

**OF WORDS AND SYMBOLS:  
A THEOLOGICAL RESPONSE TO THE CBCN COMMUNIQUE ON THE  
KILLINGS IN MAKURDI DIOCESE**

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(NB: The following reflections, here systematically formulated, were originally presented by the author during debates with some of his confreres and friends in a group social media chat. Their conversations followed the timely strongly worded Communiqué of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) which expressed the Church's grave concern over the spate of violence in Nigeria, not excluding the murder of 02 priests and 17 parishioners in Benue State on 24 April 2018 and, then, the massacre of many innocent Nigerians in Plateau State. The Bishops "are devastated by these acts of insensitivity and disrespect for the dignity of human life". The Communiqué provoked widespread and, at times passionate, comments, debates and reflections in the Church and society in Nigeria. Besides the Communiqué, an historic nationwide peaceful protest by Christians, supported by Catholics Bishops, was being planned. Editor's Note)

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The intellectual faculty is said to be one of the most distinguishing qualities that separates the human community from the rest of the animal kingdom. It is not only that human beings possess the rational faculty but are conscious that they possess it. But another most distinguishing faculty in man/woman is the faculty of speech. Though distinct from the faculty of the intellect, it is intrinsically connected to the intellectual faculty. Hence, speech is more than an articulation of sounds. It is an intelligent articulation of intelligible sounds. These intelligible sounds are called words which are nothing but vehicles of thoughts. Words are carriers of thoughts, ideas, and meanings.

Though completely non-tactile and imperceptible, words are nonetheless very powerful. They can set off a series of chain reaction of unimaginable proportion of which the effects or consequence, either beneficial or harmful, often outlive the author of those words. The power of words not only lie in the one who utters them, but sometimes even more in the very ideas or thoughts they convey. To understand the Greek concept of *logos* and the Hebrew concept of *dabar*, is to grasp the power of words or speech. It is, therefore, of little wonder that the concept of Logos was employed by early Christians and Patristic writers to capture the mystery of Christ Jesus. And so, no one with sound theological education can underrate the power of speech or word either in its ordinary day to day usage or its theological context or usage.

Although powerful, words are at the same time limited. As a vehicle of human thoughts, ideas and meanings, words sometimes fall far short of being able to

convey these “passengers”. It is like attempting to use a supersonic airplane to convey astronauts to space, yet we know that supersonic airplanes are indeed very powerful and superfast. And so, words, for all their power, don’t always succeed in conveying the ideas, thoughts, meaning, emotions, values etc. we may wish to transmit.

But man is not left hopeless and helpless in the face of the limitations of words. Where words fail or what words cannot convey, symbols become a much more suitable vehicle. If words are powerful, symbols are even much more powerful. What can be said in a thousand words can be captured by a single symbol. And so, symbols like words, are also conveyors or vehicles. But they are more economical, more effective and more efficient than words because they synthesize in a single expression what is expressed by thousands of words. Symbols travel faster and remain longer even after the sound or echo of a word has long ceased. In fact, the words of the Psalmist readily come to mind in understanding the nature of a symbol. Speaking about the heavens and the skies, the psalmist says: no words are used no sound is heard, yet their voice (message) goes out to all the earth, their message to the outmost ends of the earth (Ps.19: 3,4). Such is the nature of symbols. They do not utter a sound, yet their message is powerfully etched in the hearts and minds of their “hearers”. And so, while words speak to the exterior ears of man, symbols speak to the interior ears of man such that one whose auditory sense is defective can clearly hear and understand the sounds of symbols. This is wittingly expressed in an Igbo proverb: *anaghiagwaochintina agha esu*. This means that: “You don’t tell a deaf man that war has broken out.” S/he may not hear the booming sounds of the heavy guns but s/he certainly will see and feel the anarchy around him/her.

As we do know, the entire structure of our Christian liturgy and spirituality is firmly built on the framework of words and symbols. It is not built only on either words or symbols alone but on both. And so, we must not dismiss or minimize the importance of words. In spite of its inherent limitation, it remains a valid and important vehicle for communicating ideas, thoughts and meanings. They remain important especially as symbols also have their own limitation. Symbols can be misunderstood especially when used inappropriately or in a wrong context. This is why words and symbols must often go together. Symbols help to capture what words are unable to capture and words help to clarify what symbols intend to say. In this mutual relationship, symbol offers words the vocabulary it lacks and words offer symbol the voice and clarity it lacks. Commenting on this mutual relationship between word and deed (symbol), the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council notes that, “the plan of Revelation is realized by deeds and words having an inner unity: the deeds wrought by God in the history of salvation manifest and confirm the teaching and realities signified by the words, while the words proclaim the deeds and clarify the mystery contained in them” (Dei Verbum #2). It is in this mutual interchange that the intended message is communicated in a very powerful and enduring manner. In fact, this union of words and symbols gives rise to a new reality called sacrament. Words alone do not make a sacrament neither do symbols alone make a sacrament, both must come together to make a sacrament. And our basic catechism teaches us

that the power and effects of sacraments are transcendental, that is, they are able to effect changes or transformations that go beyond the natural realm. How else can we explain Baptism, Holy Eucharist, Holy Orders, Reconciliation, etc. And so, when words and symbols unite together as sacrament, a synergy of energies and powers is created, which is capable of transcendental effects. Whereas, such transcendental effects cannot be possible if only either of the two is used. Certainly, some effect will be possible when used separately but that effect cannot be of a transcendental quality or character. The union of word *and* symbol is best encapsulated and exemplified in the Person of our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Sublime Sacrament insofar as he is both the Word and Symbol of God.

What has the above got to do with anything? A lot! The killing of two priests: Frs. Joseph Gor and Felix Tyolaha, along with their parishioners in the diocese of Makurdi has raised the angst among Catholics and non-Catholics. But it has also raised the expectations of the flock of Christ who look up to their shepherds not only for words of consolation and reassurance but more importantly for direction. As members of the flock of Christ – both those in the church and the other flocks outside the church – are continually mowed down by terrorists, the sheep have been looking up to their shepherds for an effective and determined course of action. After the initial silence, the college of shepherds issued a very powerful statement not only condemning the atrocities but even pointedly asking President Buhari to resign. There is no doubt, the statement of the bishops is powerful and unprecedented. And as we are wont to say, it speaks truth to authority, as they have always done. Indeed, their Communiqué did state that for two years they have been speaking to Buhari concerning the configuration of the security apparatus which leaves the entire security of the country in the hands of an ethnoreligious section of the country. And so, the bishops have been speaking. Their latest “speech” is one in a series of “speeches” and I suppose the most powerful of all them all.

But it is the opinion of ordinary sheep like me that words, powerful as they may be, are no longer sufficient. It is absurd if not ludicrous to continue to multiply words on a man or woman who has lost his auditory faculty. And so, when the sounds of words are no longer meaningful to a deaf man, one must employ a different set of sounds to convey the pains, anxiety, anguish and disappointment of the people. When words fail, symbols come to the rescue just as faith comes to the aid of the senses which are unable to grasp the full reality of things. Our shepherds may have spoken powerfully but they have not spoken sufficiently. And for this, ordinary *christfaithful* like me remain rather disappointed and disillusioned.

Our shepherds must move beyond words to symbols, or rather employ both words and symbols. In short, our bishops must be *sacramental* in their approach to the current crisis in Nigeria. The church is a sacrament, and the ministry of which they – the bishops – are both recipients and custodians is a sacrament. Therefore, their approach and response to issues and problems must be *sacramental* in character. Recall, what was said earlier on, viz., a sacrament consists of both words and symbols.

One may ask what sort of symbol(s) is/are required of our bishops? There are quite a number of them. (a) *Peaceful Public Protest*. Take for instance, the symbol of a peaceful protest. Imagine for a second if all the bishops in Nigeria are to lead, contemporaneously, the priests, consecrated persons, and members of the lay faithful of their respective dioceses in a peaceful silent prayerful sit-down protest in front of the government house of their respective States for an entire week, what will likely be the effect? At the risk of being labelled unreasonably optimistic, I think such an action (symbol) will send a powerful message that cannot be easily ignored by the Federal and State Governments. In fact, one can point to a recent and related action as a precedent. Rochas Okorocha of Imo State in his usual arbitrary and provocative manner renamed Assumpta Avenue—originally named after the Assumpta Cathedral which is located in that Avenue—to Buhari Avenue. Irked by this affront, the Catholic community in Owerri began rallying round to hold a peaceful protest in the metropolis. Without waiting for that to happen the governor hurriedly did a backtrack. Yes, symbols are powerful and effective.

Sometimes, strong reservations and even oppositions are raised, particularly by members of the clergy and consecrated persons, against holding peaceful protests as a possible course of action. One of the usual arguments is that peaceful protests can easily become violent and bloody because of the likelihood of being hijacked by hoodlums thus provoking possible backlash from security forces and pro-government supporters. The multiethnic and multireligious character of the country are further adduced as added reasons why such protests, even when peaceful, should never be adopted as a possible course of action. These arguments, which more or less bother on fear, are often presented as advocating a more prudential approach since the logic is that it is preferable to avoid a course of action that may provoke more violence.

While granting that we do have a volatile ethnoreligious mix in Nigeria yet, one can confidently say that in reality, there is very little likelihood of mobs of Muslims youths attacking peaceful protesting Christians in places like Lagos, Oyo, Enugu, Benue, Abeokuta, Owerri, Port Harcourt, Abuja, etc. and even in the so-called Muslim dominated States. It is even much less likely to have the police shooting at bishops, priests and religious who should be at the vanguard of the peaceful protests. Even the most ruthless dictator knows where to draw the line. And so, the argument that a peaceful protest might turn violent and bloody may seem plausible yet it is very misleading. And let us even grant that possibility, would it be the first time a bishop or priest will be shot in public? Why fear being shot on the streets while protesting against injustice when you can as well be hacked down while lying in your bed or sitting inside the church as happened to the two priests in Benue? And so, the same death we think we are avoiding by refusing to take up a *sacramental* action will certainly catch up with us while engaged in perhaps a less noble activity.

It is very instructive that the brutal murder of Frs. Joseph and Felix took place after the Good Shepherd Sunday. In the Gospel reading of that Sunday, Christ the Good

Shepherd assures us that he will rather lay down his life for his sheep than allow the wolves to harm his sheep. And here we are debating whether it is prudent to go beyond mere words for fear that one or more persons might be shot. Yes, no one should recklessly expose his life to danger, but one must not mistake cowardice for prudence. In the name of prudence some theologians, priests and religious are feeding the flock on a diet of fear: fear that a peaceful protest might turn violent. This diet of fear is transforming Christians into helpless and hopeless people who simply throw up their arms resignedly to fatalism mistaken for faith. While these theologians quote Aquinas and church documents, lives are being lost daily in Benue, Plateau, Kaduna, Taraba, and other parts of Nigeria. I guess the lives of those commoners are nothing in comparison with the lives of our bishops, theologians, priests and religious. I consider it a very grave sin to feed the flock of Christ on a diet of fear. And yet, the first words of the Risen Lord are: "Do Not Be Afraid", "Fear Not Little Flock".

I acknowledge that our bishops are human. They are no different from any of us in terms of their humanity. I believe that they, too, can be overcome by fear and the dread of being brutalized and even killed. Like every responsible and prudent person, they too can be overwhelmed by the thought that an attempt to express their displeasure in a symbolic gesture of peaceful protest can set off a chain of events of undeterminable consequences, hence their reticence in taking that course of action. I believe that they love their flock even more than some vociferous priests like us. I believe that whatever be the case, they are not acting in bad faith but rather out of genuine or what they believe to be genuine prudence. Yet, the fact remains that there must come a time when they have to fold the sleeves of their episcopal robes, replace their shoes with a pair of sandals, and descend from their cathedrae into the streets for a peaceful but frontal confrontation with the evil going on in our country. The life of Oscar Romero of El Salvador exemplifies this. After several hesitations, he realized that words were no longer sufficient. He had to complement words with symbols. He paid the full price with his life and became a "sacrament" for the Church in Latin America. He understood that when you confront evil, evil will leave you bruised and even dead. Christ confronted the evil of sin, and evil left him not only bruised and humiliated but left him hanging on a cross. In fact, he had to show his disciples the marks of his bruises to let them know he's the same Jesus. To expect that we will go on a peaceful prayerful protest and return home with our habits and cassocks still immaculate and unruffled is being unrealistic. We may come back disheveled, harassed, brutalized and even killed, but we like our Risen Lord will triumph over evil. Like Christ we must pray intensely in the garden of Gethsemane but we must be prepared to step into the streets and courtyards of the Chief highpriest and Pilate and be ridiculed by the jeering crowd as they hurry us to Golgotha.

It is without say that the Hierarchy of the Church in Nigeria cannot keep silent or stand aloof in the face of the ongoing mass massacre of families and other forms of anomalies in our national polity. Indeed, they have an obligation to actively resist every form of evil in the society. This pertains to their prophetic ministry. There's no

question that their resistance must be non-violent, but they must strenuously resist evil even when such resistance provokes violence on them. Peaceful prayerful public protest can be considered as one among several forms of non-violent protest against the present evil in our society.

(b) Undertake *diplomatic initiatives*. Another important non-violent method could be the use of diplomatic pressure. The CBCN, as a matter of urgency, must create a unit within the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (CSN), that will be responsible for high level diplomatic engagements within and outside Nigeria. Part of its task is to help create a network of local and foreign, governmental and non-governmental pressure groups that will force the Nigerian government to take the needed steps that will bring to resolve the ongoing crises in the Country. The Catholic bishops in Nigeria must leverage on its universal status in employing diplomatic pressure as a powerful tool for protesting and resisting government endorsed injustice in the society. Needless to say, a high level of professionalism will be required to make such a unit effective.

In addition to the possible courses of actions proposed above, there are several other *symbolic* gestures that the CBCN can undertake in reinforcing its message against the unrelenting violence that has enveloped Nigeria. We shall articulate some of them in the following paragraphs.

1. The ministry of the episcopacy is a *ministry of memory*. As custodians of the apostolic tradition, they are custodians of the memory of not just the past but of the present tradition. Thus, part of their ministry is to ensure that the church never forgets. This is why the CBCN must ensure that the local church does not forget – especially witnesses of the Christian faith. As part of fulfilling the mnemonic dimension of the episcopal ministry, the CBCN, but particularly the respective bishops of the dioceses in the Middlebelt, should establish the identity (names and faces) of all those who have died in religious violence and build a mausoleum in which their names and possibly their faces can be engraved. It becomes a perpetual memory for successive generations of Christians to keep in view the price their forebears paid for their faith in Christ Jesus. This symbol is not merely mnemonic but catechetical. It becomes a symbol that reminds successive generations the price one may be required to pay for embracing the Christian faith.

2. While not everyone who died in religious violence can be strictly declared a martyr, The CBCN should undertake to identify specific individuals whose death qualifies them to be declared *martyrs*. I want to believe that among so many of our murdered brothers and sisters, some of them can be declared martyrs or confessors. Leah Sharibu, though not a Catholic is nonetheless a confessor, indeed, an ecumenical confessor of faith. She chose to renounce her freedom rather than renounce her faith in Christ Jesus. She therefore is a model of Christian faith for men and women of our epoch and of our local context. Her testimony confirms the Gospel message that to follow Christ and stand for truth may require the renunciation of one's property, freedom and even life. Her witness represents a very

powerful critique against the false gospel of materialism and spiritual hedonism that has infected hundreds of thousands of Christians in our day.

3. Every authentic Christian ministry and action, especially sacramental actions, flow from the church's *life of prayer*. Therefore, the above proposed *sacramental actions*, that is, the peaceful prayerful public protest and other forms of non-violent resistance cannot be detached from prayer. Consequently, the CBCN should establish in our local church's liturgical calendar a day to commemorate all victims of ethnoreligious violence. Just as the experience of the early martyrs became inscribed in the universal calendar of the Church, so too must the bishops of Nigeria and of Africa in general also inscribe in our local liturgical calendar the painful experience of individuals, families and communities that have lost their lives to ethnoreligious violence. It is, indeed, a greater violence to continue to pass in silence the painful memories of thousands of victims of ethnoreligious violence.

4. In addition to the annual liturgical celebration of victims of ethnoreligious violence, a specific day and hour of the week, e.g. Fridays, should be set aside as a day of *public devotion* in all parishes, rectories, chaplaincies, seminaries, and religious houses throughout the country. This public devotion would include recitation of the holy rosary, meditation on the word of God and Eucharistic adoration. This spiritual devotion will provide the vital force that will inspire all other forms of public actions that express the church's disapproval of the current political situation. This national day and hour of public devotion should not be a one-off event but a continuous one until the country overcomes its present crisis. We recall how the CBCN rose up to the challenge by composing the Prayer for Nigeria in Distress during the dark and dreary days of the Sani Abacha dictatorship. The country appears to be in an even dire situation and hence the need for all to unite our spirits in prayer.

Some may wish to interpret this short essay as an indictment of our bishops, but my intent is far from that. Any Christian, especially priest or consecrated person, who understands the nature of the church and the dignity of the episcopal ministry must give due deference and honor to the shepherds appointed by Christ to watch over his flock whatever may be their shortcomings. And so, this short essay is not intended in any way to ridicule or castigate our bishops. I dare not commit such opprobrium even if I may not entirely agree with or appreciate their course of action. More so, the deep consciousness that I live in a very brittle glass house has taught me to be circumspect of pointing to the shortcomings of others. It must, however, be clearly understood, that refraining from pointing out the shortcomings or failures of others, whether moral or otherwise, is not the same as critiquing the positions, policies, principles or opinions of others.

Thus, this essay is purely a theological task arising from a strong conviction that theology must be at the service of the magisterium in all circumstances. A theologian, must be capable of rising above the din of uncritical and emotive debates and articulate theological principles that will inspire meaningful course of actions for the church of God. This short theological treatise is, therefore, geared towards offering a theological foundation for non-violent resistance in the form a peaceful prayerful public protest (the 4 Ps) as a legitimate course of action for the church

especially when confronted with grave dangers. From our theological analysis, it is obvious that far more than just a duty or an obligation that derives from a socio-ethical or political right as citizens, peaceful prayerful public protest has solid and sound theological foundation. It is rooted in the church's theology of sacraments. When the church, therefore, engages in public protest, it is not merely a social action, it is sort of a *sacramental* action which flows from the very nature and life of the church which is herself a sacrament. In fact, this is what distinguishes the public protest of the church from all other forms of social or public protests. Since sacraments are not to be trivialized, peaceful prayerful public protests by the church are not to be trivialized. And since sacraments are important and even necessary means of salvation, peaceful prayerful public protests and other forms of non-violent protest are not only important but are sometimes necessary especially in very grave situations. They can become *saving means* of transforming a society. And so, when such necessity arises, the custodians of the mysteries (sacraments) of God has a moral and spiritual obligation to lead the flock of Christ to *celebrate* this *sacrament* even if it means having to lay down one's life. Sacraments, as we have seen have transcendental transformative power and effects. The Church in Nigeria and in Africa as a whole can through a series of sustained sacramental gestures bring about effective and enduring change in our land that has suffered enormously. We must, therefore, rise up to this challenge and expectation.