THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA AND THE CRISIS OF MINISTERIAL AUTHORITY: RETRIEVING THE TRADITION

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Abstract
This article intends to defend the thesis that ministerial authority in the Church in Nigeria today suffers a crisis. It does not content itself alone with unearthing the symptoms of this crisis that seem to slow down the immense efforts and contributions of the Nigerian clergy to the pastoral ministry in this part of the world. Using an analytic theological method, the author researches into the theological roots of the crisis, and discovers the root-factor in the juridical ecclesiology prevalent in many Nigerian particular Churches which privileges the understanding of Church authority primarily in terms of the powers and jurisdiction of the clergy. To resolve this problem which has taken the Church by a storm, the writer makes “a cast into the deep” by retrieving the ancient Tradition on authority which has come down to us from the early Church as expressed in the texts of Tradition: Biblical, patristic and liturgical sources. We discovered that ministerial authority in the early Church had an essentially spiritual character. Genuine authority was regarded as moral and required men who were spiritually alive. There was no separation or dichotomy between spiritual and pastoral authority as both were exercised in hierarchical authority. This ancient paradigm of authority, an enduring heritage of the catholic tradition, is what we have presented here as a panacea for helping the Church to “come out of the woods” in the Nigerian context. It is a doctrinal and pastoral resolution of the crisis.

Keywords: Church, Catholic, Tradition, spiritual authority, moral authority, Institutional/Pastoral authority, Nigeria, Juridical ecclesiology.

Preliminary Observations:
In comparison with her much older sister Churches of the West, the Nigerian Church is, relatively speaking, still a young Church. And as such, she still boasts of vital youthful energy, vigour and exuberance which she deplores to the profit of her mission of evangelization and service of humanity within the

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Nigerian context. Her bishops, priests and deacons, custodians of hierarchical powers and ministerial responsibilities, often sacrifice a lot to provide feeding and care to their teeming and ever-growing flock.

However, as these ministers of God and leaders of the Church of Christ continue to perform their duties and pilot the affairs of the Church creditably up to a significant degree, there are surely areas to be improved upon. One of such areas is the manner of the exercise of Church authority. Today ministerial authority in the Nigerian ecclesial context seems to be in crisis. This is so because many ministers of the Gospel seem not to know the true meaning, nature and purpose of ecclesial authority. Thus, it is sometimes used primarily to promote concerns which are either extraneous or irrelevant to the central mission of the Church of God. Instead of understanding and seeing ministerial authority as the vehicle of the mystery of that salvation which God wishes to accomplish in his Church, it is perceived first and foremost (or sometimes even exclusively) as vehicle for the accomplishment of secondary concerns and issues of a worldly nature.

Today Churches in the West have largely become empty-standing physical edifices. These Christian communities have largely been depopulated both by lack of new converts and mass exodus of Christians – a situation that continues to get worse and critical by the day. It would be better for the Church in Nigeria to learn from the above historical situation of Western Christianity and hence concentrate more on building human-spiritual edifices or “Church of living stones” (cf. 1 Pet 2:5) rather than “Church of stones and block-works” which seems to be the tendency of ministerial responsibilities today.

If the Church in Nigeria is to learn from what is happening today to her sister Churches in the western world, then it means that to a certain extent she is yet to get her acts altogether right. There is need for a re-orientation in the understanding of the nature and purpose of ministerial authority in the Nigerian Church, since it is on this that would lie the direction which ministerial responsibilities take and the shape which the Church assumes in our land. Towards this re-orientation, we shall first articulate the general understanding of ecclesial authority prevalent in many Nigerian particular Churches which, as we shall show, is contrary to the best the Catholic tradition has to offer. It is our hope that a retrieval of this sublime Tradition or heritage would ignite a new sense of re-awakening and renewal for the self-understanding of the Church in Nigeria. But to appreciate well the need for this retrieval, it would be necessary, in the first place, to undergo an excurses of the situation on the ground with regard to the pervading notion of authority and the image of the Church in need of redemption within the Nigerian context.
Juridical Ecclesiology

Although there are exceptions, the general notion of authority that holds sway in many Nigerian particular Churches is that represented by the Code of the Canon Law. It is a juridical or institutional notion of authority, which places emphasis on power and the bearers of power. The ecclesiology that lies behind this untheological notion of authority is one which deals with the Church as if it were solely a hierarchical society and a visible institution. It is a juridical ecclesiology as against the ecclesiology of communion favoured by Vatican II which is based on spiritual anthropology. Although, it accepts in principle that the Church is also a spiritual community and a mystery, in practice juridical ecclesiology is primarily interested in order, conformism, submission and the visible structure of the Church.

In its grasp of what authority consists of, what really matters is not so much the manner in which authority is exercised as to the juridical qualification of the one who exercises it. What counts is not so much what is said as to the one who said it. The pre-eminent reality is not so much the fact of things as to the authority behind the decision. This way of being Church is revelatory of the model of leadership which can be rightly termed as clericalism. A publication of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria opines that “there is clericalism when priests feel they have a monopoly of knowledge, attention and power in the Church, and ignore or downgrade the role and contribution of the laity.” This publication does not say categorically that clericalism is an unfortunate feature of the Nigerian Church, but it presumes it. Its pervasiveness is not doubted.

Juridical ecclesiology which in many instances logically issues in clericalism is based on the ideology of power and authority which owes its origin in the Roman and feudal style of authority which the Church “inevitably” adopted from the era of Constantine but has since abandoned, at least in principle with Vatican II. Leonardo Boff, a Latin American liberation theologian, traces the foundation of this ideology when he wrote:

Its legitimacy comes not from below but from above, from the will of God. The higher someone is in this hierarchy the closer one is to God and so has a greater share in God’s divine power. To obey one’s superior is to obey God, making obedience a religious act (…) This

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style of authority is untouchable and not subject to any internal criticism. Criticism from within any of the orders is only possible from a higher authority. A questioning from below would be equal to a revolution in the universe. Thus, any thought of transformation is the same as an attack on God who is author of both the order and structure of sacred power.\footnote{Leonardo Boff, \textit{Church, Charism and Power. Liberation Theology and the Institutional Church} (London: SCM PRESS LTD, 1981), 40-41.}

The danger in this way of seeing the Church and exercising authority primarily in terms of jurisdiction and powers of the clergy is that it can lay the foundation to many attitudinal tendencies which may not be in tandem with the evangelical demands of the Gospel and Kingdom of God. Such tendencies include the refusal or neglect of many parish priests in Nigeria to be accountable to their parishioners; the often unfortunate neglect of the spiritual good of the faithful to the profit of aggressive drive for funds; the prioritization of the physical development of the Church in terms of structures over the development of enduring faith-communities whose mission is love and service of the Kingdom of God – a special mark of Christians of the early centuries of the Church; the failure to focus on charity and the service of the poor as a central mission of the Church in comparison to other much more privileged Church projects of a physical nature; the engagement by many “priest-healers” in acts that further pauperize their flock already traumatized by economic depression like the emphasis on tithes and prosperity preaching in some parish communities or prayer ministries; the over-bearing and worldly attitude of some ministers of the Church that demoralize and dampen the faith of the faithful; the overt identification of some members of the clergy with the rich and powerful in the society for personal interests and the consequent neglect of the poor; the unholy romance of some ministers of the Gospel with political gladiators etc.

All these are sure signs of disorientation in the understanding of priestly identity - above all in the understanding of the true meaning and purpose of their authority as ministers of the Good News and servants of the Kingdom of God. It is on this score that a retrieval of the ancient tradition of ministerial authority which goes down to Jesus and well expressed by the early Church seems to be a most urgent necessity today.

Retrieving the Tradition: The Spiritual Character and Moral Nature of Authority

From the developments above on juridical ecclesiology, we could see that ministerial authority in the Nigerian Church is largely conceived in terms of
jurisdiction or powers of the clergy. These powers, however, are understood as something to be exercised in a spirit of personal unselfishness and service. Although, this understanding can lead to genuine and profitable developments, it is not the proper notion of authority which Jesus bequeathed to the Apostles and practiced by the early Church, and which according to the Catholic tradition, continues to be the paradigm for the Church of all ages.

According to the renowned ecclesiologist and eminent French Catholic theologian of the 20th century, Yves Congar, Jesus was not content simply to remind his followers of the spirit in which authority must be exercised. His intention was also not simply to transfer authority from the scribes and rabbis to the apostles, from the priesthood of Aaron to the ministers of the Gospel. “He radically transformed the whole character and even the nature of authority”. He transposed it to another plane of reality. In this light, the Christian concept of authority is of a spiritual nature, “which does not mean metaphorical but corresponding to God’s working in man.”

The spiritual and moral character of authority is the primary sense which authority carries in the New Testament as signified in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ who “came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Mt 20:28). His authority was one exercised primarily by virtue of moral character. He lives as he teaches and teaches as he lives. His proclamation of the Gospel of the Kingdom and his actions manifest coherently the nearness of the Kingdom of God. Nowhere is his authority or power something which he wields over others. True authority can never be imposed; it only works when it is offered, chosen and freely accepted. To be effective, its benefits must be clear or convincingly explained to the people who are called to submit to or accept such authority.

In the early Church, the ecclesia was rightly described with themes from spiritual anthropology, thus portraying the essential spiritual and moral character of authority. In this light writes Congar:

> What is involved is not a system or a juridical set-up but a body of men praying, fasting, doing penance, asking for grace, engaging in a spiritual combat and struggling for the triumph in themselves of the spirit of Jesus Christ. **This is why authority is moral and requires men who are themselves spiritually alive.** On the other hand, it is obvious that if the Church is considered to be a supra-personal possessor of rights, a juridical personality enjoying a divine authority

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7. Ibid.
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conceived as juridical, then these themes from spiritual anthropology no longer apply.⁹

Although, “genuine authority is moral,”¹⁰ by which we mean authority by moral force of example of one’s life – in our case, authority exercised according to the dictates of the Gospel - Jesus never rejected the need of authority of office. Rather what he requires is that such authority be joined with a moral authority. He clarified his position in the passage of Matthew’s Gospel where he acknowledges the legitimacy of the official authority of the Scribes and Pharisees while criticizing their double standards or lack of moral authority (cf. Mt 23: 1-7). There is nothing to doubt in the fact that authority of office is often a necessity. However, its legitimacy depends on its subordination to moral authority and thus, its reconfiguration before the demands of the Gospel.¹¹

If authority in the Church is primarily moral, and hence has to be exercised by people who are spiritually alive, then ministerial authority is meant to be the result of the power of grace, the fruit of the indwelling of the Spirit. It must not be fashioned after the likeness of a political entity, but has to be understood in relation to the transcendent spiritual principle: the mystery of God’s presence operative in history. Since in essence, ecclesial authority has to signify and communicate the power of grace and love or the mystery of God’s presence constitutive of the Church, it must be conceived as the authority of the Spirit itself shining through human channels. In other words, it is God who has the authority in the Church and he joins his ministers as his visible instruments to communicate his authority to his people. That is why the minister’s cooperation with God’s initiative and his response to God’s workings in him as he discharges his responsibilities is crucial, thus giving ministerial authority in the Church its essentially spiritual character.

Authority conceived in the above spiritual sense is not a reality confined to the official hierarchical structure alone. As Meneo Afonso says, this type of authority is present among those who are purely and simply godly persons. It is found in those who are genuinely spiritual people and friends of God.¹² The moral power associated with such people is the power of God’s grace working in them. As I wrote elsewhere:

⁹ Congar, Power and Poverty in the Church, 55. Emphasis mine.
¹⁰ Ibid.
When Church authority is not based upon the reality of God’s self-communication in Spirit and grace, it runs the risk of suggesting a structure of merely socio-political nature, thereby distorting not only the notion of authority unique to the Church, but also the nature of the Church as essentially spiritual reality.  

From the foregoing, we have been trying to establish the concept of authority handed on to us by the early tradition of the Church as evident from biblical sources or as expressed in the life and teaching of Jesus Christ. This notion of Christian authority, as we saw, is primarily moral and of spiritual character. Thus, in the life of the early Church, as shown by Congar while tracing the history of the development of Church authority, the period of the Church of martyrs (starting from the era of the apostles to the peace of Constantine) and the period of monastic Christianity (spanning from the fourth to the middle of the eleventh century) was the golden era of the reign of the spiritual character of authority. According to him, only those who were purely and simply “men of God” had authority. The authority of the Church resided with those who were spiritually alive.  

Within the context of the early Church, the bishop was a spiritual man. Although, he was looked upon as a head or a ‘prince,’ yet at the same time, he was a spiritual person endowed in preeminent way with spiritual gifts to lead God’s people. There was no separation or dichotomy between his powers as a pastor and his spiritual authority. Thus, both a spiritual as well as a pastoral authority was exercised in the hierarchical authority. According to Congar, it was as such that a bishop is chosen, since he has the responsibility to lead God’s people. Thus, he writes:

His actions, and in a more general way, all the decisive factors in the life of the Church, whether due to decisions emanating from the authority of the bishop or of synods, or from some other source, were attributed to God’s intervention. A text like the following from the acts of the council held at Carthage in the Spring 252 is evidence of a fact it would be easy to verify in a great number of examples: ‘It has pleased us, under the inspiration of the Holy Spirit and in accordance with admonitions given by the Lord in many manifest visions.’ The life of St. Cyprain is marked by visions and supernatural admonitions.

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13 Peter Onyekwelu Okafor, “Authority as Service in the Nigerian-African Church…”  
14 Cf. Congar, Power and Poverty in the Church, 5  
15 Cf. ibid., 44-45.  
16 Ibid., 45-46.
Thus, in the early Church as seen from the above, authority in the Church had an essentially spiritual character. This was the perception and practice, given the fact that the Church was also seen as an essentially spiritual reality and temple of God’s presence. It follows that her task is to form spiritual people and introduce them into the “philosophy of Christ.” As this is the correct thing to say, only those spiritually alive were considered capable in the early Church of exercising authority over the faithful. Church authority was entrusted to genuinely spiritual men and friends of God, who became known as Fathers of the Church. Theirs was authority of the Spirit himself shining through human channels. “A bishop therefore represented a whole ideal of care for men’s welfare, of justice, disinterestedness, in short an essentially moral ideal of authority.”

The above ideal of authority was attained by St. Ambrose, St. Augustine, and St Gregory the Great among others. St. Ambrose for instance said he did not wish to be a conqueror but a physician. St Augustine, on the other hand, emphasizes Christian existence over and above authority. For him, the bishop, who is the visible head of the Church, is in the first place himself a Christian. He constantly tells his flock: ‘I am a bishop for your sake, I am a Christian together with you’, ‘a sinner together with you”, ‘a disciple and a hearer of the Gospel together with you’, *vobis sum episcopus, vobiscum christianus*. The foundation of this emphasis on Christian existence and of the ecclesiology of the Fathers is the fact that the Church is the community of people of God, and all that is done within the Church is formally and immediately directed to the formation of spiritual people. Ancient liturgical sources also bear witness to this emphasis on the Christian existence of the bearers of authority in the Church, and therefore on the spiritual character of their authority. The oldest sections in the Latin ritual of ordination for instance state the duties of the bishop rather than his powers. A spiritual person, a man of God, the bishop must devote himself to an assiduous study of the Holy Scripture, to prayer, fasting, and hospitality. He has the responsibility of welcoming, listening to and helping everyone. He must also practice almsgiving. In addition, he is to edify his people by word of mouth and by the celebration of the liturgy. While performing his duties, he is to be aware not of his powers (*potestas*) but of the service (*ministerium*) he is called to render.

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17 Ibid., 51.
21 Cf. ibid., 50-51.
The stress placed in the Latin ritual of ordination on the spiritual and servant character of the bishop’s ministerial responsibilities rather than on his powers aims to promote an exercise of authority according to the dictates of the Gospel. This echoes St Peter’s injunction to the elders or pastors of the Church in a well-known biblical passage: “Never be a dictator over any group that is put in your charge, but be an example that the whole flock can follow. When the chief shepherd appears, you will be given the crown of unfading glory” (1 Pet 5:2-4). The emphasis is thus on leadership by example.

Concluding Reflection: The Way Forward

We have rightly analysed that ministerial authority in the Nigerian Church appears to be in crises—crisis of meaning, nature and purpose. The source of these crises as we have shown is disorientation in the manner in which ministerial responsibility has sometimes been perceived, lived and exercised by a number of clerics. Authority in the Church has often been understood primarily in terms of the powers and jurisdiction of ministers of the Gospel, resulting in a tendency towards juridical ecclesiology and its mind-set that sometimes issue in attitudes that run counter to the Gospel demands.

In order to stem this tide, we undertook to draw insights and inspiration for a re-thinking and reform of the self-understanding of the Church in Nigeria by retrieving the best of the Catholic tradition on the essence of ministerial authority as expressed in the tradition which has come down to us from the early Church. In this light, we saw that ecclesial authority as seen through the lens of the early Church has an essentially spiritual character and moral nature. Genuine authority was seen to be moral—an authority exercised according to the dictates of the Gospel—and by those who are spiritually alive. It is an authority generated by the power of God’s grace and love working in the minister of the Gospel, the authority of the Spirit shining through human channels.

On the other hand, the Church is also a visible organization with hierarchical structures—not only a spiritual community. As such, it is also in need of an organizing juridical structure, and an institutional governing organ. But the visible institutional structure of the Church has the mission to signify and express the power of grace and love. The juridical element is called to derive its theological significance in subservience to the spiritual reality of the Church, its essential reality. This was the contention of Meneo Afonso when he wrote:

In essence the Church is a temple of God’s presence. Through the Spirit, God is graciously operative in human history, and the community of the faithful is precisely the temple of God’s dwelling. And the visible institutional aspect of the Church with its array of functions and organization is called to express and signify the mystery.
of grace operative in history. We may say therefore that the function of the institutional order is to “sacramentalize” the mystery of God’s abiding presence; the institution is meant to symbolize and serve the mystery of grace.  

There is therefore no place for a mere juridical understanding of the ministerial office in the Church. And it is safe to say that the bishop’s legitimate occupation of the apostolic office through valid episcopal consecration must equally be matched with the fidelity of his preaching to the teaching of the apostles and the conformity of his life to the Gospel. This is based on the truth that an ecclesial function or an office cannot be separated from the moral and spiritual qualities linked up with its reality and which form part of its truth. St Augustine was aware of this fact when he warned that “Catholic bishops are not to be followed if they mislead by expressing sentiments contrary to the Scriptures”. This applies also to the clergy and all those who are called to religious responsibilities in the Church.

The way forward for priests and other ministers of the Gospel in the Nigerian Church is to focus more on the essential spiritual character and moral nature of their ministerial authority, thus always exercise their authority according to the dictates of the Gospel. Their exercise of pastoral authority should blend with moral authority and thus always radiate the life of men spiritually alive. Institutional or juridical authority in the Church in Nigeria as elsewhere should, therefore, “sacramentalize” the mystery of grace and love operative in history. It must signify and express the spiritual and moral character of ministerial authority. Keeping an eye focused on the above, the Nigerian clerics and pastors would be able to always keep alive the hallowed tradition of the Church on ecclesial authority as received from the early Church, as well as proffer solution to some of the seemingly intractable problems of ministerial authority in the Church in Nigeria today.

22 Afonso, What is the Nature of Authority in the Church? 63.
24 Augustine, De Unitate Ecclesiae, 11, 28 (PL 43, 401-411).