AUTHORITY AS SERVICE IN THE NIGERIAN-AFRICAN CHURCH: CHALLENGE OF THE TWOFOLD APOSTOLIC HERITAGE

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Abstract

The Church exists on earth as a community of salvation. Its aim is to serve the kingdom of God by working for the salvation of the world and reconciliation of all things to God in Jesus Christ. Authority in the Church exists neither as a power to dominate others nor as a coercive instrument, but as an opportunity and grace to serve the ecclesial mission of the Church. And consequently, it must be understood and practised as service in the life of the Christian community. In this article we argued that a good hermeneutics of the twofold apostolic heritage of the Church in their mutual and complementary interrelatedness, namely, an apostolic community and an apostolic ministry exercised by those with ministerial authority in this community, is of utmost importance for the true understanding of the meaning of Church authority understood and exercised as service in the Nigerian-African Church. Toward this direction, we analysed the data of the Christian Scriptures with regard to the key concepts of apostles, apostolic tradition, apostolic succession and authority. This enabled us to underscore that authority of office in the Church must be subordinated to moral authority as verified in Jesus’ own authority, as well as be linked and conditioned by fidelity to the Gospel and conformity to apostolic life which are also some of the hallmarks of the concept of apostolicity of ministry. We equally underlined the tendency towards clericalism often embodied and manifested in the exercise of ministerial responsibilities in the Nigerian-African Church, and sought a way out of the challenges by, among other things, drawing insights from the resources of African experience and culture, inasmuch as authority is concerned.

Introduction

This article proposes to examine and demonstrate two principal and important affirmations. In the first place, we wish to show that the Church received from its origins a twofold heritage which is at once complementary and in a mutually beneficial tension. This double apostolic heritage of the Church is apostolic community and apostolic ministry exercised by persons with specific authority and responsibility within this ecclesial community. In the Catholic Church, this apostolic ministry is exercised in the local Churches in the first place by the bishops who in the Catholic tradition are the successors of the apostles. They are aided by their priests and deacons. On the other hand, we intend to show that since the Church is wholly apostolic in its nature and constitution as a community of the faithful, she also stands as a whole, basically, in the apostolic succession. This apostolicity of the Church as a whole implies that it is within its context (i.e. the apostolic succession of the whole

Church) that one has to situate and understand the special apostolic succession of the bishops through their apostolic ministries which they exercise with the collaboration and assistance of the clergy. The main aim of this article is to examine the way the apostolicity of the Church conditions or shapes the understanding of apostolic succession of ministry, and to apply its implications and conclusions to the exercise of ministerial authority in the Nigerian-African Church.

Who are the Apostles?
The Term ‘Apostle’

In classical Greek usage, the word *apostolos* ‘apostle’ (derived from the Greek root – *apostellein*, meaning – ‘to send away’, ‘to send out’) designates a fleet sent out or a naval expedition, a group of colonists, a passport or bill of delivery. It is rarely used in the context of the sending of an individual person or to designate a messenger or an envoy in the sense it has been used in the New Testament (NT). Thus, Hans Küng could say, in line with other scholars, that secular Greek does not offer any linguistic parallels to the concept of the word ‘apostle’. Even the attempt made by some renowned scholars like K. H. Rengstorf and J. B. Lightfoot to derive the concept of the word from the Jewish juridical institution known as *Shaliah* has been seriously put to question by recent studies. This is because *Shaliah*, as used in the rabbinical tradition, never had any religious connotation before the NT period.

In the light of the above development, the conclusion that can be drawn from the derivation of the word, *apostolos* is that the origin and precise significance of the term is disputed. However, the idea of *apostolos* as designating a messenger, an envoy, or ‘one sent’ in the NT was certainly influenced by the Jewish-Hellenistic culture. We have seen that in its derivation from the Greek verb, *apostellein*, there is some reference to ‘being sent’. On the other hand, the Jewish book of Chronicles, an Old Testament text, shows that some men were ‘sent’ to teach the Law (cf. 2 Ch 17, 7-9). However, the transformation in the meaning of *apostolos* from a term which connotes a temporal function of being sent on mission, to a title of a permanent office in the Church is a NT development.

In the NT, the word ‘apostle’ appears several times, though not always in the same sense. It appears only once in the Gospels of Matthew and Mark, 34 times in the books of Luke (6 times in his gospel, and 28 times in Acts) and not less than 34 times in Paul, including the pastoral letters. Basically, the word means ‘ambassador’ and its broader usage which includes any Christian missionary (e.g. Barnabas in Acts

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3Ibid.
5Ibid., 47-48.
14:13; 1Cor. 9:6) is older than its technical usage as limited to the Twelve and Paul, who ranks himself on a par with them.° It is also used once in reference to Christ himself (Heb 3:1). Luke even ascribes to Jesus the attribution of this title to the Twelve (Lk 6:13).


The word ‘apostle’ is not identical with the term ‘Twelve’ frequently used by the synoptic writers in reference to the special circle of twelve disciples of Jesus even though both are related. The ‘Twelve’ is a symbolical and eschatological concept of pre-Easter origin concretized by Jesus in his institution of twelve special disciples from a larger circle of disciples. The formula: “He made them 12” shows that the group is an institution (cf. Mk 3, 13-19). The number ‘Twelve’ symbolizes the twelve tribes of Israel thought of in terms of the old people of God, but in both form and content, it signifies the eschatological Israel or the new people of God already inaugurated by the preaching of the reign of God and by the presence of Jesus.

On the other hand, the word ‘apostle’ expresses a concept whose milieu of origin was the primitive Apostolic Church and thus, was a post-Easter development. It is, therefore, not historically exact that Jesus might have during his life time given the title ‘Apostles’ to the Twelve as Luke says (cf. Lk 6:13). It was much later in the development of the concept of apostleship in the apostolic Church that the term was identified with the Twelve. We must not forget that the Gospels were also coloured by theology.

In technical theological usage, the word ‘apostle’ applies to those to whom the risen Lord manifested himself as living and whom He commissioned directly for missionary preaching. It was Paul who founded, developed, and saved this technical theological concept of apostleship from decay and disuse, and he applied it to himself. For instance, he bases his apostleship on the appearance of the risen Lord to him and refers to the Corinthians as the seal of this apostleship (cf. 1 Cor 9:1). Paul also justified his apostolic vocation by a personal commission he received directly from the risen Lord (cf. Gal 1:2). His constant preoccupation to found his apostleship on a vision and a mandate of the risen Lord, shows that the apostolic Church before whom he had to justify his claims, did not recognize any apostleship other than one derived from the express will of Christ. It is most likely that the word ‘apostle’ was used before and during the time of Paul in a broad sense without any special theological implication for missionaries, in which case Paul would have been the first person to associate it strictly with the notion of authorized representative. Through

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°F. Klostermann, Apostle, 679.
°Küng, The Church, 351.
him, the Church became conscious of what is meant when individuals like himself and Peter are spoken of as ‘apostles’.  

This special and strict theological usage of the word ‘apostle’ in reference to the Twelve, and with the inclusion of Paul, is the sense in which we are going to use it subsequently. Their qualification as apostles in this strict theological sense is based on the fact that they are the only persons who the NT established as having seen the risen Lord and at the same time as having directly received from him a commission for missionary preaching.

**Apostolic Succession and the Twofold Apostolic Heritage of the Church**

In terms of the ministry of first witnesses of the resurrection and of those who received direct commission from the risen Lord himself for missionary preaching, the apostles are unique and irreplaceable. In this sense, they can have no successors, and the vocation to apostleship ended with the death of the last apostle. It is possible and legitimate to speak of apostolic succession. Even though, their ministry as first witnesses of the resurrection has ended, the apostles have left for the Church a legacy of their witness and this has come down to us fundamentally in the form of the NT writings. Although, there were no further direct divine commissions after the apostles (as what remained was only the ministry of those commissioned by them or by the Church), the mission of the apostles remains as it is a universal one and by this fact surpasses the persons of the apostles. As this mission is meant to endure until the end of time, so also the apostolic mandate and ministry endure.

Thus, it is possible to speak of succession in Apostolic Tradition (which links the Church to its apostolic origins) and thus of the apostolic succession of the whole Church since it is the Church as a whole that hands on this tradition. This primary sense of apostolic succession precedes all succession in apostolic ministry. This is well articulated in the ecumenical report of the Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission on ‘The Gospel and the Church’:

> In the New Testament and the early Fathers, the emphasis was obviously placed more on the substance of apostolicity, i.e., on succession in apostolic teaching. In this sense the entire Church as the *ecclesia apostolica* stands in the apostolic succession. Within this general sense of succession, there is a more specific meaning: the succession of the uninterrupted line of the transmission of office. In the early Church, primarily in connection with defence against heresies, it was a sign of the unimpaired transmission of the gospel and a sign of unity in the faith.

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11Ibid.
13Joint Lutheran-Roman Catholic Study Commission, *The Gospel and the Church*, no. 57, in *Growth in Agreement. Reports and Agreed Statements of Ecumenical conversations on a World Level*
Succession in the Apostolic Tradition: Apostolic Succession of the Whole Church

The Church is prior to and precedes every individual or ministry that is in it. In the Credo, we confess the apostolicity of the Church. This means that the whole Church is apostolic in all her members and thus lives in continuity of faith, life, and mission with the apostles. The Church is the successor of the apostles in the sense that through baptism all her members have received the charge to participate in the handing on of the original Apostolic Tradition expressed in a fundamental way in the Scriptures. This handing on is expressed in the life, faith, and witness of the whole Church and of each one of her children. Thus, it is the entire people of God that bear the living Tradition as the following statements of Anglican-Roman Catholic International Commission note:

The people of God as a whole is the bearer of the living Tradition. In changing situations producing fresh challenges to the gospel, the discernment, actualization, and communication of the Word is the responsibility of the whole people of God. The Holy Spirit works through all members of the community, using the gifts he gives to each for the good of all. Theologians in particular serve the communion of the whole Church by exploring whether and how new insights should be integrated into the ongoing stream of Tradition. In each community there is an exchange, a mutual give-and-take, in which bishops, clergy and lay people receive from as well as give to others within the whole body.14

Succession in Apostolic Ministry: Succession in the Strict Sense

By apostolic succession in the strict sense, we mean the way that the ministry of the Church is said to be derived from the apostles by a continuous succession. This is the special ministry exercised by the bishop in his particular Church in collaboration with his clergy. The continuation of the apostolic ministry in the Church through the regular transmission of ministerial responsibilities is part of the apostolic heritage of the Church. The apostles have left behind not only a Church which is entirely apostolic but also a special ministry which is exercised in the service of the unity and continuity of the apostolic Tradition of the Church, or of the fidelity of the Church to her apostolic origins in Christ. In other words, the succession of apostolic ministry through the existence of the ordained ministry has, as its particular task in the Church, the preservation and the actualization of the apostolic faith.15 The fullness of the apostolic succession in the ministry of the Church implies three elements: the

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continuity in the transmission of the ministerial charge, the fidelity of proclamation to
the teaching of the apostles and the conformity of life to the Gospel and to the
demands of mission.\textsuperscript{16}

Thus, the bishops may be considered as the successors of the apostles in the
strict sense of the term by virtue of their pastoral office and membership of the
Episcopal college as well as the necessary communion that this implies. But this fact
alone is not enough as faith and fidelity to the apostolic life are essential to the
succession. One can, therefore, say with Pope John Paul II that “bishops are
successors of the Apostles not only in authority and sacred power but also in the form
of apostolic life, in apostolic sufferings endured for the proclamation and spread of
the Gospel, in their gentle and merciful care of the faithful entrusted to them, in their
defence of the weak, and in their unremitting concern for the People of God.”\textsuperscript{17}

There is therefore no room for a mere juridical understanding of the
ministerial office in the Church. Legitimate occupation of the apostolic office by the
bishop through valid episcopal ordination 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 because an ecclesiastical 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.\textsuperscript{18} St. Augustine was aware of this truth when he wrote: “Catholic bishops are
not to be followed if they mislead by expressing sentiments contrary to the
Scriptures.”\textsuperscript{19}

\textbf{Apostolic Succession of the Whole Church: Implications for
Ordained Ministry}

As we have seen, the apostolic succession of the whole Church corresponds to
succession in apostolic Tradition which involves the handing on of the teaching or
witness of the apostles by the members of the Church as a whole in their faith, life
and worship. The regular transmission of ordained ministry which corresponds to
apostolic succession of the bishops is also part of the one Apostolic Tradition of the
Church. Consequently, it is within the context of the apostolic succession of the
whole Church that the ministry exercised by the bishop in his particular Church with
the assistance of his clergy is to be understood and situated. The ministry of bishops,
although derived from a particular kind of apostolic succession proper to them, is
linked up with the ministry of the entire community of the faithful, as the whole
Church is also the successor to the apostles; all are called to witness to and confess
the apostolic faith. There is no opposition between the two kinds of ministry as both

\textsuperscript{16}Group des Dombes, \textit{Un seul MaÎtre}, no. 38, 30-31.
\textsuperscript{17}John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Bishop, Servant of the Gospel of Jesus
\textsuperscript{18}Yves Congar, “Ministères et structuration de l’Eglise”, in ID., \textit{Ministères et communion
\textsuperscript{19}Augustinus, \textit{De Unitate Ecclesiae}, 11, 28 (PL 43, 401-411).
are born from the same apostolic roots and serve the same people with the same finality. They are thus complementary as none can exist without the other. The 1967 Synod of Bishops of the Roman Catholic Church spoke of the inseparability of the apostles and the Church: “It is clear from the New Testament writings that an apostle and a community of faithful united with one another by a mutual link under Christ as head and the influence of his Spirit belong to the original inalienable structure of the Church.”

Therefore, in addition to an apostolic community, we have a distinct apostolic ministry with distinct authority and responsibility that is exercised only with the participation and collaboration of the entire Church. These two principles are in tension, but they are not really in conflict. They are two fundamental axioms of a theology of ministry. The implication of the apostolic succession of the whole Church is that what is said of bishops (shared by other ministers) as successors of the apostles in a particular sense, with regard to their mission, authority and the assistance of the Spirit, must also be predicated generally to the whole Church because of her apostolicity. This is because it is to the whole Church that is first given these gifts. According to P.P. Avis:

Unless the commission and the gift of the Spirit were given to the whole Church, the apostles and their successors would be detached from the community of early disciples which included the women and Jesus’ brothers, and the ordained ministry thereafter would be isolated from the body of Christ. This would mean an apostolic ministry ministering to a non-apostolic community. In other words, there could be no representative ministry, because the distinctive ministry would not be embodying, focusing and reflecting back the nature of the Church. But on the other hand, if there were no distinct authoritative ministry, stemming from the apostles, the whole Church could not be called to realize its nature as apostolic. How else can the Church be enabled to realize its apostolic nature if not through a distinct ministry that calls the Church, from the position of recognized authority, to become what it is by focusing, reflecting and embodying that apostolicity for the benefit of the whole body.

The ministry of bishops is necessarily linked to and supported by the effective participation and contribution of the other members of the community: clergy, religious and laity.

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Authority as Service in the Nigerian-African Church

Authority as Service

Etymologically, the term ‘authority’ comes from the Latin word *auctoritas*, which in itself is derived from *auctor* (cause, sponsor, guardian, promoter, surety). The term *auctor* is linked to the Latin verb *augere* which means “to increase”, “to enrich”, or “to augment”. The etymology implies that authority is a reality which when exercised increases well-being (*augere*) and as well empowers (*auctor*). Therefore, authority is not merely the right to determine something in the life of others (juridical authority), but it is first and foremost the rightful freedom to do what is genuinely right and to communicate this to others (moral authority). This later sense is exactly the primary sense which authority carries in the New Testament as evident 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 was an authority exercised primarily by virtue of moral character. He lives as he teaches and teaches as he lives. His proclamation of the Gospel 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.

However, Jesus does not reject the need of authority of office. What he demands is that such authority be joined with a moral authority. He demonstrates 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 standard or lack of moral authority (cf. Mt 23, 1-7). No doubt, authority of office is often a necessity. But its legitimate exercise depends on its subordination to moral authority and thus, its reconfiguration before the demands of the Gospel. Part of these demands of the Gospel is that the exercise of authority in the Church respect the apostolic nature of the Church which was, as we saw involves, a twofold heritage, namely: (a) an apostolic community which implies the basic apostolic succession of the whole Church, and (b) a special apostolic ministry which implies the special apostolic succession of bishops in the ordained ministry which they exercise together with the clergy. The exercise of ecclesial authority must respect the reality of the Church as an apostolic community. In other words, the apostolicity of the whole Church must condition or shape the understanding of apostolic succession of

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ministry. The understanding and exercise of the authority of ordained ministry must be linked to fidelity to the Gospel and apostolic life on the part of office holders or pastoral ministers in the Church.

The Church as Temple of God’s Presence and Community of Salvation: The Spiritual Character of Authority in the Church:

In its essence the Church is a temple of God’s presence. It exists on earth as a community of salvation called to express and signify the mystery of God’s presence and grace operative in history. Authority in the Church finds its meaning only in this context. We have seen above how Jesus radically transformed the whole character and even the nature of authority. This implies that the Christian concept of authority is essentially of a spiritual nature; and according to Yves Congar, this “does not mean metaphorical but corresponding to God’s working in man.” Authority in the Church does not simply mean that authority must be exercised in a spirit of personal sacrifice and service, even though this would, of course, lead to genuine and profitable developments. Rather, it is essentially meant to be the result of the power of grace; the fruit of the indwelling of the Spirit. Consequently, the concept of authority in the Church 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. In other words, authority in this context has to be, in effect, the power of grace and love; the authority of the Spirit itself shining through human channels.

Authority understood in the above spiritual sense is not confined to the official hierarchical structure alone. 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. The moral power associated with such people is the power of God’s grace operative in them. 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 a spiritual reality.

While tracing the history of the development of authority in the Church, Congar has shown that the period of the Church of martyrs (beginning 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. Only those who were “men of God” had authority. Church authority resided with those who were spiritually alive. The bishop, within the context of the early Church, was a spiritual man endowed in a

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29 Ibid., 61.
preeminent way with spiritual gifts to lead God’s people. If the Church’s goal is to form spiritual people, to introduce souls to the “philosophy of Christ,” and to be the instrument of salvation, then only those spiritually alive were considered as capable of exercising authority over the faithful.30

As a visible organization, the Church is also in need of an organizing juridical structure, and an institutional governing organ. But the institutional structure or aspect of the Church is called to symbolize, and to be a sacrament of the power of grace and love. In other words, the hierarchical structure of the Church is called to express and signify the mystery of grace operative in history. Its function is to “sacramentalize” the mystery of God’s abiding presence; that is, to symbolize and serve the mystery of grace operative in the Church.31

How far have the Nigerian-African bishops and clergy responded to the above call?

The Nigerian-African Church: A Church of Hope and Future

The Nigerian-African Church is a Church with a lot of hope and future. She is still a young Church, having just had her first centenary celebrations only in the last century. She has made a lot of progress in various areas of the life and mission of the Church. She makes her own contributions of African cultural wealth and worthy personnel to the universal Church. The Nigerian-African Church is blessed with many dedicated and hard-working bishops. She is also blessed with many committed priests, religious and laity.

However, being still a young Church, the Nigerian-African Church is not without her own share of teething problems associated with her youth and growth. In what follows, the focus would be on an area where some reforms and renewal can further lead the Church along the lines of her already embarked progress and development, namely, the area of authority. However, before delving into this, one thing is clear: In spite of some of the problems which would be identified, and which are not peculiar to the Church in Nigeria, as it is also the case with the Church in Africa in general, the Nigerian-African Church still stands strong and remains a Church of hope and a Church of the future.

Tendency towards Clericalism

Although there are exceptions, the general notion of authority prevalent in the Nigerian-African Church is that represented by the code of Canon Law. It is a juridical and institutional notion of authority, which lays emphasis on power and on the bearers of power. The ecclesiology behind this conception of authority is one which deals with the Church as if it were solely a hierarchical society and a visible institution. Although, it accepts in principle that the Church is also a spiritual

30Ibid., 63.
31Ibid., 62.
community and a mystery, this ecclesiology is primarily concerned with order, conformism, submission and the visible structure of the Church. What matters in its conception of authority is not so much the way 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 thing is not so much the fact of things as to the authority behind the decision. The model of leadership evident in this way of being the Church has been rightly called clericalism. According to a publication of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, “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.”\(^\text{32}\) This publication does not say categorically that there is clericalism in the Nigerian Church, but it presumes it.

The danger in this way of seeing the Church and exercising authority (primarily in terms of jurisdiction and the powers of the clergy) is that it can lay the foundation of many attitudes which may not be in line with the evangelical demands of the Gospel and kingdom of God. Elochukwu E. Uzukwu calls our attention to a well known case about one Nigerian bishop who made the following statement some years ago while addressing senior seminarians: “We are the Church, you are not the Church, the Church speaks, you listen; we talk, you do the listening; we give directives, you obey; you are there, we are here; we send you, you go.”\(^\text{33}\) Uzukwu concludes with reference to the above statement by saying that the “language and practice are not different from the tyrannies which are called governments in Africa.”\(^\text{34}\) Furthermore, he goes on to unmask the sacral mentality which enshrouds this authoritarian understanding of authority. He quotes from Leonardo Boff to show how this mentality owes its origin to the Roman and feudal style of authority which the Church adopted from the era of Constantine but has since abandoned, at least in principle, with Vatican II:

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 (…) This 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.\(^\text{35}\)


\(^{34}\)Ibid.

\(^{35}\)L. Boff, Church, Charism and Power, 40-41. cf. E. E. Uzukwu, A Listening Church, 122.
Clericalism has been described as the dominant model of leadership and authority in African Churches. Thus, while addressing the 1975 plenary assembly of SECAM, Bishop Mwoleka of the diocese of Rulenge in Western Tanzania identified clericalism as the stumbling block of African ecclesiology: “The root of the trouble is that we have a fixed idea of the Church. At meetings like this everybody seems to argue that the Church, of course, means all the faithful. But at the back of our minds and in our imagination, almost instinctively, the Church is always the Church of the clergy.”

On the other hand, the Congolese theologian, Bénézet Bujo sees clericalism as prevalent and pervasive in the African Churches and does not hesitate to condemn it in unmistakable terms. He shows that a number of African bishops are dictatorial and high-handed at the level of the diocese, a situation which is equally the case in the parishes with regard to the attitude of many priests. Thus, while the clergy mount a one-man-rule in their respective areas of jurisdiction, the laity are condemned to a mere passive role. Bujo sees this situation as dangerous for African Christianity: “A priest or a bishop can turn into a lifelong oppressor of the ecclesial community, effectively dechristianizing it.” He therefore, pleads for “the destruction of all clericalism and all episcopalism” wherever their traces can be found in the Church. In his turn, Adrian Hastings advocates declericalization as the way forward for the African Church: “To save the Church in Africa today we have, more than anything else, to declericalize her. We have to declericalize the liturgy (…) We have to declericalize Scripture (…) We have to declericalize parish organization (…) We have to declericalize the apostolate (…) Finally, and most difficult of all, we have to declericalize the ministry.”

The Way Forward for the Nigerian-African Church

The major fault of clericalism is that it creates a priestly caste detached from the community of the faithful and an ordained ministry isolated from the body of Christ. It behaves as if the ordained ministry has a monopoly of apostolicity and as if what we have is an apostolic ministry ministering to a non-apostolic community. The Nigerian-African Church must thus fully recover the twofold apostolic heritage of the Church (Apostolic community and Apostolic ministry) in her mission, life and organization. What we have now is to a large extent one aspect of this heritage, namely, the ordained-apostolic ministry dominating the other, that is, the apostolic-ecclesial community. We must not forget that it is to the whole Church, and not only to the Bishops and Clergy that the gifts of the Holy Spirit are given. The whole Church should therefore be involved in the search for the truth and the will of God.

37 Cited in E. E. Uzukwu, A Listening Church, 120.
There should be mutual exchange of gifts; a give-and-take attitude between the bishop and his priests, and between the ordained and non-ordained members of the Christian community. The fact that the laity themselves are not happy with the existing situation is clearly shown in a paper presented by a one-time chairperson of the Nigeria Laity Council, D. D. Dodo in 1994:

Here is the problem. For the layman, the new dispensation brought about by Vatican II and the 1983 Code of Canon Law in terms of his definition and role in the Church are welcome development and he is eager to be given the opportunity to perform; but for the priest, it is an intrusion, an invasion of his traditional power, and he is not ready and willing to allow the layman play his new role. This results in conflict of interest, confusion and suspicion.  

The situation against which Dodo complained about in 1994 still rears its ugly head today in the Nigerian-African Church.

The Church in Nigeria and in fact in the whole African continent should recover the close link between an apostolic community and an apostolic ministry. This means that in the Christian community (dioceses and parishes), there is no room for isolated ministry. There is no place in the Church for an exclusivistic brand of authority; one in the entire community would not be entitled to participate. In the Church, authority is never held alone but always with and in communion with others.

There are no set apart, ordained, apostolic, charismatic, and sacrificial ministers within a people which would not share all these attributes and functions. There are only set apart ministers within a set apart people, specially ordained ministers within the people which has received the general ‘ordination’ of baptism, special apostolic and charismatic ministries within the apostolic-charismatic church and special sacrificial functions within the sacrificial people.

Ministry and mission in the Church is first and foremost basically that of the whole Christian community (as the whole Church is ministerial) before being the responsibilities of particular individuals or Church officials.

Having seen the way forward for the Nigerian-African Church, what concrete measures can be put into practice for the realization of a Church conscious of its twofold apostolic heritage and a Church willing to allow the laity play an adult role as

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41 *Encounter, Christ’s Ministry through His Whole Church* in *Theological Foundation for Ministry*, R. S. Anderson, ed. (Scotland: T & T Clark Ltd., 1979), 437.
co-responsible members consequent on their baptismal right and duty in the Church?\footnote{Vatican II, Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People Apostolicam Actuositatem, 18 November 1965, 2: Austin Flannery, ed., Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents, 676-702.}

**Programme for Concrete Action**

**A. Promotion of Synodality on the Basis of ‘African Palaver’ Model of Leadership**

In the face of the clericalism in the Nigerian-African Church as we have shown, what model of leadership do African theologians propose as a corrective alternative? They generally propose the ‘African palaver’ model of leadership and authority. The palaver model of exercising authority is to a large extent characteristic of traditional African society in its political organizations. This model involves the consultation of the people on a wide scale and deliberation at many levels with the aim of arriving at a consensus. The decisions arrived at in this process usually reflect the opinion of the people governed such that it can be correctly affirmed that power lies with the people. M. Masango was, therefore, right when he said that “in Africa, leadership was traditionally a function to be shared by all villagers or community members, rather than invested in one person.”\footnote{M. Masango, “Leadership in the African Context,” The Ecumenical Review (2003): 315.}

Furthermore, Uzukwu illustrates the system of mass consultation of the people implied in the ‘African palaver’ model of leadership with the symbol or totem of the Manja chief in Central African Republic: “The chief’s symbol is the rabbit, because it has large ears. He has the last word. But his ears are open to the opinion of all – humans as well as spirits. That is the source of his power; and that also is the limit of his power.”\footnote{E. E. Uzukwu, A Listening Church, 18.}

The quality of patient listening is thus, one of the characteristics of the ‘African palaver’, continues Uzukwu: “For the chief to be fair, he must be a patient listener. And this listening takes plenty of time. This is what is generally called African palaver: the liberation of speech at all levels of the community to come close to that Word which is too large for an individual mouth, the Word which saves and heals.”\footnote{Ibid., 128.}

While stressing the palaver model of leadership which involves consultation of the people, open dialogue, patient listening and the exercise of authority in concert with the community, Bujo applies this model to the Church, thus:

According to the Black African palaver model, the word cannot be interpreted by some central authority but only by a community, that is, in the process of listening to one another. For in speaking and listening with and to each other, it is possible to repulse a fatal word and to confirm a life-
promoting one, and to receive it into the service of the ecclesial community. Concretely this would mean that it is not a solitary authority but this authority (is exercised) in concert with the community of all believers (…) This African palaver model even completes and corrects to some extent the individualistic view of Roman and Western ecclesiology that tends to ascribe the competence for decision-making and interpretation in many areas solely to the teaching magisterium of the Church. 46

The Palaver model of leadership is, therefore, the pattern of leadership best suited to the Church in Africa because it is truly African and as well reflects the reality of the Church as a community of disciples. Inculturation for the sake of the Gospel demands that this model be transposed into a new African ecclesiology with the abandonment of the stifling clericalism which is a dominant dimension of the present African ecclesiology.

But the question is: How can this principle of ‘African palaver’ model of leadership be given concrete institutional form? How can the principle be structurally translated into practice structurally in the exercise of authority and mode of pastoral government of the diocese? This can be done by giving priority to synodal system of government. The Second Vatican Council opened the way to this development by the creation of some synodal structures, notably, the Pastoral Council and the Presbyteral Council. Other synodal structures that followed in the wake of Vatican II include the Diocesan Synod and the Episcopal Council.

However, these synodal institutions cannot function effectively on the basis of the principle of ‘African palaver’ unless efforts are taken to ensure that they do so. This implies that priority should be given to the process of formation of consensus and that decisions in the African churches become the fruit of critical discussion, exchange of ideas and patient listening in a process in which there is equal distribution of speech acts among all those involved in the ‘palaver event’. It is the personal calling and responsibility of the bishop as the successor of the apostles to watch over the palaver of the successors of the apostolic Church, the people of God, by facilitating it and ensuring that it is not politicized or ridiculed by manoeuvres. In this light, he has always the last word which should normally reflect the authentic consensus of the African ecclesial palaver. It is thus, his responsibility to convene the palaver of the people of God in his diocese, to preside over it and to confirm its decisions.

But he must exercise this office in a responsible and credible way by having ‘large ears’ in order to be able to hear what the spirit is saying through other members of the Church, and by avoiding all authoritarianism as it is Jesus Christ and not himself who is the Head and Lord of the Church. Thus, he must conform himself to the apostolic way of life, and model his conduct on the Gospel. His ordination and

official appointment is not enough for the fruitful exercise of his office. He must also be a morally credible person after the example of Christ.

The same demand also applies to the clergy. Here it would be necessary to observe again that a number of African bishops and priests are autocratic and dictatorial. In their respective areas of jurisdiction, they assume the position of Lord and Head of the Church. This is unfortunate because they rob Christ of the position which is due to him as the Son of God. It is necessary to remind ourselves that the exercise of authority in the Church is valid only when it manifests the sovereignty of Jesus Christ, openness to the gifts of the Holy Spirit and filial adoration of God.

B. Catholic Press for the Laity

The Nigerian Catholic Laity Council, at least at the national level, could establish and run a Catholic press with the support of the Episcopal Conference, which will serve as organ of public opinion in the Church. Through this medium, the laity can make their voice heard, their thoughts and feelings known, their problems and difficulties revealed, so that the leaders of the Nigerian Church can take account of them in their own action and programme. Karl Rahner, a great German Catholic theologian, drives home this point in a work he devoted to public opinion in the Church. According to him:

Public opinion is (...) one of the means whereby Church’s official leaders, who need human aid as well as divine, get to know something about the actual situation within which, and taking account of which, they are to lead and guide the people. They need to know how people are thinking and feeling, what their problems are, what they find difficult, in what respects their feelings have changed, where they find the traditional answers or rulings insufficient, what they would like to see changed.

As a matter of fact, the lay person’s right to free and responsible speech in the Church has anthropological and theological foundations. Anthropologically, he has the inalienable right as a person to freedom of speech and of conscience; theologically, as a full, active and co-responsible member of the Nigerian-African Church, he has the inalienable right rooted in his baptism to make his opinion on Church matters responsibly heard in the Church. Public opinion is an organic functional factor of any living human society, according to the following words of Pope Pius XII to an international Catholic Press Congress:

Public opinion plays a part in every normal society of human beings...wherever there is no expression of public opinion, above all, where it has been ascertained that no public opinion exists, then one is obliged to say that there is a fault, a weakness, a sickness, in the social life of that area

47 Meanwhile virtually Catholic presses in Nigeria today are run by the clergy.
Finally, I should like to add a word about things that can be left open to
discussions, of course. Only people who know little or nothing about the
Catholic Church will be surprised to hear this. For she too is a living body,
and there would be something missing from her life if there were no public
opinion within her, a defect for which pastors as well as the faithful would be
responsible (...).49

If Church leaders do not encourage or tolerate free speech in the Nigerian-African
Church, “they run the risk of directing her from a soundproof ivory tower, instead of
straining their ears to catch the voice of God, which can also be audible within the
clamour of the times.”50

C. Decentralization and Sharing of Authority

There is need for decentralization and sharing of authority in the Nigerian-
African Church. So much authority and control is still concentrated at the centre.
Should the bishop be almost everything to his diocese? Ought priests to consult
directly with their bishops on practically almost “everything”? Are the priests in the
parish the be-all and end-all of life and activities in the parish (with the faithful
condemned to the receiving end?). It is not unheard of that commissions or
committees set up for specific tasks or projects to be accomplished are barely
functional for the simple reason that the bishop himself does the work that is assigned
to them. There is need for the bishops and authority-holders in the Church to be
willing to share their authority and to have enough confidence in their collaborators.
It is in this light that Pope John Paul II advised African bishops to leave some
administrative functions in the hands of competent priests and laymen in order that
they can devote themselves to the duties proper to their Episcopal office which are
primarily pastoral in nature.51 For instance, the bishops should be able to entrust to
their Vicars General and Deans of Deaneries some considerable administrative
responsibilities so that they can have enough time to devote themselves to their
pastoral duties. The actual situation does not commend itself a lot. Thus, Ojiako could
say of Vicars General and deans of Deaneries in Nigeria, “they are bearers of empty
canonical titles that confer no administrative or extra pastoral responsibility.”52

Conclusion

From what has been said so far, we reaffirm that if authority is to be exercised
as truly as a service of salvation of the People of God in the Nigerian-African Church,
then those with this ministerial authority in a particular way, namely, bishops and

49 L’Osservatore Romano of 18 February, 1950; cited in Rahner, Free Speech in the Church, 5.
50 Rahner, Free Speech in the Church, 15.
51 Cf. L’Osservatore Romano, Edition hebdomadaire en langue française, cité du Vatican,
September 3 1985, 8.
188.
other members of the clergy must be completely faithful to the twofold apostolic heritage of the Church. For now we are far from being there. The apostolic legacy of the Church as we saw implies that the Church’s ministry and the exercise of authority must recover not only the place and responsibility of the special apostolic ministers of the Church or the hierarchy, but also the place and co-responsibility of the entire community of the faithful, which is in the majority the laity.

As we noted, there was always a close bond between an apostle and a community of the faithful in the New Testament. In other words, the Church of the apostles lived as one organic and coherent whole that does not know any separation into two different classes of superior and inferior disciples. There was always the co-responsibility of the whole community of the faithful in the ministry and authority exercised by the leaders of the apostolic Church. This can be seen for instance in the case of Paul in the communities he founded and the place of the Twelve in the early Jerusalem community.

Contrary to this apostolic heritage, the Nigerian-African Church seems to be moving in the direction of a separation of the Church into two unequal classes: the clergy on the one hand, the rest of the faithful on the other hand. The exercise of ministerial authority in the Nigerian-African Church should therefore recover the principle of communion by encouraging participation and co-responsibility at all levels of the Church’s existence. It is also called to symbolize and express the mystery and power of God’s grace and love operative in the Church – the authority of the Spirit itself shining through human channels. In the light of this direction, we have proposed a programme of concrete action which includes recourse to the palaver model of African traditional leadership, the creation of organs of public opinion in the Church and decentralization of authority at the diocesan level.