and proliferating Pentecostal movements. Have these ‘priest-healers’ and founders of evangelistic movements lost focus? Have they gone crazy? Is the quest for material wealth and fame that has caught up with most Nigerians in every sphere of life, ecclesiastical, political, social and cultural gone out of control? What has gone wrong and where do we begin to restore order?

No! Dear Reader, do not get so upset. All is not lost. It is just part of the “*I segni dei tempi*” (signs of the times). We only need to recognize them and perhaps try to accommodate them! We may not easily ‘wish them away!’

Closely examined, those of us who care to press for a realistic approach to the growth and proliferation of Pentecostal and Healing Movement in Nigeria in particular will agree that it is our corporate failure in addressing the problem of inculturation in the young African Church that is responsible for the situation the Church finds herself today.

Young and energetic African Catholic priests, ‘commissioned’ or ‘uncommissioned’ have accepted the challenges of addressing the spiritual, moral, cultural and even physical problems, which drag our Catholics to look elsewhere (trading-religious shrines, fortune-tellers, seers and of course prophet-pastor healers. Overwhelmed by the vicissitudes of life, our people are everywhere in search of security. And answers must be provided. The “Man of God” must be available, must be ready to see eye-to-eye with “this flock of sheep” that has no more shepherd. He must wipe out their tears and assure them that there is still hope. All is not lost.

There are too many problems and unsolved ‘mysteries. There are witches all over the place perpetrating evil in communities. There is need for exorcists to cleanse bewitched homes and communities. There are seen and unseen enemies always around. There is need to *assure* a young frustrated lady spending her life-savings every month on *tithes* that age,

beauty or parental background may never be an obstacle to her finding a suitable life-partner. What of the childless mothers and fathers?

Corruption has ruined the nation and there is no future or place for young people! This young Nigerian graduate who has been in search of a job and finding none must be offered some hope that he could succeed somewhere else – definitely “outside this bloody country called Nigeria”. Whether he wishes to study abroad, work abroad, and ‘push cocaine’ in order to survive, he needs the blessings of a “Man of God”. The question: “Who will help put meaning into the lives of these desperate brothers and sisters? Will condemnation, name-calling weaken the “Man of God” and his clients or resolve the problem? Of course not! Even persecution will strengthen and encourage them!

‘ACTION, NOT CONDEMNATION’

There should be a rethinking of former attitudes toward this phenomenon afoot in our Churches and Christian communities today in Nigeria. A measure of recognition of the achievements of our brother priests in this ministry should be taken note of, at least a recognition that they are responding to the challenges posed by many charlatans in the name of pastors and evangelists. Listen to this sympathizer: *“Pentecostalism and Healing Churches are a challenge to all of us. It is no good criticizing or condemning them. We must provide healthy alternative ones for our people ... The old preoccupation with trying to ‘win over’ and ‘keep people’ in our Church by mere appeals to cold intellectual arguments on the true Church vis-à-vis the false Churches are not of much lasting value to a people for whom religion is primarily emotional and utilitarian. For these people syllogisms and appeals to authority and tradition mean nothing. What matters to them is religious satisfaction.”*

FAILURE IN CATECHESIS

What is responsible for the growth of these Churches and Religious movements? The question could be more directly put: ‘what genuine spiritual needs have we failed to satisfy but which the new enthusiastic groups promise to satisfy? Have we not failed to relate the Gospel message to our concrete situation? Too often people have been made to learn the Catechism only formally, and very little explanation has been given that would relate it to the actual human problems of our people. It is concretely observed:

But a lot of these ‘religious leaders’ and their followers are not fresh or direct converts from traditional religion, but rather have come from our Christian Churches, including the Catholic Church. This may be their fault,

but it also reflects, in some way, our collective failure. We ought to examine our consciences and ask ourselves what has really gone wrong.

AFRICAN EXPRESSION OF CHRISTIANITY: DYNAMIC WORSHIP AND CRUSADES

What seems to have emerged from the new religious movements is what many have referred to as the ‘**African expression of Christianity**’. That the African chooses to express his Christian faith in a way adapted to his own culture and religious sentiments is nothing new in the religious world of change and adaptation. It cannot be seen as a *threat* to Christianity, but as a *challenge*.

But this ‘African expression of Christianity’ does not represent a mere ‘revolt’. It should also be seen as a response of the Holy Spirit to the questioning spirit of man, in a situation where the existing Churches were not helping the people to meet their needs. It was to inspire this man, Catholic priest or a lay person (pastor or evangelist) with the gift of prophecy, healing, counseling, or preaching. The ‘Spirit revolution’ is a response to the spiritually unsatisfactory answers provide by the mission Churches to the religious longings of Africans. It was to manifest that the Holy Spirit can speak directly to Africans through their parish priest (another John Vianney!

During Crusades and at Prayers centers, near big and small rivers, fetish bushes and hills the people can now worship freely without unjustified and unwarranted restrictions. Africans like Crusades, long and protracted outings, carnivals and processions to New Zions, River Jordans. Lakes and Pools. Miraculous healings thrive in these places!

WHICH WAY FORWARDE?

While we are not presuming to offer all satisfactory solutions, or definitive way forward, it is not out of place to point out that the greatest obstacle to any solution is that posed by those who are still very skeptical and critical of the motives of the ‘founders’ or ‘operators’ (especially Catholic priests) of the ‘centers’ and ‘movements’.

For Catholic Church authorities and those of us who care, there may not be too many options left. We may have to accept and encourage our charismatic brother priests and especially help them to maintain ‘stability’ and of course remain strongly ‘Catholic’ in all they do.

PROPHECY IN THE AGE OF FEAR

We must understand too that we are actually living in the “Age of Fear”. There is surely renewed interest in prophecy at the present time, and this is not limited to the African and biblical situation nor to the religious sphere. The message of the prophets – old and modern, true or false – is no less relevant to modern times, since many factors seem to evoke speculations about the outcome of the present age.

It is an atomic age, an age of sharply clashing ideologies, an age of rising international tensions and of revolutionary technological, political, and social change. ‘An Age of Fear’ – it has certainly brought about renewed interest in prophecy and eschatology. In times of anxiety and distress, the cry of fear may be heard: ‘What will the end of these events look like?’

In every historical epoch, prophets have arisen – some to express hope and assurance in world stability, in economic and social progress. And in the eyes of many these are the ‘true’ prophets of salvation and *shalom*. Theirs is the message of peace and hope in the face of a deteriorating situation. For them, there is no cause for alarm.

The condemnation of evil is also the task facing every man of goodwill – Christian or non-Christian. It is above all one of the primary tasks of ministers of religion, especially those who claim divine sanction for their mission among the brethren, and who are expected to give account of the stewardship implied in their high office. They are all expected to condemn evil in whatever quarter it is found. They should play the role of social reformers, aim at constructing a human society worthy of God’s people; and to further this, they must become forceful defenders of fundamental human rights and promote equality and fraternity. They must be revolutionaries, although this revolution should be geared to the reform of men’s hearts: ‘*Set the trumpet to your lips, for a vulture hovers over Yahweh’s house because they have broken my Covenant and transgressed the law*’ (Hos. 8.1-5)

Finally, we may have to listen to the voice of the Spirit: “***Do not forbid them; for no one who does a mighty work in my name will be able soon after speak evil of me. For he that is not against us is with us***”. (Mark 9.39-40)

