TITHE AND TITHING IN THE CATHOLIC CHURCH
IN NIGERIA TODAY

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Abstract
Tithe is an Old Testament obligatory offering which binds every Jew to pay the
tenth part of his annual harvest to God for the maintenance of sacred places and
ministers. This practice came into Christianity and in recent time, the Catholic Church in
Nigeria is experiencing a serious wave of it. Questions are raised about the practice in the
Church and theologians and pastors have not done so much to set the people of God on
the right path concerning the matter. This paper examines the practice of tithing in the
Catholic Church today with special interest on determining its port of entry into the
Nigerian Church, if it is really Christian, if there is anything wrong with it and if
Catholics should pay tithe simply because it is practiced in other churches. The paper
ends on a note of caution about the practice of tithing in the Church.

Introduction
Catholics have always been known for making generous offerings
and donations and paying some mandatory levies to support the Church
and its work of evangelization. In recent time, tithing has emerged as a
practice in the Church, and by this, the faithful are obliged to pay ten
percent of their income to priests or the Church. According to Achunike,
"tithe payment is becoming a common experience in the Catholic
Church"1 and this is more prevalent in the cities. A good number of
Catholics are beginning to comply with this practice and it is not
uncommon to see priests today make tithing the theme of their preaching.

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1Hilary C. Achunike, The Influence of Pentecostalism on Catholic Priests and
In the meantime, there is yet no general acceptance, clear-cut agreement or authoritative directives on the matter. Some Catholics welcome the practice but others are not comfortable with it. Part of the discomfort owes to the way tithe is at times presented as the key to every heavenly blessing and those who do not pay it are threatened with curses on them. In the absence of sound directives on the practice, the faithful are left at the mercy of what they hear or read from preachers, teachers and writings outside the Church. There is confusion, misunderstanding, and misinterpretation surrounding the practice.

This paper aims at discussing tithe and tithing among Catholics in Nigeria today. Beginning with the background of the matter, it will highlight the meaning, origin and significance of the practice and then address some issues surrounding the payment of tithe. A conclusion will be drawn based on the above. These are done with a view to bringing about a better understanding of tithe and providing the Church with basic information for possible formulation of directives on the practice.

1. The Background of Tithing in Our Church

The first time that I became really acquainted with tithe was nearly twenty years ago in Port Harcourt. Then, I was a very young priest and people would come to me with cheques and envelopes containing cash as their tithes. Initially, I did not know what to do but my elder brother in the priesthood, the Parish Priest, taught me to accept the tithes, to pray for those who bring them and then to submit whatever they bring to him. I followed this directive strictly. I have not been in a parish for years; I do not receive tithes but there is hardly any week that I do not get a number of questions bordering on paying tithe. Recently, I had a brief discussion with one of the leaders of the Catholic faith in Nigeria about tithing. He was of the view that tithe is not a new thing in the Catholic tradition. This view is not known to a good number of other persons that I interrogated for whom the practice of paying tithes (tithing) is a relatively new phenomenon in the Catholic Church in Nigeria.

In a study published by Hilary Achunike in 2004 on the influence of Pentecostalism on Catholic priests and seminarians in Nigeria, he aptly identifies tithing as one of the new things which Catholics copied from the Pentecostals. He notes that in the first place, "The payment of tithe is the
staple diet of the Pentecostals."

It is one of the major pillars of their spirituality and their pastors see tithe as a principal source of income. They use tithes to build up wealth for themselves, supported by the belief that being wealthy and highly prosperous is a sign of divine blessing. This belief is greatly highlighted in preaching and admonitions, and a good number of their adherents abide strictly by them. The present practice of tithing in the Catholic Church is not unconnected with this Pentecostal tradition.

The influence of Pentecostalism on the Catholic Church and other mainline Churches in Nigeria is a fact that cannot be denied by anybody. There is hardly any mainline Church in the country without a strong presence and impact of the Charismatic Movements, which is a strand of Pentecostalism. The way we pray in the Catholic Church, a good number of the choruses we sing and the way we organise some of our prayer programmes bespeak clear Pentecostal influences. “Prayer meetings,” “fellowships,” “revivals,” “crusades” and “adorations” organised by the Pentecostals and/or Charismatic movements, which are usually presented as inter-denominational or non-denominational in nature, provide favourable environments for Pentecostals to sell their beliefs and practices to Catholics. Moreover, events like weddings, child dedication, harvests and bazaars, thanksgivings, anniversaries and birthday celebrations constitute points of encounters between Pentecostals and Catholics. The former uses such encounters as opportunities to put their messages across to the latter.

Being that tithe is "the staple diet of Pentecostals," there is hardly any Pentecostal gathering that it is not preached or practised. From the Pentecostals, Catholics learnt about tithes and many of them have become convinced of the need to adopt the practice. Hence, "many Catholics now pay tithe as a result of Pentecostal influences." Today, in many parishes, certain Sundays are set aside for tithing, boxes are displayed at some strategic places where people put their tithes, and tithe-envelopes are

\[^{2}\text{Ibid., 92.}\]
\[^{4}\text{Achunike, The Influence of Pentecostalism, 92.}\]
\[^{5}\text{Ibid., 93.}\]
printed and distributed to people. Holes are created at the entrance of some Churches where people drop in their tithes even in the absence of priests. Some bishops demand from their priests an account of the money realized from tithes. In other places, the practice is that tithes belong to the priest to whom they are paid and they are free to use them for their personal upkeep. The practice varies across parishes and dioceses.

One can say that tithing is a borrowed practice which is not yet well fitted into the tradition of the Catholic Church in Nigeria. It is fast spreading but bounded by a bunch of issues and without any clear-cut doctrinal foundation. The Catholic Biblical Association of Nigeria (CABAN), in its 5th Annual Convention held in 2014 paid serious attention to the issue of tithes and other related emerging matters like sowing seeds and pledges in the Nigerian Church. From all indications, the scholars had divergent views on veracity of the practice of tithing in the Church. For instance, Victor Onwukeme says: "On tithing, my personal opinion is that people should be encouraged to pay tithes. However, it should be noted that tithe is not only paid with money." Then, Chris Ukachukwu Manus holds that "erroneous preachment on tithe and the exertion of tithing in contemporary times is quite discordant with the teaching of the word that the Apostles had received from Jesus Christ and which they had handed down to us." On the level of academics, differences in opinion could be healthy but not in the practice of faith. Catholics should not be left in confusion on matters of their practice of faith. The mission of this writer and the significance of the paper are to be located in the attempt to contribute to this highly needed clarification on tithe.

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6 Paying of tithes was practised in the Catholic Church at a time as evidenced in the decisions of the Council of Trent, cf. Session XXV, Canon 12 and the 1917 Code of Canon Law, cf. Canon 1502. However, the practice was not there from the beginning and did not continue after a while. It was not part of the traditions inherited by the Nigerian Church. Hence, what we see today as tithing is rightly traceable to the Pentecostals.


2. The Meaning and Origin of Tithe

The term tithe derives from the English word, "tenth" and it refers to the tenth fraction of a thing. Technically speaking, it is “a portion of one’s annual income contributed voluntarily or due as a tax, especially a contribution of one tenth of one’s income for the support of the clergy or Church.” Or, it “is a one-tenth part of something, paid as a contribution to a religious organization or compulsory tax to government.” The actual origin of tithe is not known. However, it has a very long history that dates before Abraham; "It was there before the laws of Moses and after the law." Tithing among the Jews was borrowed most probably from the Ancient Near East. Secondary documents show that it was widely practised in that region and there are evidences of tithes of different kinds in Mesopotamia. Nonetheless, the major source of the information we have today on tithe and tithing is the Bible particularly the Old Testament.

3. Tithe and Tithing in the Old Testament

The first and the oldest reference to tithe which we find in the Bible is in connection with Abram. Abram was on his way back from a victorious war waged against those who plundered Sodom and Gomorrah and made away with possessions and people from the city including Lot, Abram's nephew, and kings of the neighbouring cities came to meet him. Among those kings was Melchizedek, who was both the king of Salem and a priest of God Most High. He offered Abram bread and wine and blessed him. In turn, “Abram gave him a tenth part of everything.” This gesture of Abram was done in thanksgiving to God for the victory granted to him.

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11Achunike, The Influence of Pentecostalism, 92.
14We can find this in The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago, vol. 4.
16Genesis 14: 20.
Similarly, tithe appears in the story of Jacob. His father Isaac wanted him to marry a wife from their people and not from the Canaanites among whom they lived\(^{17}\). On his way to this marriage mission, Jacob had a strange experience in Bethel and when he woke up, he made a vow to God that if he would guide him through the journey, he will, on his part, serve him as his only God for life and, in addition, give him a tenth of all he possessed. These were his words, “... of all that you give me, I will give back a tenth.”\(^{18}\) Once again, Jacob's tithe will be given to God in appreciation and thanksgiving for favours which he hoped to receive. His was to be a tenth of all his possession and not simply of his harvest within a given season.

These instances of tithing in the stories of Abraham and Jacob constitute the source of the Jewish tithing tradition. Later, Moses and those who came after him translated this inherited tradition into laws.

The liberation movement which Moses and his brother Aaron engineered in Egypt materialized in the exodus of the children of Israel from slavery and their movement into the open and free space of the wilderness. At Mount Sinai, the people whom Moses led out of Egypt had a covenant with Yahweh, the God who showed them the great favour. The Jewish nation was established in the context of this event which was continually re-enacted in the cult of Yahweh. Naturally, an alliance of this nature is sustained by rules and regulations. In addition to the foundational laws of the Covenant, namely, the Ten Commandments\(^ {19}\), there were so many other precepts relating to practically all aspects of the life of the people and their relationships with God and with one another. Stipulations about tithes and tithing form part of such laws.

The law about tithe stipulates that “One-tenth of all the produce of the field or the fruits of trees, belongs to the Lord, they are holy to the Lord.”\(^ {20}\) It is further stated that while tithes are offerings made to God to honour him, they are also to serve the need of sustenance for the Levites. The status of the Levites in Israel is sometimes ambiguous. They are a tribe in Israel, the descendants of Levi; one of the twelve sons of Israel.

\(^ {18}\) Genesis 28: 22.  
\(^ {19}\) Exodus 20: 1-17.  
\(^ {20}\) Leviticus 27: 30.
(Jacob) born to him by Leah\textsuperscript{21}. To this tribe belonged Moses and Aaron. During the unfortunate incident of the Golden Calf, the Levites proved faithful to God and to Moses and as a result, they were rewarded with priesthood in Israel\textsuperscript{22}. Again, it is reported that at Massah and Meribah, the Levites singled themselves out in fidelity to Yahweh and his servant Moses.\textsuperscript{23} With this award of priesthood to the whole tribe, it was from among them that high priests were chosen and consecrated such as Aaron and his sons. Generally, “the Levite has a right to serve in the sanctuary and share in the priestly portions whenever he desires to do so.”\textsuperscript{24}

A tradition has it that when the territories of the Promised Land were shared, some cities were assigned to the Levites in the same way as other tribes\textsuperscript{25}. However, the most common and compelling account is that the tribe of Levi was given no share in the heritage. Hence, "It is frequently stated that the Levites have no portion or possession; unlike the other tribes they received no allotment."\textsuperscript{26} They have no share in the land because Yahweh himself is their portion. Thus, the Israelites were mandated to show charity to the Levites and to provide for their sustenance through a number of obligatory offerings.\textsuperscript{27} Tithe was part of these offerings.

The Israelites were obliged to have the tenth part of their harvest separated, taken to the place of worship where God dwells and consumed in a sacred banquet. In doing this, the law reminds the people of their duty towards the Levites thus: “Do not neglect the Levite who dwells in your towns, since he has no share or inheritance as you have.”\textsuperscript{28} In addition to the reason of having no landed inheritance, the Levites are to receive tithes "in return for their services, for the ministry they render in the Tent of Meeting."\textsuperscript{29} Within this passage of Numbers18: 21-32, it is stated that from the tithes they receive from the people, the Levities were required to

\textsuperscript{21}Genesis 29: 34.
\textsuperscript{22}Cf. Exodus 32: 25-29.
\textsuperscript{24}Ibid.
\textsuperscript{25}Numbers 35: 2-8; Joshua 6&21.
\textsuperscript{27}Deuteronomy 18: 1-5.
\textsuperscript{28}Deuteronomy 14: 27.
\textsuperscript{29}Numbers 18: 21.
pay tithes to the high priest. This law says: “When you receive the tithe that the people of Israel must pay and which I am giving you as your inheritance, you are to set aside a tenth of the tithe for the Lord....Thus, you too will set aside a share for the Lord from all the tithes you receive from the people of Israel, and you will give to Aaron the priest from the part you have set aside for the Lord.”\(^{30}\) Here, we find a difference between the "Levites as inferior ministers who assist the priests and perform sacred but not sacerdotal functions in the sanctuary"\(^{31}\) and the priests in the order of Aaron and his sons.

The period of the exile impacted significantly on the tithing tradition in Israel. Being away from home for years, the people lost touch with a good number of their customs and traditions, including tithing. In fact, "During the exilic period, there was some disregard for tithing."\(^{32}\) Coming back from the exile, they were faced with the big challenge of rebuilding the temple of Jerusalem and men like Ezra and Nehemiah took up the task. They had to raise the money for the restoration project. Tithe was revitalized for this singular purpose. Nehemiah emphasized tithing and presented it to the people as one of the ways that they are to show commitment and fidelity to Yahweh. Inspired by the admonitions of Nehemiah, the returnees from exile committed themselves to giving a third of a shekel each year for the service of the house of God and the tithe of their fields to the Levites.\(^{33}\)

The first batch of our dough, and our offerings of the fruit of every tree, of wine and of oil, we will bring to the priests, to the chambers of the house of our God. The tithe of our fields we will bring to the Levites; they, the Levites, shall take the tithe in all the cities of our service. An Aaronite priest shall be with the Levites when they take the tithe, and the Levites shall bring the tithe of the tithes to the house of our God, to the chambers of the treasury.\(^{34}\)

\(^{30}\)Numbers 18: 26-28.
\(^{34}\)Nehemiah 10: 37-38.
It is expected that when tithes are paid by the people to the Levites they would in turn bring their own tithes to the house of God. Thus, the temple treasury will increase and there will be fund for rebuilding the temple. The ministers and the temple are the principal beneficiaries of tithes and failure to pay it amounts to lack of care for God.

The teachings of the prophets on tithe appear to have reached its apogee in the oracle of the prophet Malachi. His view on tithe happens to be the scriptural passage most frequently used by preachers and pastors today to support the practice. The passage reads:

Can a human being deceive God? Yet you cheat me. But you ask, 'How did we cheat you?' I point out your sacred tributes and the tenth which is due to me. A curse lies on you, because you, the whole nation of you, try to cheat me. Turn over to the temple treasury the tenth part of all, that there may be food in my house. Then you may test me, says the Lord of hosts, to see if I will not open the gates of heaven and pour out an abundant blessing on you. I will drive away the locusts that they may not devour your fields, and not let the vines wither in your land, says the Lord. Then all the nations will call you blessed, for you will be delightful land, says the Lord of hosts.35

Here, the withholding of tithe is qualified as cheating God and a curse is pronounced on whoever does it. On the other hand, blessings are poured upon those who pay their tithes. Of special interest in this oracle is that the Levites and priests are not mentioned as recipients of the tithes paid by the people. It is simply stated that tithes are to be lodged in the treasury of the temple. Tithe is temple money and this seems to be the understanding even during the time of Christ.

In all, the Old Testament records about tithe show that there are layers of stipulations, views and emphases on the matter. Beginning from tithe as a totally voluntary thanksgiving offering for favours received or anticipated (Abram and Jacob), it became a law that must be kept. From offering made to God for the upkeep of the Levites, tithe came to be a deposit for the temple treasury. With these in mind, let us examine the practice within the tradition of Jesus and his followers.

35 Malachi 3: 8-12.
4. **Tithe in the Tradition of Jesus**

One simple truth which is known to many is that the New Testament stands or falls with the person and deeds of the Lord Jesus Christ. By the time that Jesus came to the scene, the demand for tithe had been expanded to include even the smallest herbs from people's harvest. Moreover, “the payment of all tithes was a proof of the piety of the Pharisee.” People were counted holy, godly and religious or otherwise on the basis of their fidelity to paying tithes. In the parable of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector, we find the thinking of a typical Pharisee, where fasting and tithing constitute grounds for righteousness. On the contrary, Jesus teaches that God does not justify anyone on the basis of tithes paid or how often he or she fasts. So, even though the lesson of the above parable is not on tithe, it sheds light on what Christ thinks about the place of tithe in our relationship with God.

The most striking and direct expression of Jesus’ mind on tithe is found within the segment of the seven woes he pronounced on the Scribes and Pharisees. The text reads:

> Woe to you, Scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill and cumin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law, justice and mercy and faith; these you ought to have done, without neglecting the others. You blind guides, straining out gnat and swallowing a camel!\(^{39}\)

In this text, Jesus does not say outright that paying tithe is unlawful, sinful or does not matter. Rather, he declares in simple but straightforward terms that it does not count among the weightier matters of the law. The Jews knew that there is a hierarchy in the matters of the law, and that everything in the Law is not of equal importance. The Lord Jesus decries the fact that those who occupy the seat of Moses as teachers of faith failed to make the necessary hierarchical distinctions in the law. By this misplacement of priorities in the law, the people were made to

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place undue emphasis on tithes while neglecting the weightier matters of the law such as justice, mercy and faith.

On another note, one cannot really say that the problem which Jesus had with the Scribes/Pharisees regarding tithe was only about the misplaced priority in the law. The gravity of his words against them suggests that something extremely serious was at stake. In fact, grave sin may not be lacking in the actions of the religious leaders in question which made Jesus to address them with one of the severest words we could find in the Lord's mouth. Generally, in biblical context, sin means to "miss the mark" which "signifies not merely an intellectual error in judgement but a failure to attain a goal."40 Also, sin has the sense of "deviation", "distortion" and "disorder."41 These basic elements of sin can be seen in the act of setting aside or neglecting matters of justice, mercy and faith and laying emphasis on tithes. The Scribes and Pharisees missed the mark of the law and so did all those who followed their teachings. It is a deviation from the right course which distorted the law and brought about disorder in God's plan for his people. It is only something of this nature that could have made Jesus to address the Pharisees and Scribes using such strong words as "woe".42

Moreover, it is important to note that there are no records whatsoever to show that Jesus paid tithe during his life on earth. Once, he instructed Peter to pay the temple tax for both of them in order not to give offence to those who were intent on finding fault with him43. Sometimes, people misunderstand and misinterpret this temple tax which he paid to be tithe. The temple tax "refers to annual contribution which every Jewish male above nineteen years of age is expected to pay for the upkeep of the temple."44 Therefore, we are not left in any doubt that Jesus did not buy into the Jewish tithing tradition. His focus was rather on something greater.

41 Ibid., 818.
42 We are aware of the fact that some translations use the word "alas" instead of "woe" and that the former is not as strong as the latter. All the same, one cannot negate the fact that from Jesus' choice of words, something serious was at stake.
43 Matthew 17: 24-27.
44 Bona Ikenna Ugwu, Tithe and Tithing in our Churches Today (Enugu: Kingsley's, 2016), 14.
5. **Something Greater than Tithe**

Jesus did not teach his disciples to pay tithe but he taught them to give something greater than that. The praise of Jesus for the widow who gave all she had gives an inkling about what he wants from his followers. Many rich people put large sums of money in the treasury but “a poor widow also came and dropped in two small coins, the equivalent of a penny.” Jesus told his disciples that this woman put in more than the rest because she put in everything she had. Again, a certain rich young man came up to Jesus to ask him what he should do to inherit eternal life. When Jesus saw that the man had fulfilled the basic requirement of keeping the commandments, he said to him, “There is still one thing you lack. Sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven. And then come and follow me.” Jesus' demand for total giving of the self as the way to perfection is distinctly highlighted in these two stories.

Giving everything that one is and has is not simply what Jesus teaches but the example he gave with his life. On the night before the day he died, while he was at table with his disciples, he offered them his body and blood in the form of bread and wine. Then he commanded them to do exactly the same thing in remembrance of him. The following day, he actually gave up his body and blood on the Cross of Calvary. Therefore, while the Jewish law of tithing asks for the tenth of one's harvest, the Lord Jesus expects and demands that his followers give everything to God to the point of laying down their lives (body and blood) in order that others might have life in abundance. Here, we see one of the radical nature of Christianity and where it differs radically from Judaism.

6. **Tithe among the Early Believers**

In the life of the early Christians, we find a clear departure from the Old Testament laws and practice about tithing to the new way patterned after the tradition of Christ Jesus. No matter how far one goes in the history of the early Church, one would not find anywhere that tithes

45 Mark 12: 42.
were demanded of believers. Emphasis was primarily laid on disciples giving to God everything that they had. Thus, there was a disciple called Joseph who sold his possession and submitted all the proceeds to the apostles. On the contrary, we find Ananias and his wife Sapphira who were condemned and punished severely because their act of giving deviated completely from what the Church inherited from the Lord. They sold their possession, put aside some of the proceeds and brought the rest to the apostles. Not only that they fell short of the Lord’s teaching, they lied to God. They lost their lives on account of this.

There are obvious records of collections that were taken up in the early churches especially for the poor but not tithe. In most of the Churches established by Paul, he instituted the custom of weekly collections that were sent to Jerusalem to provide for the needs of the poor and the holy ones. Freedom in giving was highly emphasized in the Church. The rule was that people should not be forced to give, that one should give only what one can afford and that it has to be done cheerfully. This rule was built on the belief that "whoever sows sparingly will reap sparingly, and whoever sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. Each must do as already determined, without sadness or compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver."

Therefore, there is no particular form of offering or collection that the Church received from the Lord Jesus as obligatory for all believers. Down the ages, the Church of Christ, which subsists in the Catholic Church, has operated different systems of fund-raising to promote the

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48 The statement of Victor Onwukeme in *Acts of CABAN*, vol. 5: 12 that "In early Christian times, tithing was adopted in continuance of Old Testament practices of the Jewish people..." is hard to substantiate.
51 1 Corinthians 16: 1-3.
52 2 Corinthians 8: 1-15.
spread of the Gospel.\footnote{The 1917 Code of Canon Law no. 1502 stated that "The payment of the tithe and first fruits shall be governed by the special laws and laudable customs of each country."} In what follows, we will examine how this has worked out, particularly in Nigeria.

7. **The Church and the Support of the Work of God**

The universal law of the Church stipulates that “Christ’s faithful have the obligation to provide for the needs of the Church, so that the Church has available to it those things which are necessary for divine worship, for apostolic and charitable work and for the worthy support of its ministers.”\footnote{Code of Canon Law, no. 222. For more information on offerings and donations see canons 531, 1260, 1261.} In addition, the fifth precept of the Church states that “the faithful are obliged to assist with material needs of the Church, each according to his own ability.”\footnote{Catechism of the Catholic Church (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2004), no. 2043.} The visible Church and the ministers of the Gospel depend on the cheerful and generous support of the faithful for their living and work.

In Nigeria, particularly in the South-Eastern part, the early missionaries (the Holy Ghost Fathers and Brothers who brought the faith to this part of the country), established some basic systems of raising fund for the support of the Church. There were annual or special levies, donations, and offerings. In addition to money, the faithful were taught to give food items such as vegetables, yams, condiments, palm oil and egg as offerings during daily or Sunday Masses. Harvest and bazaars were organised annually as expression of thanks to God for the fruit of people's labour. When the missionaries left, their successors continued in the same line. With time, new forms of donations and offerings came on board such as "seed-sowing", "harvest support", and "project Sundays collections". Tithe is one of these latest in the list of new forms of offerings in the Church. It is spreading everywhere throughout the Catholic Church in Nigeria. This practice of tithing in the Nigerian Church has a number of issues surrounding it, particularly as a result of misconceptions, misinterpretations and misunderstanding.
8. Grappling with Some Issues about Tithe

In the first place, there is no unified doctrine of tithing in our Church and this shows itself in the lack of uniformity in the practice across parishes and dioceses in the country\(^{58}\). Every priest and bishop is left on his own to support or reject, to allow or disallow the payment of tithe within the place under his authority. There is also no agreement on whom tithes should be paid to; the Church or the priests.

I read a posting made on a Whatsapp group chat of a Catholic association where someone presented a list of the punishments meant for those who do not pay their tithes at all or promptly as well as the benefits of tithing. According to this list, if a person fails to pay tithe, he will: “fall under the curse of God, suffer rejection instead of acceptance, give room for the devourer to strike, become idea deficient, God deals with and sees him as a thief, suffer hardship and untold poverty and suffer miscarriages and unfruitfulness.” On the other hand, if you pay tithe, “you receive divine ideas, you walk in divine health, you command kingdom attraction and attention, near success syndrome is terminated from your life, God fights both seen and unseen battles for you, you never get stranded in life without getting to know what to do next, you become a commander of wealth where you were once oppressed.” This represents the belief of a good number of persons on tithe. Similarly, Ibenwa is of the view that:

Tithe is one of the biblical keys to financial prosperity and obedience to the commandment of tithe attracts open doors to heavenly blessings like healing and deliverance, divine favour, job opportunities, divine security, divine protection and guidance and many others. Therefore, Christians are advised to pay tithe and correctly so in order that the blessings of tithing will pursue and overtake them in all they lay their hands to do all the days of their lives.\(^{59}\)

Ibenwa is not a Catholic but his ideas and the ones expressed by the Catholic in the whatsapp group chat are very close. This affinity

\(^{58}\)If there is any formal directive on tithe from the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, it is not known to this author.

indicates that there is not much difference between the belief of Catholics and other Christians regarding tithe.

Jesus' criticisms of the practice of tithing among the Jews of his time and his complete silence on its practice in the community of his disciples appear to be taken too lightly by Christians of this generation. The emphasis being laid on tithe today tends to suggest that the Master was mistaken in his decision to de-emphasize the practice. What reason have we as Christians of today to exalt what the Master refused by choice to include in the list of important matters for his followers? Why is the Church interested in exhuming what Jesus, by word and action, laid to rest?

Jesus set forth in clear terms what people should do to win blessings. Eternal blessings are promised the poor in spirit, those who mourn, the gentle, those who hunger for justice, the merciful, the pure in heart, those who work for peace and those who are persecuted for the cause of justice⁶⁰. Again, receiving those sent by the Lord on mission, the prophets and the righteous, or giving even a cup of water to the disciples qualifies one for blessings⁶¹. A comprehensive list of things to do for consolidated blessings are also found in the parable of the Last Judgment: feed the hungry, give drink to the thirsty, welcome the sick, clothe the naked, and visit prisoners⁶². It is worrisome that these mediums of blessings highlighted by Jesus are not getting the kind of emphasis that tithe receives among new generation Christians. What could be the reason for this?

In a world deeply soaked in materialism which is reinforced by religion through prosperity gospel, people are more interested in promises of blessings that are immediate and measurable than in eternal rewards. Tithe payers are promised immediate solutions to their problems but the ones of Jesus do not seem to be so. Surely, Jesus guarantees extraordinary blessings for free, generous and cheerful offerings: “Give and gifts will be given to you; a good measure, packed together, shaken down, and overflowing, will be poured into your lap. For the measure with which you

⁶⁰Matthew 5: 1-11.
⁶¹Matthew 10: 40-42.
⁶²Matthew 25: 31-36.
measure will in return be measured out to you.”63 This too cannot be understood as referring strictly to immediate material things.

The prophecy of Malachi which modern preachers of tithe find most suitable stipulates that tithes are to be turned over to the temple treasury and not to priests. The temple treasury today would be the Church account. One wonders why this aspect of the Malachian prophecy seems to be neglected by priests. Why should we be interested in just one part of the prophecy and not the other. If tithe were made strictly Church money, perhaps fewer priests would promote it.

Moreover, it is surprising that the present emphasis on tithe and tithing is championed by the Pentecostal and Protestant Churches. These are Churches which in principle believe and teach that good works have no real significance in human righteousness. One is saved by believing in the Lord Jesus Christ as one's personal Lord and Saviour. The belief that faith, hope and love are essential for salvation and that the greatest of them is love64, that faith works out through love65 and that faith itself without works is dead66 is scarcely considered by these Churches. It is difficult to reconcile their position with the importance they attach to tithe as gateway to divine blessings.

Furthermore, we know that besides tithe there are other offerings stipulated by the Jewish Laws and practiced by the Jews. Among them are the offering of the first fruit of the land67, the consecration of every first male cattle or sheep68 or the first male born to a family69. Jesus was offered by his parents in keeping with this law.70 One wonders why these other offerings are not emphasized by Christians as they do about tithe.

The story of tithe represents the trend of indiscriminate imitation and borrowing from other Churches which has become characteristic of Catholics particularly in Nigeria. This trend is worrisome. Borrowing or imitation is not the real issue because that is part of every culture or tradition but the way it is done without discrimination is problematic.

65Galatians 5: 6.
66James 2: 17.
67Deuteronomy 26.
68Deuteronomy 15: 19-20.
Being that tithes are offerings, they are not expected to be rejected in the Church but preaching and promoting it in the way it is done today is questionable.

Concluding Remarks

In this work, we have reflected on the emerging culture of tithing among Catholics in Nigeria and from the discussion we note that this practice crept into the Church through our interaction with the Pentecostals. We find this practice highly questionable because Jesus did not accord it a place of importance in his life and that of the new community he inaugurated. Surely, Jesus would have no problems with people making offerings to God; after all, he demands even something greater from whoever wants to follow him. Giving everything is far more difficult than giving one tenth of what one earns (tithe). In other words, the problem is not that tithe is too difficult a practice but that its Christian value is questionable.

Nothing from Jesus suggests that not paying tithe is a sin or that it attracts a curse on anybody. Christian holiness is meant to be pursued along the path of placing accent on the weightier matters of the New Covenant: love, mercy, justice, communion, compassion, the beatitudes, the fruits/gifts of the Spirit, carrying our cross and following Jesus daily, and not on tithes. Offering, including tithes, made with pure, generous and cheerful heart to the Lord should not be rejected. However, the idea of using some Scriptural passages to coerce people to pay tithe should be completely discouraged in the Catholic tradition. We (Catholics) are not Jews but Christians, and our religion is Christianity, not Judaism. As such, the way of Jesus and not the Jewish precepts guides our understanding and practice of religion including tithing. It is high time we Catholics started being contented with who we are and our ways of doing things and stopped copying whatever we see from other Churches or society. In the meantime, further reflections on tithe should continue for better clarification and eventual establishment of doctrines and directives on it particularly in the Church in Nigeria.