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CATHOLIC SOCIAL THOUGHT AND THE CONTEXT OF NIGERIA

“The Church has formulated particularly over the past one hundred years, and through the efforts of a very well informed body of priests and laypersons, a Social Doctrine which points with clarity the sure way to social reconstruction. The principles she gives are of universal application, for they take human nature into account and the varying conditions in which man’s life is involved. They also take into account the principal characteristics of contemporary society and are acceptable to all”

(John XXIII Mater et Magistra, 1961, No. 220)

Nigeria – Historical Background:

History cannot be divided into watertight compartments. The realities of one epoch have their influence on the next. One event precedes another. To understand the situation of Nigeria today and offer perspectives on Social Thought from this context, a historical insight into Nigeria’s pre colonial and colonial history would suffice, even if in a cursory manner to offer some background information much needed to understand the focus of this contribution. In the year 1884 and 1885 at the height of European colonial conquest over the rest of the World, and following the abolition of the trans-Atlantic slave trade in 1807 which shameful business of trading on black human beings had lasted for over four hundred years, the scramble to take what belongs to others followed with a greed to partition the continent of Africa among European powers for the purposes of colonization. This led to a series of internal European conflicts resulting in rivalry among the active participants namely, Britain, Germany, France, Portugal, Holland, Denmark, Brandenburg (Ref. Fage, J.D., A History of West Africa, Cambridge, London, 1969, p. 68).

The convocation of the Berlin Conference by these European powers to settle politically their spheres of influence in Africa led to the “*Berlin Act*” which provided that: “*any European Power which could show that it had a predominant interest in any African region would be accepted as the administering power in that region, provided it could show that its administration was a reality*” (Forsyth, Frederick, *The making of an African legend,; The Biafra Story*, London, 1969, p.15). Britain participated and thus got the large geographical territory, which is today’s Nigeria under her colonial domination. In 1914, a British soldier Lord Lugard in an act of “*administrative convenience*” amalgamated the Northern and Southern Protectorates of this territory. Britain had gained a colony with a large landmass of 923,768 square kilometers. It had not been conquered, it hadn’t really been explored. It had no name, so Lord Lugard’s girlfriend gave it one – NIGERIA (Forsyth, F., *op. cit.*, p. 14 – 15).

According to the founding fathers of post independent Nigeria, “*since the amalgamation of the Southern and Northern provinces in 1914, Nigeria has existed as one country only on paper... it is still far away from being united. Nigerian unity is only a British intention for the country*” (Balewa T. Abubakar, First prime minister of Nigeria at Independence in 1960). One of the outspoken politicians of Nigeria Chief Obafemi Awolowo at the height of colonial Nigeria said in 1947: “*Nigeria is not a nation. It is a mere geographical expression. There are no Nigerians in the same sense as there are English or Welsh or French. The word Nigeria is merely to distinguish those who live within the boundaries of Nigeria from those who do not*” (Awolowo, Obafemi., 1947, Published in “*The punch*”, Nigeria, Friday, 12 December 1982; Vol 8, No. 13, 819; pp 12-13).

Nigeria since independence- social, economic and political issues:

Nigeria gained independence from colonial Britain in 1960. There are an estimated 374 different ethnic nationalities in Nigeria, each speaking their own language and contributing to an interdependent society rich in culture and diversity. The traditional African religions are strongly existent but have given up their edge to the religions of the Book, Christianity and Islam, which today are approximately 40 % each of the total population. Nonetheless, values emanating from traditional African religions and cultures persist somehow, despite modern trends, competing cultures and technological novelties.

Nigeria is richly endowed with physical, human and natural minerals and resources that largely remain untapped. The country provides a range of tropical climatic, vegetation and soil conditions which can be found all over the continent of Africa. There are an estimated 120 – 130 million people (National Population Bureau and Statistics of the Central bank of Nigeria, 2002); occupying an average density of approximately 124 persons per square kilometer, allowing Nigeria to compete as one of the most populated countries in the world. It has been argued that one out of every five Africans is a Nigerian.

In global terms, Nigeria is said to constitute 2% of the world population and is estimated to be one of the 5 - 6 most populated countries in the world by 2025 (Ref. UNDP World Report, 2001). This is a potential strength. Alongside the Republic of South Africa, modern Nigeria is no doubt not only the most economically important, but also the most politically significant country in Africa. However, the contrary is the case as we witness large-scale poverty among the generality of the citizens of this country. Poverty which is the absence of means to maintain and enjoy the basic needs of life, a deprivation and lack of access to education, health services, food, social services and productive assets affects

the most vulnerable part of the population, mainly women and children. . The poor do not participate in decisions that touch their own lives.

Poverty has remained a plague afflicting peoples and countries all over the world. It is considered one of the symptoms or manifestations of underdevelopment. Poverty is “*complex and multidimensional*” and has “*various perceptions*”. One could go beyond physical poverty to describe spiritual and psychological poverty. Yet, the high incidence of poverty in Nigeria is the failure of man’s ability to take his destiny into his own hands. Nigeria is blessed with large scale human and natural resources. Poverty is not God determined. In Nigeria, it is man made. The human operators of the political, social, economic spheres have failed the people and to a large extent are responsible for the high condition of poverty in this territory. The national economy is heavily dependent on an unpredictable oil exploration and oil exports sector (63% of public revenue in 1998), to the detriment of the many other natural resources yet to be fully exploited. In the past, these revenues have been used to finance large scale projects in the industrial, infrastructural or agricultural sectors and to enable the elite get richer through corruption.

Nigeria is highly vulnerable in terms of food security; her relentless burden of balance of payments and a legacy of excruciating external debt repayment demands impede development. The poor economic base and political instability of the country has pushed out many of the country’s skilled and professional members leading to a “*brain drain*” of the population. Nigeria has thus been described as a society in “transition” situated “*halfway between the traditional world of the pre-capitalist, pre-colonial past and the modern world of urban life, industry and global communications*” (UNICEF/FGN document, p. 13).

The state health and education systems are quantitatively and qualitatively inadequate, the former even being considered one of

the worst in the world. There exists a large regional divide between the North and the South, as well as a divide between urban and rural areas. To offset these deficits at least partially, and to guarantee some sort of broad basic provision especially for the poorer sections of the population, the Christian Churches, particularly the Catholic Church have become heavily involved in this sector.

Nigeria is one of the few countries in the world where people's health status has barely improved in recent decades. Life expectancy is low, being only 53. Communicable diseases such as tuberculosis, malaria and to an increasing extent HIV/AIDS, along with infant and child diseases, as well as high maternal mortality are amongst the major health problems faced by a desolate health system. Often the sick cannot be treated because important medicines or instruments are not available or are too expensive, or because the staff are inadequately trained, or because patients are unable to pay hospital's fees.

The education sector shows a similar picture. The illiteracy rate is 28.7% amongst men, and 45.8% amongst women. Although education is compulsory, and despite the high official rate of primary school enrolment of 95%, it is questionable how many school children actually regularly attend school. The number of dropouts is extremely high, and the average period of time spent in secondary schools is short. Besides, the quality of school education is poor. Due to their low level of school education, for most people the informal sector remains the only alternative. Here, potentials for vocational training and income generation are very limited. The formal labor market provides very few jobs in relation to demand, and most people are threatened by unemployment.

Time and again, the internal stability of Nigeria is threatened by religiously motivated violent conflicts. The introduction of the Shari'ah legal system in many states of the north limits the constitutionally guaranteed religious freedom of the Christian population in those areas and violent conflicts abound costing innocent human lives, not to include the wanton destruction of goods and properties. Nigeria is thus constantly standing on the brink of a civil war that to this day has only been averted thanks to the sensibleness and presence of mind of some responsible politicians and clergy. As compared to other countries on the continent, Nigeria has experienced the greatest number of violent changes in government since its independence from colonial rule in 1960. The country has suffered nearly 28 years of military dictatorship that denied the country its full potential in democracy dividends, the rule of law, political, human and civil rights and the guarantee of a life of security and prosperity for the citizenry. The gross mismanagement and theft of government resources has deteriorated Nigerian society and economic wealth, plunging its people deeper into poverty. In overall terms, the social reality since the colonial and post colonial incursion has led to a regress in the quality of life of people considered from the social, political, environmental, economical and technological situation. Nigeria's performance in terms of social indicators is increasingly amongst the worst in sub-Saharan Africa and throughout the developing world (UNDP World Report 2001; UNICE/FGN 2001 Report).

This is the situation where the Gospel of Jesus Christ and the Church's Social Doctrine is being applied to transform people and society from within. This Gospel carries with it a message of hope.

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