

THE CORE VALUES OF ONITSHA ARCHDIOCESAN (CATHOLIC) EDUCATION APOSTOLATE

Address presented to the Catholic Teachers of the Archdiocese of Onitsha

Wednesday, November 7, 2018

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On Easter Sunday 1971, the then Archbishop of Onitsha, Most Rev. Francis A. Arinze, along with Bishop Thomas McGettrick (Ogoja), Bishop Anthony G. Nwedo (Umuahia), Bishop Godfrey M. P. Okoye (Enugu) and Bishop Mark O. Unegbu (Owerri) making up the Catholic Bishops of the East Central State of Nigeria, issued a joint Pastoral Letter titled *Education*. In paragraph 7 of that letter, they said that “Education is meant to prepare man for life. Our life begins in this world where it generally lasts less than one hundred years. It continues in the next world where it lasts for ever. Education must prepare man for both.”¹ They were reacting to the Public Education Edict – ECSN Edict No. 2 of 1971 which was passed on December 1970 and made retroactive to 26th May 1970 by the military Government under the administrator of the East Central State, Mr. Ukpabi Asika

Towards the end of the Pastoral Letter, the Bishops stated: “The Catholic Church, as the proprietor of many educational institutions affected by the Edict, who was not consulted before these drastic measures were taken, wishes it to be known that she has no intention of giving up her proprietary rights to her educational institutions.”²

Why is the Church so emphatic on rejecting the takeover of these schools by the Government? The reason is simple: the Government may be, and indeed should be competent in preparing man for the life on earth which generally lasts for less than 100 years, but it is not competent in preparing him for the one that lasts forever. Subsequent Archbishops of Onitsha, one after the other, have happened on this point over and over again. Welcoming participants at the *First Onitsha Archdiocesan Education Workshop June 30th –July 1st 2006*, Archbishop Valerian M. Okeke said that the Catholic Church in Onitsha

¹Catholic Bishops of East Central State of Nigeria *Education: 1971 Pastoral Letter* Onitsha 1971, p.6-7, no.3.7.

²Catholic Bishops of East Central State of Nigeria *Education: 1971 Pastoral Letter* Onitsha 1971, p.17 no. 8.31.

Archdiocese is aware of “Christ’s divine will to bring life, both temporal and eternal to his brethren” and is therefore “intent on playing once again, a leadership role of service” and “intends to devote serious effort and attention to bring about the revival of love of education.” He pointed out that without balanced religious education we will be producing social misfits armed with certificates. For him, “Our experience in this country over the past few decades has shown clearly that the neglect of religious instructions in our schools has within a very short time eroded the moral fabric of our society, and made a good percentage of our youth people without direction or culture and without hope. Our educational efforts are therefore geared first and foremost at producing good human beings, good Christians and good and successful citizens for our country.”³

The Catholic Bishops of Anambra State recently described Catholic Schools as “institutions where the youths/children are led through a life illumined by Christian faith to explore and understand the world created by God, pursue cultural goals, lead to holistic development of the person and improve the society.”⁴ It is here that we find the core values of the type of education which the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha wants to offer to the nation. We shall go through it under the following headings to enable us say a few words on each. We shall first consider it from the point of view of *Child-centeredness*, then the *Illumination of the Christian Faith* in Catholic education; the position of *The Parents and the Teachers* will be considered; the importance of *Culture* comes next; and then the integral and *Holistic Development of the Human Person* before we conclude.

Child-centeredness

From this, one can easily discern that the school envisaged by the Church is child-centred. This means that the school is for the child; it is not centred on the Church; not on the Archbishop, nor on the Catholic Community, but on the child. Nor is it centred on the teacher or on the management. It is not centred on the Government, the Ministry of Education or any government

³V.M Okeke, *Catholic Education for integral Human Development: First Onitsha Archdiocesan Catholic Education Workshop June 30 - July 1 2006*, Onitsha 2006, pp. 3-4.

⁴Catholic Bishops of Anambra State: *Education Policy for Catholic Schools in Anambra State*, Nnewi 2018, p.1, no. 1.0.

functionaries. It is centred on the child. All these other stakeholders come together to assist the development of the child. We can regard this as a take-off point in considering the core values of Catholic education. Indeed that is how it should be in any institution that calls itself a school. The Church therefore does not entertain any service to any of these stakeholders that may want to place itself at the centre of the educational enterprise.

Illumination of the Christian Faith

The Catholic school regards this child-centeredness as anchored on illumination of the Christian faith. The child is not standing somewhere in the air. The child came from somewhere. The child is not a making of the state, the school or the teacher. He/she has parents, but the parents also came from somewhere. He/she is living in the world. The world also came from somewhere. The child is led to explore the world and understand what the world is all about. He/she is helped to seek for the origin and meaning of the world and be able to take his/her proper position in the world. The Christian faith points to God as the beginning and end of all. The child therefore learns how to relate to God, and to all which God has made. Here comes another important step in the core value of Catholic education. While the Catholic school is child-centred, the child is not led to be self-centred. He/she is helped to see God as the centre of his/her life in such a way that all his/her relationships revolve around God, and have God as their beginning and their end.

The onion model typifies the proper relationship which Catholic education aims at for the child.



The child looks on God as the centre of his/her life. It is his/her relationship with God that forms the take-off point of all other relationships. It is from there that he/she draws the strength for all other relationships. The movements take off from God, gather strength from God and go back to God. He/she learns to see the footprint of God in the daily activities of life. He/she gradually becomes aware of himself/herself as an instrument of God's grace in the family, community and indeed in the world.

That is what it means to say that God is the beginning and the end of his/her life.

The Parents and the Teachers

The parents are then viewed not just as those who provide food and shelter, but more as gifts from God and representatives of God in the development of their life, as guiding companions on the interaction with, and journey to God.

They become those assigned by God to take the responsibility of guiding the child in his/her relationships. The Church affirms and clarifies the rights and obligations of the parents in the education of their children in these words: "Since parents have conferred life to their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring. Hence parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children."⁵ The parents share with, and to some extent transfer these same sentiments to the school which becomes a supplementary home, and the teachers are therefore acting *in persona parenti*, on the mandate of the parents.

The love which exudes from the relationship with God flows all through this structure which now has become God's way and not just human fabrications. Under this umbrella, the role of the Catholic teacher or teacher in the Catholic school takes its meaning. The Catholic teacher becomes the person who bears testimony to Christ who indeed is the one Teacher. The Church in this respect says about the teacher: "Teachers must remember that it depends chiefly on them whether the Catholic School achieves its purpose. They should therefore be prepared for their work with special care, having the appropriate qualifications and adequate learning both religious and secular. They should also be skilled in the art of education in accordance with the discoveries of modern times. Possessed by charity both towards each other and towards their pupils, and inspired by an apostolic spirit they should bear testimony by their lives and their teaching to the one Teacher, who is Christ."⁶

Culture

Pursuing knowledge in the Catholic school places culture in its proper perspective. It means to pursue cultural goals. This is the next point mentioned by the Catholic Bishops of Anambra State, as stated earlier. Speaking to the university community during his visit in Nigeria in 1982, St. John Paul II articulated the vision of the Church and her expectations from educational institutions in the cultural development of the society. For him, the cultural environment which these institutions painstakingly create in classrooms, laboratories, studios and in the media is the key that opens the door to

⁵Vatican II Declaration on Christian Education: *Gravissimum Educationis* no.3.

⁶*Gravissimum Educationis* n.8.

personal advancement and elevation of the men and women of Nigeria, especially the young.⁷ It is this personal advancement and elevation of man and woman that the Catholic school in Onitsha Archdiocese is seeking to bring about. Further, the Pope said: “As Christians you are convinced that economic progress alone, while important, is not enough to *free man from many conditions and situations of incompleteness that beset his personalities and his life in society*. Only an education that aims at embracing and enlightening all the dimensions of man’s life and personality is capable of enabling each man or woman to step out of his or her ignorance, or to escape from the lethargy that comes from personal frustration or lack of opportunities and incentives in social life. Only a cultural atmosphere that allows its participants and its recipients to seek ‘to be more’ rather than ‘to have more’ is capable of helping every man, woman and child to attain that rightful place in society and thereby exercise effectively their unique and inviolable human dignity.”⁸ He talked of the primacy of spiritual values in all the areas of cultural environment and said that “*without spiritual values man is no longer true to himself* because without them he denies or ignores his essential relationship of dependence on the very source of his existence, on his creator in whose image he was made and continues to exist.”⁹

Catholic education therefore aims at cultivating the culture that emerges from the image of the creator as man interacts with God’s creation, replicating the picture which was presented by Pope Francis in his Encyclical Letter *Laudato Si, on the Care of our Common Home*. Here, he carefully linked this important aspect of culture with the responsibility of the family in the following words: “In the face of the so-called culture of death, the family is the heart of the culture of life. In the family we first learn how to show love and respect for life; we are taught the proper use of things, order and cleanliness, respect for the local ecosystem and care for all creatures. In the family we receive an integral education, which enables us to grow harmoniously in personal maturity. In the family we learn to ask without demanding, to say ‘thank you’ as an expression of genuine gratitude for what we have been given, to control our aggressiveness and greed, and to ask forgiveness when we have caused harm.

⁷ Cf. Pope John Paul II in *Papal Messages to Nigeria*, FGP632/982, p.31, no. 2.

⁸ Ibid.

⁹ Pope John Paul II, op. cit. p32, no 6.

These simple gestures of heartfelt courtesy help to create a culture of shared life and respect for our surroundings.”¹⁰ He had earlier said that: “All of us can cooperate as instruments of God for the care of creation, each according to his or her own culture, experience, involvements and talents.”¹¹

Holistic Development of the Person

Addressing the Church in Africa in his Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation after the famous “Second African Synod”, Pope Emeritus Benedict XVI spoke of Catholic schools as precious resource for learning from childhood how to create bonds of peace and harmony in society. They train children, he said, in the African values that are taken up by those of the Gospel.¹² He talks of education that aims at “passing down knowledge full of truth: not mere know-how but genuine knowledge of life, inspired by a Christian consciousness shaped by the Church’s social doctrine.”¹³ This is an education that prepares the young ones to look for what they can become and not just what they can get. The type of education the Church is offering “is directed towards the formation of the human person in view of his final end and the good of that society to which he belongs and in the duties of which he will, as an adult, have a share.”¹⁴ To ensure this ‘integrality’, the children are educated in dialogue, encounter, sociality, legality, solidarity and peace, through the cultivation of the fundamental virtues of justice and charity, - all with the witness of life and in words.¹⁵

To achieve this, sufficient attention is to be paid to what is generally termed academics. But that is not all. Academic qualifications without true human formation will turn out to be inimical to the human society. Here, religious and moral training must be written in capitals. It is not sufficient in Catholic education to have Religious Knowledge as one of the subjects and get one or two hours a week designated for Moral and Religious lessons while English and

¹⁰ Pope Francis, *Laudato Si*, no. 213.

¹¹ Op. cit no. 14.

¹² Cf. Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, no. 134.

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ Vatican II, Declaration on Education, *Gravissimum Educationis*, no. 1

¹⁵ Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*, no. 43; Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*, no. 242.

Mathematics are assigned five lessons each. Religion must be seen as a core subject. Religion is viewed as the subject that gives true meaning to all our academic engagements. It is like a verb in a sentence. Just as the sentence requires a verb to have a meaning, so does education need Religion if it is to achieve the end for which we are in the world. And when we talk of Religion, we are talking of a Religion for life, and not an academic exercise of a religion of nobody taught by anybody as occasioned by the ill-fated government take-over of schools.

Conclusion

These ideas may sound lofty, but they are based on the fundamental principles of the Universal Church as regards education. It is understandable that some individuals, especially those who are not Catholics may not want to get fully involved in these processes, even if they do not reject them in themselves. They may just not want to be involved in the processes of their execution which in themselves require some sacrifice from all stakeholders, especially the teachers. They may not want to make the necessary sacrifices that would lead to the success of the project. In this regard, I would like to say that in the process of the discussions on the return of schools, we made it clear to both the Government and the National Union of Teachers (NUT) that the Catholic Church would not force anybody to teach in the Catholic schools, and would not want to accept anybody who does not want to teach in the Catholic school. The reason, apart from the rights of the individual, is that the success of this programme depends greatly on the cooperation of all stakeholders. For the success of the Catholic schools in this programme, the staffs must be in agreement with the philosophy of education on which the system is built. Staffs who do not share our philosophy of education are likely to be counterproductive and can certainly not be an asset to the programme. They would also not have fulfilment working under a system that is at variance with their philosophy of life. Even at the wider level of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN), its policy on Education demands that the staff members' educational philosophy should be Christ centered, and that they should model Christ in their actions.¹⁶

¹⁶Cf. Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) *Policy on Christian Education*, Abuja 2013, pp.7-8 no. V .2.

We are therefore grateful to all of you who have exhibited willingness to share this philosophy with us and have joined us to offer to the young ones the type of formation that is Catholic, a learning process that will help the young ones achieve maximum potential; a process that brings faith, culture and life into harmony; a process that values truth, honesty, justice, fairness and integrity. We gladly welcome you to this system and enjoin on you to strive even more to pass this on to the young ones.

May we all continue to share this vision and make it available to as many people as come our way.