

RIGHTEOUSNESS IN GOVERNANCE

***Paper presented at the Rev.(Dr.) Mike Okonkwo
Foundation Public Lecture***

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by

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APPRECIATION:

Mr. Chairman, distinguished ladies and gentlemen,

I greatly appreciate your kind invitation extended to me to deliver a lecture as guest speaker at this distinguished audience. Your letter of invitation, extended to me, expressed a desire to achieve the goal of assisting participants, public officials and the citizenry at this forum to:

- *understand the spiritual and physical implications of their actions or inactions, as a nation , or as corporate leaders;*
- *analyse issues in governance from an informed spiritual perspective;*
- *do a rethink of the programmes that will enhance governance at the National and Corporate levels, to justify the purpose of God in our lives.*

The topic: “*Righteousness in Governance*” is one, which has as its aim the desire to bring to the fore, the role of the citizen who is a believer, a Christian and an adherent of a religious faith to participate at efforts which lead to nation building. It seeks also to challenge the Church in Nigeria to assume its rightful position of leadership and relevance in our great nation by playing its God determined roles of teacher, reconciler, social transformer and prophet.

This is a challenge which finds experience in the fulfillment of the scriptural injunction:” *Righteousness exalts a nation*”.

Ladies and gentlemen, these are very high ambitions indeed, and I venture to add with wide significance, although others before us had nurtured such ambitions in the past, nay with little, modest or no success at all depending on which society or country one turns the camera. It is indeed a great sign and worthy of note that TREM is establishing this Foundation, which aims at initiating a Forum for social and political dialogue of this nature. I congratulate the organizers and wish the best for TREM and for our nation. This is surely, a path and the way for the future.

THE CHALLENGE:

Permit me to add that it is a truly Christian challenge and a fundamental option in a corrupt society like ours to respond to the “*signs of the times*” imposed by the demands of modern society by following in the footsteps of the teacher and master himself, Jesus Christ of Nazareth who urged his followers “*to be the light of the world and the salt of the earth*” (Mathew chapter 5). Do we have other viable alternatives? And could we afford the option of lethargy and apathy at this time? At what costs would these be for us and for our human heritage?

Pope John XXIII far back in 1963 understood this challenge for in the Encyclical Letter Mater et Magistra, he writes:

“Though the Church’s first care must be for souls, how she can sanctify them and make them share in the gifts of heaven, she concerns herself too with the exigencies of man’s daily life, with his livelihood and education, and his general welfare and prosperity”
(Mater et Magistra, n. 3)

Like John the Baptist in the desert, repeating the citation of Isaiah, there is a call for the committed and convinced Christian and citizen of our time, country and era. We are like challenged to be:

*“the voice of one crying in the wilderness,
prepare ye the ways of the Lord, make his path straight”*
(Mathew 3:3; Isaiah 40:3)

Right now, the world in which we live in is experiencing a number of conflicts some of which seem to have assumed a new and agonizing dimension. There are conflicts and contradictions between governments and the peace movements, the rulers and the ruled, trade unions and employers, the rich and the poor, ethnic groups and races and more currently, within Nigeria between religious groups especially the Muslims and the Christians. In many cases, human lives have been lost and war was threatened.

SITUATIONS OF CONFLICT AND CRISIS:

We live in an interdependent world where crisis and other happenings in one region affect the others. The continent of Africa has had its fair share of crisis and conflicts . Since 1970, over 50 wars have been fought in our continent and indeed, in all the regions of the continent, giving Africa, the image of the continent with the largest number of displaced persons and refugees. UNDP Human Development Index Report for year 2000 shows that most African countries are in the list of the least Developed countries. We have the least Gross National Product and Income Per capita, the largest stretch of poverty, unemployment, educational possibilities, medical care, necessary utilities (such as water, electricity and rural and urban infrastructure) without access to capital, information technology and modern means of mass communication. The digital divide has continued at the expense of Africa. Globalization has continued but most of our people are not on the train.

From the horn of Africa to central Africa, from southern Africa to the Great lakes Region and down to West Africa, we are all caught up in a collective convulsion of war and violence. Some of these fratricidal wars have subsided, but their traumatic and tragic effects are still with the people. Think about the child soldiers and the maimed in Sierra Leone and Liberia of recent.

It is sad to observe that despite all appeals in the past, the respect for the dignity of the human person, the violation of human rights, civil rights, political and social rights, cultural and economic rights continues unabated not only in our country Nigeria, but indeed elsewhere on the globe and even in the entire sub region of West Africa. Although democratically elected governments have been installed in all the 17 countries of our sub region at the level of ECOWAS (the first time since thinkable history), we do know that the leaders and the led are still far learning to operate the system. They are on transition towards democracy, to say it mildly. What we have may be near to civilian government, but a democratic culture is yet to emerge.

Our country Nigeria and indeed much of Africa is blessed by the benevolent Creator with abundant human and mineral resources and with rich varieties and diversities in situations of both Church and Society. Yet we are aware of the abject poverty and general misery presently facing our people, traceable to human factors such as colonial and neo-colonial structures – oppressive structures of injustice and of sin;

These include a myriad of vices, uncountable to mention such as bad governance which has been teleguided and promoted by successive military dictatorships and bad civilian governments; exploitation and degradation of the environment as we have never known it before. We observe with horror, the desertification of large areas of our country, the expansion southwards of the arid and sahel zones, the deforestation of the mangrove forests, the oil spillages and destruction of the Niger delta and other solid mineral areas of Nigeria, sometimes, without social or corporate responsibility by businesses over the over the earth; the mismanagement of scarce resources; endemic and all pervasive corruption in high and low places and in all forms, including bribery and the cult of mediocrity; ethnic bigotry; religious fanaticism and burdens resulting from international debts and unjust economic world order.

Child soldiers abound in Liberia, Sierra Leone, Guinea and other countries of our sub region. They have been abused and traumatized and there is hardly any rehabilitation going on for them. There are no skill centers for their retraining and crime thus abounds. With guns and no breads, what else could they make out of the meaning of life?

Other forms of child abuse persist alongside with trafficking on women. The local, national and international prostitution of women as good business by middle persons and consumers remains a scourge, which the intelligent mind still fails to fathom. The disregard and marginalisation of women is an issue of general concern; they are sometimes not given equal opportunities with men because of their gender both in public and private sectors and even are sexually assaulted or harassed.

The results of all these stares us in the face: inter ethnic and intra-ethnic conflicts; inter-religious squabbles and suspicion; widespread unemployment of youth, many of whom have not seen their first jobs while their parents and sponsors have lost their last jobs; Hunger exists in the land added to the current spread of such diseases like malaria, HIV/AIDS which leads to painful and excruciating death. Current costs of living have soared, making conditions of living and the quality of life cheapen in many cases. We are aware that the poor are increasing in their millions whilst the rich are becoming more exclusive.

CALLED TO MINISTER AND TO RECONCILE

It is this state of affairs, characterized by strife, lack of orientation and meaning, conflict and human misery that the Church is called upon to carry out her evangelizing mission. Of course, at the root of all these divisions and tensions is the human heart wounded by sin. Sin, which causes death, has made the ministry of religion, of the Church and of reconciliation an urgent task in our land.

In the words of the Apostle Paul:

“God in Christ was reconciling the world to himself, not holding men’s fault against them...We are ambassadors for Christ: it is as though God were appealing through us, and the appeal that we make in Christ’s name is: Be reconciled to God”
(2 Corinthians 5: 19 – 20).

CRITICISM OF THE ROLE OF RELIGION AND THE CHURCH IN OUR SOCIETY

It is no longer unusual to read open criticism of religion in our local newspapers. Religion and the Churches are blamed for sowing discord in the country though the denominational schools, even held responsible for the so-called educational imbalance between one part of the country and the other. They are accused of dogmatic indoctrination, of intolerance and bigotry. On another level, the Christian religion is labeled as foreign and condemned as the colonial remnant responsible for the cultural alienation of the African and the banishment of its gods.

Thinly veiled or even overt anti-religion or anti-clericalism has not been unknown in the pronouncements and administrative policies of some of our leaders. In general, there is a tendency to make religion a scapegoat for a myriad of our societal ills and the impression is given that society would certainly be better off without religion.

Even beyond our national frontiers, the criticism of religion and its role in society has even gained in intensity. It is taunted that religion has not succeeded in making the world better; that in fact, on the contrary, it has made it worse. Left-Wing critics and rationalists, even atheists point out that

religion as institutionalized belief has become an ideology in the service of the bourgeoisie with whose worldview and life style it is identified. It has therefore become an instrument for the maintenance of a conservative Status quo, that is to say an instrument of oppression.

Christianity and other religions it has been urged, has lost its initial evangelical impulse which was essentially humanitarian and pure in its holiest sense. It is said that they have now degenerated into a system of cold dogmas, empty ritual, intellectual mystification, false prophecies of doom, fake pastors, prophets and dupes who are charlatans, "*wolves in sheep clothing*" misleading the ignorant, the naïve and the helpless. The search for money has turned many churches and religious centers into places of trade, and it is no longer seldom to hear criticisms labeled against some churches, religious leaders and religious centers, likening them to the chastisement Jesus once gave to the traders whom he chased out of the Temple in Jerusalem: "*My house is a place of prayer, but you have turned it into a den of thieves*".

THE SIGNS OF THE TIMES:

This paper derives its urgency from a fundamental concern with the present state of affairs in our dear country- politically, socially, economically and religious and culturally. It seeks to ask questions about meaning and orientation in a situation of complete apathy, distrust, mischief and bad governance. Can we afford to continue this rudderless travel on a ship which has lost direction? There is need for people with conscience, committed Christians and enlightened citizens to speak out. There is need for the prophetic voice of the Church. Not to act is the evil, for the man dies who keeps silence in the face of tyranny.

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council in 1965 reflected in deep detail on the role and place of the Church and the Christian in the modern World and determined as its mandate in the decree “Gaudium et Spes” to:

“consider the signs of the times of the Gospel and translate them in the light of the Gospel” (no.2).

Unlike previous theological approaches which drew us to the scriptures and traditions only as exclusive sources for guidance in knowing God’s will, the Vatican Council pointed to a further source found in social theology which recognizes events, situations and aspirations of people. People cannot be separated from the situation in which they live.

In this new approach, scripture passages long neglected make new sense. We are also enabled to interpret the Gospel message within the context of experience of those who are victims and members of a hostile and ungodly society; those who have been denied the development and legitimate enjoyment of the fruits of our human and material resources; those who have been stripped of their humanity and reduced to the level of chattels, the prisoners of human –inflicted pervasive society, the marginalized. How can the Nigerian Church respond to the massive injustices prevalent in our modern society, on national and global scales?

No wonder, the document of the Synod of Bishops in 1971 on the theme “Justice in the World” states that:

“Action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as constitutive dimension of the teaching of the Gospel, or in other words, of the Church’s mission, for the salvation of the human race and its liberation *from every oppressive situation*”.