

## **The Catholic Church on the Common Good: A Panacea to Tribalism and Ethnicity in Nigeria's Politics**

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### **Abstract**

One major problem facing Nigeria politics from Nigeria's political independence to date is ethnicity. This has been a serious clog on the wheel of national cohesion and development. This work identifies this factor as a great setback to the politics and governance of the country. This work made use of primary and secondary methods of data collection to generate information, while the impartial government theory was the background upon which the work holds that why Nigerians are still clamouring for their tribesmen in politics is because of lack of efforts to carry every ethnic group along in politics and decision making that affects the entire country, catering for general well-being of the people. As a solution to this, this work presents the principles of the common good as taught in the Catholic Social Teaching which emphasises the need to promote the general good instead of sectional good. By promoting the common good by those at the helms of political affairs of the state, the country would experience a decline in the tempo of ethnicity in Nigeria politics.

**Keywords:** common good, ethnicity, politics, Nigeria

### **Introduction**

Nigeria, a nation that gained her political independence from the Britain in 1960 has continued to experience setbacks especially in proper governance 62years after. This no doubt has affected the proper functionality of various sectors of the nation's polity. National cohesion has been much elusive from the first republic to date. Voices of dissention are heard from various quarters of the country making it difficult for the country to adequately position herself on development trajectory. The country has not been able to thrive properly despite abundance of mineral and human resources in her.

At the centre of every country is the state power which in other words is called political power achievable through politics. This determines how the state functions in every sphere. As Egbuogu (2006) observes, the state came to being as a result of some serious existential needs and the emergence of a state is to address these needs for the integral well-being of the people. As Egbuogu holds

...the state has to be an entity that is real and beyond a mere concept; it has to be a reality that is active, effective, influential. .... It has to exert authority, command influence and exercise power in order to move people to a way of life.... The State Power is or should be a political power exercised in the state or by the state and for the state. In the right sense it is the desired power through which the commonwealth influences the citizens and carries them along in the fulfillment of the ends of the state. (p. 98).

A state is not a mere concept but a reality that caters for all as citizens of the state. However, with various events in the history of Nigerian politics, it is obvious that such essence of a state is elusive in Nigeria. It has not been difficult to have Nigerians who see themselves as Nigerians than they see themselves as tribesmen or ethnic men. This defeats the idea of establishing a state called Nigeria. The state power has not fully been seen as a way of promoting collective welfare and well-being of the people instead, it has been seen as a way of introducing and promoting ethnic superiority in the country; hence, the country has been troubled in various spheres.

As seen in every political election so far in Nigeria, it often looks like tribal wars instead of collective interest of the essential needs of the country. To majority of the people, it is better to have one's tribesman in power no matter how bad the governance is. This is a serious misfortune to any meaningful development and national cohesion. Regrettably, Ekei (2013) points out that where ethnicity is very obvious, one witnesses existence of ethnic militias, problem of leadership, lack of respect for the

common good, corruption and indiscipline. These are the situations Nigeria is experiencing currently. Worried by the scenario, this work brings to bare the teaching of the Catholic Church on the common good as a way of eliminating ethnicity/tribalism in Nigerian politics. It is the position of this work that if the governance of Nigeria is carried on according to the dictates of the social teaching on the common good, the tempo of ethnicity/tribalism in Nigerian politics would reduce or even eliminated.

### **Definition of Terms**

**The Common Good:** Common good here refers to as ideas, values, or actual deeds that benefit a whole community and not just a selected few. It refers to all those values and concern which belong to the entire community and not just a specific group or individual. In this, there is respect for the person and his dignity, social well-being and development of human communities as Ike (2013) holds.

**Politics:** Etymologically, politics is from two Greek words “*polis*” and “*politikos*”. *Polis* means a state or city while *politikos* refers to anything appertaining to the state or city affairs. Politics consists of social relations involving authority and power, and refers to regulation of a political unit and the methods and tactics used to formulate and apply policy. Kanu (2009) maintains that politics “involves the art or science of government or governing, especially the government of a political entity, such as a nation, and the administration and control of its internal and external affairs (p. 1). Shively (2005) sees politics as having two aspects: politics as the making of common decisions and politics as the exercise of power. Therefore, politics involves decision making, implementation of policies and allocation of resources. These three areas are apt to the current research.

**Ethnicity/Tribalism:** Ethnicity simply put is an identity based upon presumption of shared history and common cultural inheritance. Individuals with such background see themselves as related to each other with high affinity. Tribalism on the other hand is seen as tribal consciousness and loyalty especially when one places a tribe above others. The two concepts are used interchangeably in this work because each emphasizes ties that are in most cases placed above general interest especially in developing countries like Nigeria.

### **The Challenges of Ethnicity/Tribalism in Nigeria Politics**

Discussing the challenges facing the Nigerian politics without reference to tribalism is like discussing processes of birth without fertilization. Asking the reasons for that may not be necessary when one appreciates the existence of over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups in Nigeria. Stories of tribal agitations have been on the pages of history books and newspapers as well as academic papers in Nigeria. Interestingly, Okpalike (2012) describes what goes on in this way:

Up till the present day, the ship of Nigeria is still rocking in the sea of British troubled waters. From a purported Igbo quest for domination resulting in a mindless pogrom to Biafran secessionist struggle; from military totalitarianism to military despotism and tyranny; from the riots of the Oduduwa People’ Congress (OPC) to the unrest of Arewa Consultation Forum (ACF); from the insurgence of the Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra (MASSOB) to the awakening of Movement for the Survival of Ogoni People (MASOP); from resistance of Niger-Delta militant to the terrorist attacks of Boko-Haram. The Nigeria nation has surely become a wreckage of multiple crises. (p. 228).

The above observation is an instance of of crises that have been witnessed in Nigeria with tribal undertone. A critical look at the nation’s incessant problems would always have something to do with tribalism. Nzomiwu (1999) observes that tribalism poses a dangerous signal to Nigeria in all ramifications. He asserts that it develops to the level that crimes are covered up because a particular tribe is concerned and also, contributes to poverty of the nation. One has to recall that absence of violence is a governance indicator. The description above by Okpalike is a clear evident that the nation has not experience a violence-free time especially in her area of politiking. Many writers are not different from the view. One thing to restate is that since the amalgamation of this heterogeneous group of people as a nation voices have continued to sound. Ojukwu (1989) in his words wrote that “Nigeria

remains in essence an amorphous mass of individuals busy pretending to be a people” (p. xiv). For Okpalike (2011) Nigeria as amalgamated is an entitative misnomer.

The truth remains that tribes play a significant role in Nigerian nation and Africa in particular. Researches have shown that a tribe man is more important in Africa than a citizen of a state. In fact, state could be seen as European making. In Africa, language, culture, tradition, history, religion and social institutions belong to the tribe not the state. Even the distributive politics is part of what tribalism invented. The question of Nigeria project is often less important when compared with tribal project. A Nigerian in most cases is more at the tribe than the state (country) no matter its political position and this has severely affected good governance especially where it affects equity and justice. Okpalike (2012) views that

In Nigeria, tribal fraternity is stronger than national unity; sectional interests attract more dependable and credible loyalty than national programs. The average Nigeria is more at the tribe than the nation. . . . There is more dignity in a tribal role than a national role and tribal roles demand more commitment and character than national roles. Most people will not feel fulfilled as having contributed to the society until such a contribution has been recognised by the tribe. (p. 232).

The picture showcased above cannot allow for responsible politics. The governance problems Nigerians face since independence were deepened by this idea of tribalism/sectionalism. This develops into marginalization in all levels of government as Izuegbu (2012) holds. Tribalism which led to the formation of pre-independence and first republican political parties alongside ethnic cleavages marred the period as nothing meaningful was seen except tribal struggles. Nigeria as a nation remained almost as an orphan with no real and committed caregiver because of tribalism. Even with the creation of states, the problem is still there and will continue if not checked. The concomitant effect is that whoever ‘grabs’ political power in Nigeria faces his ethnic group to the detriment of other ethnic groups. The most interesting part of it is that the judgement for a performing government is determined by what the government had done for a particular ethnic group. Whether other ethnic groups ‘benefit’ from the government or not, that is not necessary as far as that particular ethnic group is ‘benefitting’. With such situation in Nigeria, good governance has been a mirage for over sixty years of independence of the nation. Therefore, one of the major factors hindering good governance is Nigeria remains tribalism at all levels of Nigeria politics.

Justice demands that every ethnic group is taken care of under the umbrella of good governance and this is the common good. With rivalry among the ethnic groups in Nigeria, it is not so easy to experience good governance in the politics of Nigeria. It is argued that the existence of over two hundred ethnic groups in Nigeria do not make for political harmony and stability more especially as there seems to exist a sort of congenital discordance between the majority ethnic groups. For Nzomiwu (1988), until Nigerians learn to disabuse their minds of tribalism the unity and stability of the nation will continue to be a farce. A nation where tribal considerations or indices are rated more than consideration of merit is potentially unstable and patently unjust. There cannot be good governance without proper unity. Unity of a nation is paramount for her to thrive positively on the road to proper governance through proper politics. Analysing Plato’s position on proper governance, Egbuogu (2006) saw unity as the top-most of the criteria that would promote responsible governance. In his appraisal, he maintained that

Top-most among the criteria with which proper governance should be identified is the ability of those who exercise state power to order state in such a way that the above mentioned unity, in which the sentiments and feelings of all are made one, in which all are recognised and appreciated, and in which non-is discriminated against, is self-evident in the state. Unity here is not simply peaceful co-existence and harmony but more, the recognition and appreciation of all, the acknowledgement of the importance of all. (p. 109).

By Egbuogu’s position, a state that lacks unity cannot claim to experience proper governance. Nigeria is a notebook of a disintegrated state that pretends to remain one. In actual politics, one sees the level of disintegration based on the ethnic groups cum sections. The problem is even increasing. When it

were regions, regionalism filled the political terrain. With creation of states, statism continued. The six geo-political zones of the state have also posed political red light to the nation. Assessment of candidate for political offices in Nigeria is not based on the capability of the candidate but his ethnic group, state, geo-political zone and even his language. And with all these, proper governance continued to elude the nation. Nzomiwu (1988) made a serious case against tribalism and sectionalism in Nigeria. In his submissions, he asserts:

The problems of sectionalism and tribalism should be the primary concern of every true patriot because it is very fundamental to stability in Nigeria. In Nigeria today, each ethnic and tribal group is vying for a position of supremacy, using any means available under the sun. For most of these groups, it is not the interest or economy or stability or unity of Nigeria that matters but the interest of their ethnic groups. The survival of one ethnic group is seen to depend on the annihilation of any other group. This is a glaring manifestation of the animal instinct in man. The traditional democratic philosophy of: “live and let’s live” is forgotten. This was the attitude that led to the demise of the first republic and to the Nigerian Civil War but it is unfortunate that Nigerians have not learnt anything from those traumatic events. In a situation like this political antagonism and ethnic conflict reign supreme. Such a situation naturally sends up in a catastrophe. (p. 5).

The exposition made above by Nzomiwu goes further to buttress that the issue of tribalism and sectionalism has long history in Nigeria. The problem remains that Nigerians do not want to learn as he expressed. Many tribal problems are still in existence. Many analysts have attributed the post-election violence of 2011 in the North to tribalism. For them, since a northerner lost the election, the state would be made ungovernable for the winner of the election. Such ethnic sentiments are capable of retarding governance. Many times, what would have been used for common good were used to quench ethnic problems in Nigeria. There is no human institution that can efficiently thrive in a culture of disintegration. With such in mind, tribalism and sectionalism in the politics of Nigeria have thwarted good governance in Nigeria. It is a present reality. A look at various comments on internet about Nigeria has made the researcher affirm that the problem is still on the increase. It is crystal clear from the comments of Nigerians that the unity which is capable of fertilizing good governance, development, unity and general progress is a scarce commodity in Nigeria. Edum and Amaefula (2012) recognized that tribalism is a serious challenge to Nigeria nation. According to them, “the leaders deny the prevalence of tribalism...and by implication, do not notice its adverse effects” (p. 175). With this in mind, tribalism continues to breed enormous problems in the country. Achebe (1983) among other things identified tribalism as one of the clogs on the wheel of Nigerian progress. One thing important to note in here is that no scholar has approved of tribalism in the country. It has been generally condemned as a serious setback to the nation.

A critical look at the nation would show that most of the problems the country had witnessed were anchored on tribalism. The prediction that Nigeria would disintegrate was triggered off by the issue of tribalism. It is tribalism that breeds the quest for dominance. Federalism is said to allay fears of domination but in Nigeria how true that is remains a question for further debate. The utterances of both the founding fathers of Nigeria and contemporary Nigerians continue to elicit that cankerworm - tribalism. The equitable distribution of resources is on paper. No aspect of the nation is without tribalism. In reality, this has affected the efficiency and effectiveness of governance in Nigeria. As a social reality, if not checked, the nation may not experience what good governance offers. This calls for ethics in the process.

### **The Church’s Position on the Common Good *vis-à-vis* Nigeria Politics**

One of the major areas of the Catholic Social Teaching (CST) is on the common good. The Church has not only prepared the minds of the people for the life eternal but has constantly advocated that man who is created in the image of God has enabling environment that would allow him live his life here on earth in order to fulfill his call. The Church has seen justice and fairness among the people as crucial in the journey to eternal life. It is in the heart of the Church that there is a conducive social order for all to live. The Church has not been elusive to the events in social, political, social and cultural spheres of

life. According to Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2005), the Church is interested in these principles that promote social life.

These are principles of a general and fundamental character, since they concern the reality of society in its entirety: from close and immediate relationships to those mediated by politics, economics and law; from relationships among communities and groups to relations between people and nations. Because of their permanence in time and their universality of meaning, the Church presents them as the primary and fundamental parameters of reference for interpreting and evaluating social phenomena, which is the necessary source for working out the criteria for the discernment and orientation of social interactions in every area. (n. 161).

As the conscience of the society, the Church offers salient teachings to enable members of the society live as servants of God for the good of all. The Church has in its wisdom, directed by the Holy Spirit holds on the need for the common good for the well-being of the people.

The common good entails a true community which is a community in which people have what is rightfully theirs without harming the generality of the welfare of the entire community. Common good in this regard is reached when all work together to improve the well-being of people in the society and the wider world. Common good happens when individual possessions and community resources balance with the needs of the disadvantaged and dispossessed. The common good is seen according to Pastoral Constitution of the Church in the Modern World (1965) as “the sum total of social conditions which allow people, either as groups or individuals, to reach their fulfillment more fully and more easily” (n. 26). Very importantly especially to the current work, the document emphasized that every group has to take into account the needs and legitimate aspirations of other group, and still more of the human family as a whole. This idea becomes very relevant where in a nation, a tribe may want to lord it over other tribes. Such a situation is a devaluation of the common good. It is common good for it belongs to everyone and to each person. In his encyclical, John XXIII (1963) holds that no expression of social life- from the family to intermediate social groups, associations, enterprises of an economic nature, cities, regions, states, up to the community of peoples and nations- can escape the issue of its own common good, in that it is a constitutive element of its significance and authentic reason for its very existence.

The common good as holds by the Church is the responsibility of everyone to promote. This is because the content is for the general good. In clear terms, Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2005) sees involvement of everyone in promoting the common good as commitment to peace. It involves the organization of the State’s power, a sound juridical system, the protection of the environment, and the provision of essential services to all, freedom of communication and expression, and protection of religious freedom. This involves everyone in a political community for the well-being of all. This principle is very necessary especially in a plural State like Nigeria where there are many ethnic groups. The common good as holds by the document must be served in its fullness, not according to reductionist visions that are subordinated by certain people to their own disadvantages.

The import of the Church’s position on the common good cannot be overemphasized especially in Nigeria where there has been a wide disparity among the ethnic groups of the country as well as the leaders and the led. The Church’s emphasis on pursuit of the well-being of the entire people remains sacrosanct as there are divides along tribe affiliations in almost every aspect of the country’s political, economic and even religious life. Sectional interest opposes the common good and in Nigeria, sectional interest primes higher than the common good. The winner takes it all in the politics of Nigeria is against the position and principles of the common good. During political elections for instance, one discovers that the people are not actually searching for credible leadership rather, people are more interested in the ethnic background of the candidates. This is a clear indication that Nigeria has not fully understood and imbibes the principles of the common good. Politics in Nigeria is marred by sectionalism, ethnicity and tribalism and hence, the common good is jettisoned making it almost impossible for the nation to thrive positively.

### **The Demands of the Common Good on Nigerian Political Community**

There are three essential elements of the common good. These include: respect for the individual; the social well-being and development of the group; and peace which results from the stability of a just society. These three essentials are *conditio sine qua non* for human and societal survival. The rights of individuals that make up Nigeria no matter where they come from are to be protected and guaranteed by all. Doing so is promoting the common good which in turn gives everyone a sense of belonging and involvement in the politics of the nation. The social well-being of every tribe is expected to be the priority of all and by doing so, every group feels carried along and cared for thereby playing down the tempo of ethnicity and or tribalism. Doing these usher in a just society, where there is peace, progress, development and proper national integration. This involves the political leaders and the citizens.

On the part of the Government, Ehusani ((2013) states

Government exists in society to promote the common good and therefore the government... must strive to ensure the best possible good for everyone.... Our leaders must ensure that we put in place such laws, or such juridical structures that will guarantee the rights of individuals to private property, but also checkmate the acquisitive instinct of individuals. In this way, our government will ensure just and equitable distribution of resources of the land. It is indeed the responsibility of the government to protect the vulnerable poor from the excesses of the powerful who are often tempted to sell the poor for a pair of sandal. (p. 4).

The government of Nigeria has responsibility of equal distribution of the nation's resources to all without discrimination of any form. This is what the common good means in that regard. The commonwealth of the nation has to be for the common good not sectional good or privileged individuals' good.

The Church holds this truism that the State has the responsibility of upholding the common good. The State and state actors have this task of championing the common good. The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace (2005) maintains that

The responsibility for attaining the common good, beside falling to individual persons, belongs also to the State, since the common good is the reason the political authority exists. The State, in fact, must guarantee the coherency, unity and organization of the civil society of which it is an expression, in order that the common good may be attained with the contribution of every citizen. (n. 168).

This responsibility of the State is in tandem with the reality that individuals, families or intermediate groups cannot live their full lives outside the State. It then follows that the State must do everything to promote that which would give each opportunity to share in the resources of the State for survival. This promotion is self-evident when those who hold political authorities pursue the general good instead of sectoral or sectional good only. The State is therefore at the centre of promoting the common good.

It then behooves on the government of the State to channel interests in promoting the common good. By doing so, every section is carried along with an even sense of belonging. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace affirms this fact in the following statements:

To ensure the common good, the government of each country has the specific duty to harmonize the different sectoral interests with the requirements of justice. The proper reconciling of the particular goods of groups and those of individuals is, in fact, one of the most delicate tasks of public authority. Moreover, it must not be forgotten that in the democratic State, where decisions are usually made by the majority of representatives elected by the people, those responsible for government are required to interpret the common good of their country not only according to the guidelines of the majority but also according to the effective good of all the members of the community, including the minority. (n. 169).

The above indented paragraph is very apt to the crux of this work. In Nigeria where one experiences what may be regarded as sectional governance instead of general governance, it brings to bare why the promotion of the common good is a great solution to the tempo of ethnicity in Nigeria politics. This document proffers a great solution to the menace in Nigeria politics. People in authority especially in

democratic government are not only to be guided by the will of the majority but also by the principle of the common good where both the majority and the minority are protected. It is obvious that some ethnic groups are in the majority. If the majority determines what happens always, there should be a clear subjugation of the minority. It is therefore incumbent on the leaders to hold onto the common good, the good of all in making decisions and policies for the country. This is a great means of putting an end to the reoccurrence ethnicity in the politics of Nigeria.

### Conclusion

Appraising the political situation of Nigeria exposes different challenges facing the full realization of responsible politics where every individual, group or ethnic group could feel accommodated. The politics of Nigeria from inception has been full of ethnicity and tribalism even before independence. Different political crises witnessed in Nigeria took place majorly because of ethnic politics. Be it the Kano Riot of 1953, the Census Crisis of 1962/63, the Federal Election Crisis of 1964 and so on, these had serious and detrimental ethnic undertone to the political survival of the country. The common denominator of the causes of these crises is fear of domination by different ethnic groups that make up Nigeria. Political elections in Nigeria have been seriously affected by tribalism which is positioned above merit. This is one reason the country remains a toddler when she ought to be an adult.

Amidst these political upheavals and quagmire, this work holds that one salient way of bringing to an end ethnicity in the politics of Nigeria is by upholding and promotion of the common good. The common good as taught by the Church remains a serious means of bringing down the tempo of ethnicity in the politics of Nigeria. The three essential elements of the common good which are: respect for the individual; the social well-being and development of the group; and peace with which results from the stability of a just society are what can easily bring Nigeria to the path of responsible politics and not ethnic politics. Where the rights of every individual is respected no matter from where he comes from in Nigeria, citizens would not have much need of being tribesmen but see themselves as citizens of Nigeria. Where every part of the country whether majority or minority tribe experiences equal development, all being carried along in the governance without unlawful inhibitions, the ember of ethnicity would gradually fade off. Where the first two essentials are met, the third comes in automatically which is a country with at least relative peace, a country where everyone is happy, a country where citizens are carried along. In this regard, with unity of purpose, things move appropriately with resultant effects of development and general progress. It is therefore the position of this work that the problem of ethnicity in Nigeria politics is easily solved when there is promotion of the common good. All in the helm of affairs of Nigeria is expected to hold the common good in every sphere of politics in Nigeria. This reduces the tempo of ethnicity/tribalism in Nigeria politics.

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