

THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA AND FUND-RAISING: CHECKING THE ABUSES

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Abstract

All manner of abuses have bedeviled and continue to bedevil fundraising in the Church in Nigeria: from the sustained and, in most cases, unregulated rolling back of presumed frontiers as regards the means, occasion, and frequency of fundraising to hurried celebration of Mass only to spend a whole lot of time on fundraising; from the near-coercive language sometimes used to liturgically worrisome actions aimed at working up the faith of the people, including the growing phenomenon known as “FR” (Fundraisers), etc. While noting the need for fundraising in the Church, including a cursory foray into the theological and historical roots of fundraising in same, this write-up exposes these attendant abuses and more, suggesting the possible ways to put them in check. Some of the ways suggested include: catechizing the faithful, sensitizing the priests to the rudiments of fundraising, constitution of parish finance committee, making use of works committee, checking the activities of the fundraisers, regulating collections, reporting abuses to the local Ordinary. The conclusion is that there is an urgent need to check abuses in fundraising.

Keywords: Fundraising, Abuses, Money, Collections, Church

Preliminary Word

We venture into this ground conscious of the sensitivity of the subject-matter. Money matters easily draw attention, put most people on their feet with eyes wide open, and could lead to misunderstanding. That is why such issues are not handled with kids’ gloves but with tact and clarity.

The Church as the sign and instrument of communion with God and of unity among all men (*LG 1*), has both sacramental and incarnational (divine-

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human) character. She is both an invisible and visible or spiritual and historical reality (*LG* 8; *DS* 3300-3301).²

As a spiritual reality, she is a bearer of divine life; but she is also a historical reality, comprising human beings in their concreteness, in their here and now. As such, apart from her concerns with the hereafter, she is also concerned with all that has to do with man in his historicity. She has her material needs; hence the question of fundraising or Church collections.

The Church is not run with holy water. She needs money to set up her structures – places of worship, rectories, seminaries, religious houses, retreat centres, secretariat, etc. She needs money to maintain the structures, run her institutions, pay her staff, take care of her clergy and religious (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 21). She needs money for the training of personnel, for her works of charity and missionary work, etc. In fact, while recognizing the fact that God in his omnipotence could differently provide for the Church in her work here on earth, the ordinary means is collecting and making use of money. Giving is how God intends his work to be financed (2Cor.8-9). The bottom line is that the Church needs money and it does not diminish her reality as Church; for money *qua* money is not evil but rather could be a blessing from God (1Chr.29:12).

These common-sense grounds for fundraising notwithstanding, one sometimes meets Christians who wonder if the whole idea of fundraising and Church collections is not a new development in the Church, fashioned out by her leaders to milk dry the people of God. Most importantly, there are Christians who watch with amazement how fundraising is carried out today, especially in our parishes, and feel that something is amiss. There are lots of abuses that need to be checked.

Our intention, therefore, is to study fundraising in the Church demonstrating that the practice has been with us right from the earliest times of the Church, to point out its attendant abuses in the Church in Nigeria, and proffer solutions to how these abuses could be checked.

An Ancient Heritage

Fund-raising by the people of God for the work of God is not a modern-day bolt from the blues; the Sacred Scripture is replete with antecedents and exemplars. Moses, at God's command (Ex.25:1-9), called on the Israelites to make contributions for the work of the tent of meeting, for all its service, and for the holy garments (Ex.35:4-19). The people responded positively, bringing much more than was needed such that they were restrained from bringing any

² See also *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn.770-771; Peter Paul Saldanha, *The Church: Mystery of Love and Communion* (Vatican City: Urbaniana University Press, 2014), 199-200.

more (Ex.35:20-36:7). David asked the people of God to make contributions in preparation for the building of the temple by his son Solomon (1Chr.29:1-5). The response was so wonderful that David burst into praises unto the Lord, joined by the whole assembly (1Chr.29:6-20). Some other instances of fundraising in the Old Testament were the ones conducted by Hezekiah (2Chr. 31:1-21) and Nehemiah (Neh.1:1-2:20).

Jesus himself was positive about giving (Mt.5:42; 25:31-40; 6:1-4; Lk.11:41; Acts 20:35). As he watched people putting money into the treasury, he did not condemn the act but rather praised the poor widow for giving all she had to live on (Mk.12:41-44; Lk.21:1-4). He only railed against unjust collections (Mt.21:13-14) and placing unnecessary burdens upon the shoulders of the poor (Mt.23:4). While he did not directly appeal for fund, he received for himself and his apostles, all manner of provisions from the people. For instance, in Lk.8:1-3, we read about “certain women who had been cured of evil spirits and ailments: Mary surnamed the Magdalene, from whom seven demons had gone out, Joanna the wife of Herod’s steward Chuza, Susanna, and many others who provided for them out of their own resources.” The followers of Jesus received a mandate from him to take the gospel to the ends of the earth. He taught them to care for the sick, the poor, the less privileged, etc, and he told them to give without charge since they received without charge (Mt.10:8). So, to carry out the gospel mission, nobody was charged; yet all manner of support was coming from everyone (Acts 2:44-46).

When the Jerusalem church found herself in serious financial straits on account of persecution and the famine of 44 A.D, the other churches throughout the Mediterranean region had to raise fund and come to their assistance (Acts 11:27-30). Paul, who himself, received aids for his ministry (Philippians 4:10-20), organized collections in Macedonia, Achaia and Corinth for the Church in Jerusalem (1Cor.16:1-4; 2Cor.8 and 9). St. Clement of Rome (ca.90) wrote to those who went to prison voluntarily to ransom others. Some even sold themselves into slavery in order to feed the hungry with their own body price. Hermas, writing about 140 A.D., urged the poor to fast and give the food they saved to those who were poorer than they.³ Tertullian, in A.D 197, discussed the Sunday contributions which were put into the Church’s treasury saying they were “the deposits of piety. For they are not expended therefrom on feasts and drinking parties and in thankless houses of gluttony, but for the support and burial of the poor, for boys and girls without parents and destitute of means, for

³ George J. Dyer, “Ten Questions from the Parish,” in *Chicago Studies* 25, no.3 (November 1986), 240.

the aged quietly confined to their homes, for the shipwrecked.”⁴ Entire communities went to one another’s aid. When the Numidian bishops were unable to ransom their imprisoned brothers and sisters, they appealed to Cyprian of Carthage and the Carthagian Churches collected what was needed. When Caesarea was devastated by invasion, Rome sent not only sympathy but money to relieve the crisis.⁵

Writing in A.D. 390 on the spirit with which the Christians gave, John Chrysostom had this to say: “They did not dare to put their offering into the hands of the needy, nor give it with lofty condescension, but they laid it at the feet of the apostles and made them masters and distributors of the gift.... Thereby the givers did not become arrogant.”⁶ So, not only that everyone gave his support contributing something, the mind with which they gave is worthy of note: without any air of arrogance or condescension to the poor. They also gave freely, without any compulsion.⁷ For the early Christians, their collections had a sacred character. They considered their fundraising for missionary and charitable work to be a *leitourgia*, that is, a sacred function (2Cor.9:12; Philip.2:30). They considered their giving as an act of worship, their material offering representing their offering of themselves to God. Their collections were also a *koinonia*, a “community” of goods, a symbol of Christian solidarity and a means for engendering that solidarity. For all this, they gave willingly, out of love and with joy.

As we saw above, the leaders of the Church, on their own part, administered judiciously the collections put in their charge. They used them for advancing the cause of the gospel, assisting sister churches in financial need, helping the poor, making sure people were not abandoned in their need. This effort at judicious administration of collections started even from the time of the apostles (Acts 4:34-35). In fact, it necessitated the institution of the seven deacons to be solely responsible for this affair (Acts 6:1-6).

It becomes, therefore, evident that fundraising has been a practice in the Church right from her earliest times. But does the mind with which it is done today tally with that of the early Church? Is the modality employed in tune or out of tune with the Christian spirit and disposition?

⁴ Tertullian, “Apology” 39:5-6, in William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. one (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1995), 116.

⁵ George J. Dyer, “That “M” Word,” in *Chicago Studies* 30, no.1 (April 1991), 13.

⁶ John Chrysostom, quoted in *Christian History* 7, no.2 (1987), 23.

⁷ Tertullian, “Apology” 39:5, in William A. Jurgens, *The Faith of the Early Fathers*, vol. one (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 1995), 116.

Fundraising Today: The Abuses

Like the Church of yester-years, the Church today, especially the Church in Nigeria that is relatively young, has need of money for the work of God. She should not hesitate to ask for money. In fact, Canon Law makes it clear that “the Church has the inherent right to require from Christ’s faithful whatever is necessary for its proper objectives” (can.1260) “The faithful are to give their support to the Church in response to appeals and in accordance with the norms laid down by the Bishops’ Conference” (can.1262).⁸

The problem is rather the abuses now creeping in. Apart from the normal Sunday and weekday (where it obtains) offertory collections, the Catholic Church raises fund mostly through annual harvest thanksgiving and bazaar, project Sunday, special fundraising for particular projects. Today, on account of Pentecostal influence, the list has increased and continues to increase by the day *ad nauseam*. Tithing was the first to make its entrance into the Catholic Church, that is, in the recent past and in the Church in Nigeria. It is not a phenomenon completely strange to the Catholic Church. Writing in the third century, Cyprian of Carthage referred to “the form of which ordination and an engagement the Levites formerly observed under the law...Which plan and rule is now maintained in respect of the clergy, that they who are promoted by clerical ordination in the Church of the Lord may be called off in no respect from the divine administration, nor be tied down by worldly anxieties and matters; but in the honour of the brethren who contribute, receiving as it were tenths of the fruits, they may not withdraw from the altars and sacrifices, but may serve day and night in heavenly and spiritual things.”⁹ Tithing, therefore, seems to have been practiced in the Catholic Church, at least in some particular churches as is also evident in this declaration of the Council of Trent: “They are not to be tolerated who by various obstructive devices contrive to withdraw tithes from churches, or who brazenly lay hold of tithes paid by others and annex them, since the payment of tithes is due to God, and those who refuse to pay them or prevent others from doing so are purloining the property of others.”¹⁰ The 1917 Code of Canon Law leaves for the particular churches legislation on tithing (can. 1502); but the 1983 Code is silent as far as tithing is concerned. An examination of the

⁸ The diocesan Bishop normally handles the specific details.

⁹ Cyprian of Carthage, Epistle 65:1, www.newadvent.org/fathers/050665.htm. Accessed 24-5-2018. Cf. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (eds.), *The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol.V (Grand Rapids: W.B. Eerdmans Pub. Co., 1981), 367.

¹⁰ Council of Trent, session 25, chapter 12, in Norman P. Tanner (ed.), *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. Two. *Trent to Vatican II* (Washington DC and London: Sheed & Ward and Georgetown University Press, 1990), p.792.

Scriptures, however, shows that tithing is an Old Testament practice¹¹, though at the time of Christ some Jews still tithed (Matt.23:23; Lk.11:42). While Jesus did not condemn tithing (Mt.23:23), he neither demanded it from nor recommended it to his followers. More than one-tenth, he wanted their all (Lk.21:1-4) in the sense of placing no limit to what one could give and his intention was that people give freely (Mt.25:34-40; cf. 2Cor.9:7). He wanted them to give in love, in mercy, in justice (Mt.23:23). Most probably this is why (apart from the fact that the faithful give through various other means) the Church today does not emphasize tithing but rather giving generously and with faith. However, while the bishops continue to tell the faithful that whereas their tithe is acceptable, they are not under obligation to pay it, like Bishop Paulinus Ezeokafor of Awka diocese recently did,¹² what some people say in the parishes regarding tithe and other collections is not far from the fear-inducing Pentecostal line: “If things are tight for you, check your tithe.”

Some parishes have also introduced the birthday cake cutting. Every month, those born in that month are called up to cut cake. This means parting with some money.¹³ Wonderful initiative, no doubt, but when it is too much, it is too much. One might say, “But nobody is forced to give.” The truth is, some feel psychologically forced to give.¹⁴ This should not be; there must not be coercion but rather free-will donation.¹⁵ The danger is that if these things are not regulated, one day, the already simmering disillusionment might burst and spill over.

Thank goodness the other Pentecostal money-yielding ploys like pledge drive and storehouse giving, have not found their way into the Catholic Church. But one other means of fundraising worthy of mention is the merit award. Going by the name, this award should be by merit, going to those who have distinguished themselves in various areas in the life of the Church. But what one notices today is that it is more about money than merit.

As for what is said and done in the course of the fundraising, often times the Mass is rushed so as to have enough time to raise fund. In some parishes, it

¹¹ John D. Freeman, “Tithe”, in Merrill C. Tenney et al., *The Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Zondervan Publishing House, 1967), 857.

¹² Joe Chukindi, “Awka Catholic Bishop Tackles Kogi Gov. Bello, Says Church not Run on Tithes”, posted on *Daily Post*, Feb.11, 2018: <http://www.dailypost.ng/2018/02/11/awka-catholic-bishop-tackles-kogi-gov-bello-says-church-not-run-tithes>. Accessed on 22-4-2018.

¹³ Casmir Igbokwe, “Hiring Pastors to Fight Criminals”, in *Daily Sun* (February 19, 2018), 47.

¹⁴ Edwin Udoe, *Witchcraft in the House of God: Religion or Farce?* (Owerri: Gabtony Prints Ltd., 2015), 107.

¹⁵ Hilary C. Achunike, *The Influence of Pentecostalism on Catholic Priests and Seminarians in Nigeria* (Onitsha: Africana First Publishers Limited, 2004), 94.

is almost an every-Sunday occurrence and it is taking its toll on the spiritual life of the people of God. The fundraisers also often times say anything in their attempt to get money from the people. Listening to one on one occasion, one could not distinguish him from Johann Tetzel of the indulgence saga. He was Tetzel resurrected like a Phoenix from its ashes. Some fundraisers also do strange things in their attempt to work up the faith of the people: having people place their hands on the altar, for instance. If such things are not stopped, we shall not be surprised if one day we hear that the tabernacle was opened and the people asked to put their hands inside it.

Another thing that gives one cause for concern as regards fundraising is the fact of the existence of the “FR” (Fundraisers). This non-formalized daily expanding group is made up especially of young priests. They are invited to parishes to help in fundraising but normally it is not for nothing. This goes against the injunction of our Lord: “You were given without charge, give without charge” (Mt.10:8). Also, this fundraising “ministry” is creating bad blood in the rectories. Some priests move from one parish to the other raising fund to the neglect of their parish assignments. This is not good. These things are pointed out without any intention of being judgmental or with an air of self-righteousness but for something urgent to be done for the good of the Church. A stitch in time saves nine.

Towards Checking the Abuses

It has been made clear that there is nothing wrong with fundraising in itself. In fact, it is needed in the Church, not just for running the affairs of the Church but also because of its spiritual dimension. In contributing to the work of God, we worship God; we express our faith in him, our love of him and neighbor, and the hope we hold. Unfortunately, when dealing with men, one should expect now and again, some human imperfections. Such is the case with abuses in fundraising. It becomes, therefore, necessary to work out ways to check these abuses before they cause the Church a lot of harm. We now make some suggestions:

Catechizing the Faithful

The bane of the Church in Nigeria today is inadequate catechesis. Most Catholics receive the sacraments of initiation when they are hardly old enough to understand the teachings of the Church. Sunday Evening Instructions are to serve as a follow-up, but many no longer take these seriously. Since there is not much time during the homily to go into the details of the Church’s teaching, priests should make good use of the Sunday Evening Instructions. They should, most of all revive interest in the faithful by preparing well for these instructions.

In this forum, the issue of fundraising could be handled at length. The history and theology of fundraising, the need for it today, especially in one's parish, what the parish did with what was collected in the past, giving a detailed account, new projects in the offing and need for them, all these and more should be explained to the people during the Sunday Evening Instruction or any other suitable occasion.

This is important because sometimes the faithful do not respond positively to calls for fund simply because it is not well explained to them why they should give, what was done with the money they contributed in the past, how it was used, and why the call for more. Now, because the faithful are well instructed and carried along with respect to their parish finances and projects, there would no longer be need to spend a lot of time during the Mass trying to work up their faith or put up shows or say what should not be said in an attempt to get money from them. They would respond more willingly and promptly. Because they are well instructed, they would also know when abuses are going on and report to the appropriate quarters.

Sensitizing Priests to the Rudiments of Fundraising

To curb the tide of abuses, it might be good for dioceses, maybe during corporate retreat for priests or something similar, to sensitize their priests to the do's and don'ts of fundraising. During this meeting, it could be brought to their consciousness, the whys and wherefores of the Faithful's attitude towards fundraising and how best to deal with them.

They should be reminded or helped to see the connection between their commitment to their ministry and the people's attitude towards fundraising. If the priest is committed to his ministry, if he does not treat his parishioners as numbers but as persons, if he is close to them visiting the sick, the aged, helping them in their moments of need to the extent that it is possible, surely, they will not pay deaf ears to his calls for fund. It should be brought to their consciousness that one can never thank his parishioners enough for their support; appreciation should always be shown for what they are doing. Accountability is also of paramount importance. Priests should be taught how to give account to their parishioners. This brings us to the question of expenses. They should be reminded that if the people notice that they make effort to cut down on expenses, that they do not erect unnecessary structures and demolish existing ones with reckless abandon, they would be more disposed to make contributions when they are called upon. Because of this positive disposition of the faithful and the conscientization of the priests, abuses could, at least, be reduced to the barest minimum.

Constitution of Parish Finance Committee

In the Code of Canon Law, it is explicitly stated that “in each parish there is to be a finance committee to help the parish priest in the administration of the goods of the parish, without prejudice to can.532. It is ruled by the universal law and by the norms laid down by the diocesan Bishop, and it is comprised of members of Christ’s faithful selected according to these norms” (can.537). This committee provides the parish priest with valuable insight and advice so that he may act more effectively in the interest of the parish. It is here implied that the members of the committee should know, to the extent permitted them by the law, the finances of the parish. This is where the diocesan Bishop comes in, who is to lay down norms for the appointment of the committee and the conduct of its affairs. The parish priest is not free not to consult the committee when the law so requires (can.127 §2 2°); otherwise he may leave himself liable to an action for damages in canon law.¹⁶

It might be good if dioceses that have not done so make sure that finance committee is constituted in their parishes. And not just setting up the committee, but making sure it is functional (may be by setting up a monitoring committee) because there are some parishes that have it in theory but not in practice.

To have a functional finance committee in a parish is not a distrust of the parish priest. It is a recognition of human limitations and weakness. It could be tempting and risky for the parish money to be exclusively in the hands and under the control of one man, even a priest; hence the need to make the finance committee functional. Moreover, it is an effort at closing doors to suspicion. A priest might be spending his personal money for the parish, but because he single-handedly controls all the money in the parish, he gives room for suspicion and sets tongues wagging. “Caesar’s wife must be above suspicion.” A priest should not only be trustworthy, he should let it be seen that he is trustworthy. This was exactly what the apostle Paul did with respect to the funds collected from the churches in Macedonia and Greece to help the poor believers in Jerusalem. He could have all alone taken the funds to Jerusalem, but “taking precaution so that no one will discredit us in our administration of this generous gift; for we have regard for what is honorable, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men” (2 Cor.8:20-21), he decided to take them to Jerusalem accompanied by representatives of the churches (1Cor.16:1-4). If every door to suspicion is closed and parishioners are convinced that every dime they contribute is used judiciously, they would contribute more.

¹⁶ Gerard Sheehy et al. (eds.), *The Canon Law: Letter and Spirit* (Collegeville, Minnesota: The Liturgical Press, 1995), 299.

Making Use of Works Committee

In the same vein, priests should be made (maybe again through a monitoring committee) to work with their parish works committee. The members of this committee should be educated on their role (maybe during the diocesan pastoral council). If they know their role and they work with their parish priest, a situation whereby structures are indiscriminately erected in the parish and wantonly demolished could be avoided. This is because when a parish priest leaves and a new one arrives, there would be some people on ground to give him the reason behind every structure in the parish and its situation. Thus, there would be continuity and unnecessary financial demand would not be made on the faithful.

Checking the Activities of the Fundraisers

We are differently gifted. There is nothing wrong in a priest inviting his brother priest to help him talk to his parishioners about a particular project and the need for financial assistance. But when abuses begin to issue therefrom, when the priest begins to cook up stories and carry out strange and aliturgical actions in an attempt to manipulate instead of persuading the faithful, when he acts as a mercenary stating what goes to him as honorarium, when he turns himself into a fundraiser neglecting his official assignment, there is problem. It was because of a similar problem (abuses with regard to indulgence) that the Council of Trent abolished the office of alms collector in the Church.¹⁷

To check the excesses, we would suggest that no priest should invite for fundraising, a priest or a lay person for that matter, from outside his parish, without the permission of the diocesan Bishop or any other person given such power by the Bishop. If the diocesan Bishop deems it fit, he could place a ceiling over the amount to be given for 'fuel' depending on where the person is coming from or leave it to the discretion of the inviting priest. One would prefer the former because the latter is also prone to abuses. Whichever, the important thing is that the "fundraiser" not be left to place a charge. It is true that some parishes may not be generous enough to a priest who came to help out in fundraising but that does not justify the placing of a charge on the work of God. If one feels he did not receive a good treatment, he should rather say no to subsequent invitations than place a charge.

Moreover, the parish priest should be able to employ the services of his parishioners who can deliver on this count, that is, who can help him in fundraising. And if he as a priest in the parish, even if he does not have the gift of the gab but as we said earlier on, carry out his priestly ministry

¹⁷ Joseph Martos, *Doors to the Sacred. A Historical Introduction to Sacraments in the Catholic Church* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1981), 121.

conscientiously, handling money-matters with transparency and carrying his parishioners along, there is no way they would abandon him when he calls upon them for financial assistance.

Regulating Collections

The rate at which some parishes multiply collections, holding fundraising almost every Sunday, thereby making the Mass last too long, calls for regulation. One might say: “But they conduct more collections in the Pentecostal and ecclesial communities than we do.” Are we just an ecclesial community? Are we not the Catholic Church? When did the ecclesial communities become our model? The faithful watch with dismay what is happening. We must not wait for the situation to deteriorate any further before action is taken. We would suggest that the diocesan Bishop spells out in clear terms the collections to be conducted in his diocese and the frequency. If a parish wants to do something extra, they must get permission from the Bishop or any priest to whom he may decide to delegate the power.

Report Abuses to the Local Ordinary

One would prefer that the priests take it upon themselves to fight the abuses, but whereby they continue unabated, the entire people of God should be encouraged to report them to their Bishop or any person he charged with this responsibility. The Bishop could, apart from the diocesan pastoral council, use his pastoral visits to touch on some of these abuses and encourage the people to report to him should they notice any. For the people to reach him easily not only on this matter but on any other issue of importance, the Bishop could leave an e-mail address and a phone number that would be just for text messages. If one calls, he is sure not to be answered except the Bishop decides to be taking the calls. But this could wear him down.

Conclusion

The Church in Nigeria is a vibrant Church, catering not only for the spiritual needs of the people of God, but to a certain extent, for their material needs also. She delves into the latter in an attempt to better the lot of the people, especially considering the sorry state of the Nigerian polity and the apparent incompetence of the political class. She provides some important services like schools, hospitals, etc., thereby creating job opportunities too.

The Church in Nigeria, no doubt, needs money to carry out this her far-reaching mission. So, there is nothing wrong with her raising fund when there is need, just like the Church writ large, as we have shown, has sometimes done in her history. The problem is when abuses begin to crop up. The Church in Nigeria cannot afford to turn a blind eye to these abuses. Much as money is important,

she cannot allow abuses to ruin her image and ultimately her mission. That is why the abuses noted in this write-up, together with any others, should be seriously looked into and nipped in the bud. The recommendations made are not exhaustive and could be re-touched to suit the different dioceses and ecclesial contexts. The stakes are high. This matter demands the urgency of now.