

ENOUGH IS ENOUGH:

A Critique of Fundraising Modalities in the Nigerian Church Today

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After the major scandal and embarrassment that attended the unfortunate massacre of 13 worshippers inside the St. Philip's Church, Ozubulu, Anambra State, on Sunday August 6, 2017, I addressed a memorandum to the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, pleading that they consider it a matter of priority to come up urgently with clear guidelines on what manner of fundraising can be considered suitable in our Churches, and especially within liturgical and paraliturgical settings. It was the case of a young man with no known pedigree, no known qualifications, no antecedents in business, etc; but who came back home from South Africa, throwing money around, single-handedly building a Church and dedicating it with fanfare, and no one asking any questions. It was alleged that many among the clergy and laity in that part of the country knew that the young man could not have made such stupendous wealth in any legitimate manner, and that many even knew for sure that he was a drug baron.

Yet, the Ozubulu case of an alleged drug baron who single-handedly built a Catholic Church and had it dedicated with fanfare, is not an isolated one. These days, rogue public office holders, known treasury looters, corrupt civil servants, and kidnappers, are now celebrated in our Churches, considered Pillars of the Church, decorated with Knighthood, made Patrons of pious societies, and are regularly encouraged to come up to the sanctuary, told to mount the pulpit and given the microphone to address the congregation at Sunday masses, at funeral masses, at wedding ceremonies, and at the anniversaries of priests and religious, etc., in anticipation of some donation towards our Church building or mission house projects. These days some (so-called powerful) priests have made themselves expert fundraisers, going from diocese to diocese, getting invited across the country to preside over harvest thanksgiving and bazaar, or some other fundraising events, and it is even alleged that some of these fundraiser priests do request for a percentage of the funds they help to raise - using the most unorthodox, irreverent, distasteful, if not nauseating and perhaps sacrilegious methods.

Not long ago, after reading the Gospel passage of the Widow's Mite, I shared my honest impressions with those gathered in Church about the conduct of harvest thanksgivings and bazaars, as well as the conduct of fundraising in general in our Churches these days. I told them how embarrassed and distressed I have become with all the cumbersome announcements and elaborate arrangements that precede harvest each year, whereby for many weeks or even months, precious worship and religious instruction time is expended on preparing Church members for the harvest thanksgiving and bazaar day, and the largest billboards and banners displayed in the parish are often those of the annual harvest, as if annual harvests have become the most central or the most critical liturgical celebrations of the year. In the process however, the sanctity, integrity and solemnity of the traditional Catholic liturgy are often violated, and the vanity and vainglory of the people are not only accommodated but celebrated as if they have become Christian virtues - and all these, just so that more money could be raised for God's work. Sometimes secular comedians as well as fans of such football clubs as Man United and Chelsea or AC Milan, are brought in to ginger the Church members, so they may contribute more.

I hear that at harvest time especially, the ingenuity and creativity of some parish priests and harvest committee chairpersons have reached the extent that sundry articles and food items like apples, oranges, and cakes, are transformed into sacramentals, with specific rituals designed for blessing such items, so parishioners could buy them and consume them or take them home, so they may receive some special blessings or have their problems solved. And it is becoming commonplace that at funeral masses and weddings, the families involved are ambushed, forced, or coerced into announcing a donation for the Church - even while some of them are deeply mourning their departed family member or some of them are in a state of economic distress and indebtedness after expending enormous resources on medical bills for the departed loved one. It is all so sickening, so nauseating, so distressing!

My question is: Why do adult Christians have to be pursued, cajoled, harassed, blackmailed, and manipulated, before they donate generously towards the work of God, if indeed we have succeeded in raising adult Christians? Why does an individual have to be called out five or six times during one Mass before he hands over what he has decided to give God for his annual thanksgiving? Perhaps some of us believe that our members do have the money, but that they are not generous enough to willingly donate such money for the Church's work, so we resort to some of the most base, shameful, ridiculous, and sacrilegious tactics, to extort money from an apparently unwilling people. But does it make sense for us to violate the integrity of the sacred liturgy and to dishonour God, only so that we could raise enough money to do God's work? Does it make sense to bring into the Church secular entertainers (such as comedians and cultural groups), that have no regard whatsoever for the sanctity and integrity of Catholic Liturgical celebrations, just so that we could motivate the parishioners enough to contribute money to promote our work of evangelisation?

True, I consider the carnival-like environment and the vile entertainment tone that harvest thanksgiving and bazaar has taken in many of our Churches these days as simply ridiculous, and therefore should be considered unacceptable, and sanctioned accordingly. I believe that things could be done differently, with better results by way of funds generation, than what we are presently able to generate, with all the dishonourable and indecorous gimmicks that many of us have recently devised to raise funds for our Churches. I believe that we could be more faithful to Christ and to Christian values in our fundraising enterprise and generate more income than we are able to do today with all the unorthodox methods we employ today. And let me say here that Lux Terra Leadership Foundation will be ready sometime in the future to organise a workshop on *Effective Christian Fundraising Mechanisms* for parish priests and lay leaders from our various parishes.

Recall that Jesus says in Matthew 6:1-4,

“Beware of practicing your piety before others in order to be seen by them; for then you have no reward from your Father in heaven. So when you give alms, do not sound a trumpet before you, as the hypocrites do in the synagogues and in the streets, so that they may be praised by others. Truly I tell you, they have received their reward. But when you give alms, do not let your left hand know what your right hand is doing, so that your alms may be done in secret; and your Father who sees in secret will reward you.”

Recall also the story of the Widow's mite in Luke 21:1-4, and the powerful lessons on Christian giving contained therein.

Since we need money to do God's work, fundraising in the Christian Church should be considered a missionary task and therefore a holy enterprise. Henry Nouwen the celebrated Retreat Preacher and Mystic reminds us that fundraising in the Church is *"proclaiming what we believe in such a way as to offer other people an opportunity to participate with us in our vision and mission."* He says, *"Church fundraising 'is the opposite of begging.'"* When we speak to people about raising funds for the Church, we are not saying, *"Please, could you help us out because it's been hard."* Rather, he says we are declaring, *"We have a vision that is amazing and exiting. We are inviting you to invest yourself through the resources that God has given you – your energy, your prayers, and your money – in this work to which God has called us."* Nouwen then reminds us that, *"to be converted means to experience a deep shift in how we see and think and act."* Finally, St. Paul says, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your minds, so that you may discern what is the will of God – what is good and acceptable and perfect." (Romans 12:2). St. Paul also admonishes the Ephesians and ourselves to "Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish but understand what the will of the Lord is. (Ephesians 5:16-17).

Each time I hear of the abuses that go on today in our Churches in the name of fundraising, I ask myself: What has suddenly gone wrong with us? At what point did we lose the sacred character of our missionary work, that our fundraising enterprise has become such an object of public ridicule? See the shame and embarrassment that the encounter between Chimamanda Adiche and her home parish priest (on the occasion of the burial of her father) brought upon our entire Catholic Church of Nigeria, with the interview granted by *L'Osservatore Romano*. And Chimamanda's kind of experience is not an isolated case, but sadly a regular occurrence... See what young people are writing daily on the social media about our increasingly crude fundraising methods that are making some of the most devout, truly generous and promising young people, turn away from active engagement with the Church.

I humbly request the Archbishop, the Auxiliary Bishop, the Parish Priests and all the delegates at this General Assembly, to work towards declaring a state of emergency regarding the fundraising protocols in our churches, for I am convinced that no lasting good can come out of the now widespread abuse of the liturgy and the house of God, in the name of fundraising, for enough is enough!

Let me end by pointing out that part of the reason for what has become a crazy drive to raise funds in our Church is the excessively speedy (and unchecked) growth and expansion in physical structures, and our inordinate taste for very huge and expensive structures as Church buildings all over the place today. We are attempting to build everywhere in this country, the kind of structures that took over 500 years to come up in Europe. The Archdiocese of Abuja for example is only 41 years old, but within these 41 years, we have engaged in building large Churches in over 150 parishes and pastoral areas. So almost every parish is building either a Church, a Church Hall, or a mission house, and the Archdiocese is building a new Cathedral at the same time. The same is true of many dioceses across the country. This unprecedented expansion of physical structures places enormous burden on the worshippers, and a lot of pressure on the priests and parish councils, at a time of worsening economic fortunes of the Nigerian people. And while this is happening, if we pay sufficient attention, we will realise that this unprecedented physical and structural growth is not matched by a genuine and discernible deepening of the Catholic faith and Catholic pastoral ministry, especially among the young population.

You will be worried if you check out the average age of those who regularly attend weekday masses, Sunday evening benedictions, those who go for the sacrament of reconciliation, or those who attend annual parish retreats or such diocesan celebrations as the Chrism Mass and the Cathedra. Most of the time the young people – those between ages 15 and 35 cannot be found in any good number at such events. What is more, many of the children of our devout and faithful Catholics, whom we often depend upon to make major contributions towards these projects, have in many cases left the Catholic Church or have abandoned religious practice altogether. While we pursue these faithful Catholic adults for money, we often do not ask after, or show sufficient interest, in the faith commitment of their children. From all indications, many of them are abandoning the faith.

So, the question is: For whom are we building all these expansive and expensive structures? Churches are usually built for future generations, not really for the present generation. That is why they are built to last for hundreds of years. But from what we see of our global youth culture, reflected in the social media in our country today, the dire indications are that many of these Church structures could be empty in just 20 or 30 years, if we do not take urgent steps with the grace of God, to turn the tide around. Such is not going to happen, if we keep chasing away the brightest, the most educated, and the most enlightened of our young people away from the Churches, with our embarrassingly crude and shoddy methods of fundraising. We must begin today to do things differently, and we will achieve better results to the glory of God.