

## **SIN AND THE MODERN MAN OF GOD: ISSUES THAT PRICK OUR CONSCIENCE**

By Msgr. Nathaniel I. Ndiokwere

Daily the man of God has to put up with many nagging and sharp feelings of remorse, regret and sorrow as he struggles in his ministry to show he is really the 'other Christ' ('alter Christus'). In fact, for many centuries of Christianity in the modern world the man of God has continued to fumble in many aspects of his pastoral ministry, to put into practice what Christ taught us, and what we must preach to others, our flock and our congregations. We admit that we have in many ways and situations fallen short of expectations. Today, as part of the "matters of the moment" in Nigeria and precisely in the Catholic diocese of Orlu a deep refection is necessary, especially for those starting the journey today. The same should happen whenever we assemble, monthly or annually for retreats and reflections.

It is no more enough to hurriedly 'repent', 'confess our sins', often choosing our most preferred confessor who easily understands and appreciates our addiction to certain sins and absent-minded grants absolution, in what the Roman Catholic Church refers to as "Sacramental Confession of Sins". It is no more unusual to do the thing, sitting under a shade, standing or stooping and behind a car. There is more to this ancient practice that before our eyes is fading and losing much value in the modern times.

### **TRUTH AND SINCERITY**

The man of God lies, makes untrue statements a lot of times, with clear intent to deceive, even from the pulpit, and calls on Jesus the Christ to bear witness to his utterances. How for example, can a pastor of souls, a miracle worker organize crusades and healing and deliverance sessions or ministries, just to deceive our gullible Christians simply to make money? He concocts lots of obscene and cultic substances and procedures, to deceive and extort money from desperate people. He has no atom of qualms, morality and spirituality in him and absolutely none to be found among his bunch of committee members and evil henchmen? Has miracle-working and wonders as seen in the time of Jesus the Savior nothing more to do with real prayers, real fasting, morality and spirituality?

Didn't Christ admonish his followers on the issue of "Truth and Sincerity", saying, "let your 'yes' be 'yes'; 'no' 'no'", meaning that we must not lie, deceive anyone or speak untruth from both sides of the mouth! Unfortunately most people, especially Nigerians including pastors of souls and certain men of God have no more qualms about the amount of lies they dish out to the public each time they preach or talk to people.

Surely Christ condemned lying in its totality and vehemently, not even as with much force as he condemned adulterers and fornicators: “Be the first to cast your stone.....!” Most of us are so addicted to lying, and don’t count it as a grievous offence or sin any more. We don’t feel any burden of sin in our minds or count untruth as a sin that can render us unworthy to sharing the body and blood of Christ at mass and Holy Communion.

“Behold the Lamb of God.....! This may be the only little time we rarely remember our unworthiness to receive Christ in the Blessed Eucharist. But this only passive reminder sends our conscience, momentarily panting with fear and hypocritical attitude, namely that our, perhaps, indelible immoral activities, in thought, word and deed count as “less grievous sins” before God than our clouded lives of lies, deceit, and deviousness. What a calamity!

Don’t we priests believe that when we tell lies we offend God and neighbor grievously? Most of us that have become addicted liars often think we are smart when we try to equate lying (‘aghugho’, ‘cunning attitude’) with ‘smartness of mind’, almost an approved style of deception and crookedness in Igbo society.

The Archbishop of Owerri, His Grace Anthony Obinna hit the nail at the head while addressing a large group of Ndigbo leaders who attended mass at Assumpta Cathedral recently. His grace challenged Ndigbo to put away the cunning spirit and put on the truth and honesty which he said were the real identity of Ndigbo. He added “Presently, we have the tortoise as our patron saint, very cunning. We must remove ‘aghugho’ in our lives – whether we inherited it in our land or imported it from Europe or the Arab world. We must remove it because ‘ihe ejiri mara’ the real Igbo is truth and honesty:....”

## **ACCOUNTABILITY – TRANSPARENCY**

Are priests and bishops not bound to give account of their stewardship, particularly in the nature of ‘incomes and expenditures’ of church’s material goods? How often do we quote Europeans and Americans to make our solid points clear to our people as we deliver our sermons? “How they do it elsewhere in Europe and America, where we studied, worked for years, spend our summer holidays, sabbaticals or were even raised up!” Sorry, and regrettably we tell our people half truths most of the time.

Why don’t we tell them all; make them know, for truth and justice sake, in the name of Jesus Christ? We fail to tell them boldly that in Europe and America priests and bishops publish parish and diocesan budgets, incomes and expenditures of all monies realized at least at the end of each calendar or church’s year. Why don’t we disclose the facts, whether priests and church workers receive straight salaries or not and what these people earn per month per annum. There is nothing to hide!

Most of the accounts in Europe and America (except in Nigeria) are published in parish bulletins, and Newspapers like the Forum and the Leader, like

the new locations of priests, and these include offertory collections (first, second, third collections etc), mass intentions stipends, donations, just to name a few?

On the part of the diocesan bishops, accounts are rendered to priests and other church workers, in our case as regards collections from the cathedraticums, pastoral visits, monthly or annual collections (diocesan budget levies), ministerial funds, donations towards diocesan projects, just to name a few.

All said and done, Europeans and Americans don't publish their accounts for fun and show. It is part of everyday obligation we must fulfill in virtue of our high offices, part of challenges facing all leaders of the people, where truth, accountability and transparency can never be overlooked in the modern world.

## **HUMILITY**

The other time the whole world went wild with excitement when American news media published a video where Barack Obama, the president of the most powerful and richest nation on the planet held an umbrella to shield himself and some of his aids from heavy downpour as he stepped out of his presidential jet! Why couldn't a dozen of his security personnel and aids take care of that president's need at that point in time!

Obama registered another positive mark on simplicity and humility which Christ taught his disciples and followers and lived the important virtue in word and deed! One commentator, overwhelmed by the president's action, suggested that the Catholic Church should canonize Obama a saint after his death!

Behold African priests and bishops agog in works of humility and simplicity! African leaders don't like the title 'Mr' or first name. It is an insult if one careless fellow fails to observe the protocols; for example failing to address a title holder "Monsignor", "My Lord Bishop", "His Royal Highness", or kissing the bishop's ring as it was done in the Old Roman Empire and Church!

They say, in Europe and America, (and you don't need to doubt it), bishops drive their cars with no bodyguards and conductors. Some are said to be poor in spirit and therefore cannot afford the driver's' monthly salaries! In Nigeria and elsewhere in Africa, there may be extra need to provide extra bodyguards for the bishops, some to open and close their cars as they step in and out!

In the same Europe and America, bishops put on and off their bishopric miter ( a high-pointed hat worn by bishops or abbots in church ceremonies) when due. There are no pageboys (youth attendants on a person of rank at ceremonies, especially in the medieval era), or altar servers to carry the crosier (a staff resembling a shepherd's crook carried by bishops and abbots as a symbol of office). There is absolutely no need to hire extra hands to put someone else's hat on his head and hand over to him his ruling staff! The minister of God can collect these paraphernalia and use them as official protocols demands during service. Why not?

The central part of Christ's preaching on humility, simplicity and service can never be ignored by his representatives and leaders of Christ's faithful. In the Catholic Church in Nigeria, there is no need for bishops, Monsignors, vicar-generals, other vicars and other titled church dignitaries to eat at separate dinner tables or rooms. The American and European men of God – high and low – join their congregations in queues in “self-service” dinners. *It was 'when they were at table' that Christ, The Lord, 'broke the bread.....!' Wasn't it?*

The sanctuary kingly thrones we carve out for ourselves (and altar servers) in our dedicated churches are too worldly to inspect and admire. Worse is where only one man, he alone, the bishop, can sit on his own majestic throne. In the same Europe and America from where we get our financial support every sanctuary minister can share with bishop and priests.

### **ON THE ISSUE OF TITHES**

Why should we overburden our Christians with these 'illegal collections' in the name of tithes? Many writers and experts in scriptures have researched the origins of 'tithes' and have told us that Christ's faithful have no moral or spiritual obligation to pay what priests call 'tithes' today.

We have no reason to print 'tithe cards' and envelopes forcing our people to make donations to enrich our private pockets. Why should priests keep records of 'tithers' in the parish and punish those who can't even afford enough daily bread for themselves and families? Why should the man of God refuse decent burial for a parishioner who 'is not up-to-date' with his tithe activities?

Once, there was 'AMC' – Annual Mission Collection". Then 'CCF – Consolidated Church Fund'. Now we have 'Tithe'. "The bigger your tithe, the sooner God comes to the rescue of those in need of his mercy! The dispenser of this Lord's magnanimity in kindness is His ordained minister? Wow!

### **CONCLUSION**

A word for the new priests! As you and your families and friends rejoice for the marvels the Lord has done for you, remember to keep to the rules the Lord established Himself for those He has called to service. Copy little from the worldly men of God.

Let the type of cars, gifts and money you receive at your ordination not becloud your spiritual and moral integrity. Learn to walk before you run, for many in a big hurry have always crashed in very short a time. You may have to copy the good side of your "Dede Father" – older or younger than you are – and detest his vices and bad side.

Spiritual and moral bankruptcy may lead to an unfulfilled life, no matter how much we try to cover up. "All that glitters is not gold". Show gratitude to those who have suffered to raise you and helped to make the long journey so far a

**'success'. But no one may pretend or try to forget that all Christ's ministers face a lot of challenges in the modern world and will be held accountable if the flock they are charged to keep and feed stray away and get lost. Praise the Lord!**