

AN APPRAISAL OF CYPRIAN IWENE TANSI'S RELIGIOUS IMPACT TO THE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT OF CATHOLICISM IN ONITSHA ARCHDIOCESE, NIGERIA

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Abstract

The advent of Christianity in Anambra state was made possible through the efforts of Cyprian Micheal Iwene Tansi wjho was a Catholic priest. There are so many legends and monuments depict and perpetuate their exploits, while little or nothing is remembered about their collaborators in success. Today the success story of the Roman Catholic Church is largely attributed to the efforts of men like Iwene Tansi. This study tries to raise this issue and endeavours to remind the present and posterity how Iwene Tansi worked behind the scene with the white missionaries and was able to change the face of Roman Catholicism in Anambra state with their undying influences in education, religion and evangelization, socio-economic and above all with their political and historical influence. Iwene Tansi had his own challenges and shortcomings, the church equally influenced them in various ways just like they had influenced the church. The essence of this study is, therefore, to bring to light how these indigenou missionaries particularly Iwene Tansi contributed, and even pioneered the growth of Catholicism in Onitsha ecclesiastical province. The research adopted both primary and secondary sources of data collection which include oral interview, historical and empirical approach, and the documentary sources such as internet, the previous work of both foreign and indigenou scholars that wrote on the relevant issues about the subject.

Keywords: Christian, Missionaries, Growth, Development, Christianity, Igboland

Introduction

Cyprian Iwene Tansi was one of the men who sacrificed his comfort, time, resources and so forth to ensure that the light of Christianity illuminates the Igbo territory. While the missionaries were spreading the gospel, they came with good tidings which attracted the Warrant Chiefs, most of whom the British government handed over to the missionaries to train them using Western form of education. Nwosu (2011) observes that the missionaries adopted the strategy of enticing both the rulers and their people with material gifts. These good tidings associated with Christianity such as western education, medical and humanitarian services, introduction of mechanized agriculture, and modern commerce among others encouraged the Warrant Chiefs to partner with the missionaries to see that development comes to their own towns. Due to the enterprising nature of Igbo people, it could be observed that Igbo people were more interested in the economic values than any other value of Christianity. Ekechi (1972) states that, this was partly because the trade commissioner associated material prosperity with the adoption of Christian religion. For example Mgbemena (2012) describes that Onitsha in 1857 was a poor state and welcomed the missionaries in hope of increased prosperity. Within few years Onitsha began to develop and appeared to be the paradigm of a town which had prospered. This was as a result of the effective, cordial relationship and partnership between the Warrant Chiefs and missionaries at Onitsha. Thus, Egwuonwu and Mgbemena (2019) opine that, delegations led by Warrant Chiefs came from other towns and villages to request the missionaries to come and establish Christianity in their lands. Most times, the missionary bodies never rejected their invitation nor where they afraid of attacks by the native people. This was because apart from protection by the colonial army, the Warrant Chiefs have prepared the soil for the planting of Christianity through testifying to their kinsmen how the missionaries have brought development and economic boom in towns like Onitsha, Nnewi, Aboh, thus the indigenou people were ready to receive the gospel which would be either preached or interpreted in Igbo dialect by freed slaves also known as receptive who are of Igbo origin (Nwadiador and Umeanolue, 2015).

Cyprian Iwene Tansi was one of the pioneer indigenou priests in Eastern Nigeria who became a number one collaborator of the White missionaries. As a priest, he studied under the supervision of the expatriate priests. There, he was entrusted with the most delicate function, the procurator, which he discharged creditably to the admiration of his superiors and fellow students. Both in active and contemplative life, be it as a busy Parish Priest in Nigeria or a contemplative Cistercian monk in England, Fr. Tansi spent his life entirely for God through the ministry of

reconciliation in the church and society in all the places he had worked as a Parish Priest. He spent hours in the confessional, helping and reconciling of the people. He helped many people who were experiencing difficulties in living together whether as husband and wife or as neighbours to reconcile, first with God, with oneself, among themselves and with the created reality. Fr. Tansi actually contributed immensely to the development of women because he was the person who singlehandedly started the Mary League for the young unmarried girls and equally the Saint Annes Society for married women which are still in existence in different parts of Nigeria till date (Igwe, 1977). This research is an attempt to bring to limelight the salient labours of Cyprian Iwene Tansi whose enormous contributions led to the growth and development of Christianity in Igboland. The impact of Iwene Tansi who contributed immensely not only to the development of Onitsha Archdiocese but also to the societal development. Hence, this research will seek to appraise Blessed Iwene Tansi life and pastoral ministry and his effort towards the growth of Roman Catholicism in Onitsha Archdiocese.

Historical Survey of the Life and Ministry of Cyprian Iwene Tansi

Early Life of Cyprian Iwene Tansi

Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi is acknowledged as the first blessed saint of Nigeria who was born by the farmer Tabansi and his wife, Ejikwevi of Igboezunu Aguleri, Anambra State in 1903. Oborji (2018) asserts that only a few years before 1890, the Catholic missionaries had brought the first announcement of the faith to the region and they were followed by Irish missionaries who belonged to the Congregation of the Holy Spirit. The parents of Cyprian were poor and they were also pagans who practiced the traditional religion of the Igbo people. Commenting further, Oborji (2018) states that in 1909, when Cyprian was only six years old, he was sent by his parents to live in the house of a maternal aunt whose son was named Robert Orekie, a Christian and a teacher in the mission school. At the age of nine, he was baptized and was given the name of Michael. His friends described him as a studious boy who demanded very much of himself. He had a strong influence on his companions, who were fascinated by his decisive and precocious personality.

The birth of Iwene Tansi occurred at a very critical and trial period of his hometown Aguleri, when the people of the town were having serious frictions with the British Royal Niger Company (R.N.C.), operating at the banks of Anambra River. Okon (1985) opines that the livelihood of Aguleri people was and is still dependent on the agricultural activities which they do along the banks of the Anambra River. However with the colonial overlords controlling the Anambra River banks and its environs, the people of Aguleri never had it easy with the officers and army of the Royal Niger Company (R.N.C.) throughout the colonial era. The birth of Blessed Iwene Tansi occurred precisely when this uneasy relationship between the natives and the colonial R.N.C. was at its lowest state.

Education, Career and Priestly Call of Iwene Tansi

In 1913, Michael moved to Onitsha, where he enrolled into Holy Trinity Primary School and in 1919, he obtained the diploma which enabled him to be a teacher. In 1924, he assumed the post of a principal of St. Joseph School Onitsha. According to Oborji (2006), it was at this verge that he felt the call of God to be a priest in 1925 at the age of 22 and he resolutely overcome the opposition of family members and entered St. Paul's Seminary in Igbariam thereby becoming the first indigenous vocation of the area. In 1932, the confidence he had inspired his superiors and it was so great that he was entrusted with the role of a treasurer of the Training College. According to Nwosu (1990), on December 19, 1937, Iwene Tansi was ordained a priest by the Bishop Charles Heerey, C.S.Sp at the Cathedral of Onitsha. Fr. Tansi demonstrated his exceptional gifts throughout the first twelve years of his priesthood which has been confirmed by the many testimonies of those who witnessed his zeal and his complete abandonment to God.

Immediately after ordination, Father Tansi worked as a Parish Vicar under Father John Cross Anyogu (who was later consecrated a Bishop of Enugu) at Nnewi for three years (1938 to 1940). Nnabuike (1983) notes that, his laudable performance at Nnewi mission encouraged his Archbishop to transfer him to Dunukofia in order to open the station which he did credibly well too. After five years at Dunukofia (1940-1945), Fr. Tansi, was transferred to Ufesiodo (Orumba and Aguata region) to build up the mission. He worked satisfactorily as well in this field, from 1945 to 1949. According to Obi (1985c), he was posted to his hometown Aguleri in 1949 and it was while at Aguleri that Father Tansi expressed for the first time in writing to his Archbishop his wish to become a Trappist monk. Consequently, from Aguleri he departed for the Monastery in Leicester England in 1950. As a priest, Father Tansi dedicated himself not only to daily contemplative prayer but also to active ministry. He evangelized to the youth, prepared couples for marriage, and visited the sick. He was a very good confessor who promoted vocations to priesthood and religious life, and provided for the needs of the poor. He travelled extensively throughout the parish environs to meet and serve his people. As an active and busy pastor, he suddenly developed interest for a monastic life. According to Obi (1985a),

after thirteen years as a diocesan priest, Archbishop Charles Heerey selected him as the most appropriate candidate to receive, incorporate, and share the trappist spirituality. However, it must be noted that, not every young man at the age of forty-seven could leave the parish house, his native land and travel to a distant land to prepare himself professionally. He traveled to England where Father Tansi made a pilgrimage to Rome. In 1950, he arrived at the Abbey of Mount St. Bernard in Leicestershire. Six years later, he took the religious name Cyprian (in honour of that great third-century African ascetic theologian, St. Cyprian of Carthage).

Unfortunately, after Cyprian had begun his formation program, the trappists reviewed the proposed location of their foundation in Africa and changed the site from Nigeria to neighbouring Cameroon. Although disappointed at this change of location, Cyprian nevertheless continued his formation and dedication to the trappist spirituality.

Human Capital Development of Iwene Tansi

Michael's first assignment was in the parish of Nnewi. Obi (1980) summarizes Fr. Tansi's strongest pastoral characteristics such as personal asceticism, great capacity for commitment and physical resistance, goodness towards the sick and the poor, concern for the sanctity of marriage and the spiritual formation of women, as well as personal charisma. In 1940, he bravely managed to dispel a superstitious myth about land that had been given to the missionaries which was known as the cursed forest. However, it was expected that anyone who entered the land would die or contract some kind of terrible disease. According to Izuegbunam (2015), the first thing that Fr. Michael did was to travel through the forest thereby sprinkling it with holy water. After he emerged unscathed, the people took courage and cut down the forest. The next step was to build a church and a school, a rectory and houses of welcome. They were rudimentary buildings, but he helped build them himself thereby offering a concrete example of being a tireless worker. Seeing a priest working so hard prompted many people to help him, and his example inspired others to undertake similar endeavors throughout the region. As for women, Sourou (2014) enunciates that Tansi cared about women's dignity and put forth much effort to protect their virginity. In doing so, he organized houses in his parishes which accommodated young women so as to prepare them for marriage and to deter them from living with their future husband before marriage. The Legions of Mary he established assisted him in every village of the parish by informing him of sick people who wanted to be baptized, thereby promoting the morality of the inhabitants and preparing the catechumens. He committed himself to the building of schools and to making sure that there were qualified teachers. He built houses to welcome the oldest students, one for boys and one for girls. He attended to a good number of orphans, and he made sure that each of them received a suitable education.

Fr. Michael had a special gift to encourage priestly vocations; at least seventy priests came from his parishes. According to Madukasi (2021), Tansi was a good preacher as people were touched by what he said and remembered by his teaching. He was critical of some pagan customs, superstitions and even when he could not completely eradicate them, he still managed to weaken their hold on his parishioners. Amidst the whirlwind of pastoral activities, he perceived the beauty of the contemplative life. Okon (1985) remarks that during a retreat day with the clergy, Archbishop Charles Heerey expressed the wish that a few of his priests embraced a monastic experience in order to bring the seed of contemplative life into the diocese. Father Tansi, without hesitating declared himself ready to put his bishop's proposal into action, along with the assistant priest at his parish, Fr. Clement Ulogu. In July 1949, contacts were made with the Cistercian Abbey of Mount Saint Bernard in Leicester, England, which agreed to welcome the two priests. Michael arrived at Mount Saint Bernard on July 3, 1950, accompanied by Archbishop Heerey.

Under the action of the Spirit, Iwene Tansi who had been an authentic pioneer and manager in the young missionary church of the diocese of Onitsha made himself a humble and docile monk in his new way of life. He embraced the austerity/silence of everyday as a trappist life where no one except the novice master Fr. Gregory Wareing, had any idea of the magnificent work he had done as a priest. According to Ozigboh (1985), one of the memories shared by those who knew him at Mount Saint Bernard is the image of him praying in the chapel of the Madonna, with his head bent to one side, as if he were listening to his Lord speaking to him. The original idea with which the two Nigerians had entered the community was to receive formation in monastic life with the aim of bringing it to Nigeria but the difficulty of making a foundation with only two people soon became clear. Eventually they freely asked to be admitted to profession at Mount Saint Bernard and to wait until the community was able to send a group. According to Wuerl (2017) in 1963, the monastic community decided to establish a foundation in Africa but in Cameroon rather than Nigeria. This disappointed Fr. Michael but he accepted it as God's will. When the group for the foundation in Cameroon was appointed, Fr. Michael was chosen as the novice master, because he seemed to be the right person to form the future African vocations. The first four founders left Mount Saint Bernard on October 28, 1963 in order to

prepare the buildings for the rest of the group's arrival, scheduled for the spring of the following year. But God's plan for Fr. Michael was different and it was made manifest in a very short time.

Major Achievements of Iwene Tansi in Promoting Christianity

Promotion of Women's Dignity and Building Family Relationship: Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi from the time of his ordination till he became a monk initiated various pastoral techniques of taking very good care and ministering to individuals and groups particularly women and minors within the ambit of the Church. Among the role he played in the development of women within the Church, was his unrelenting effort to secure solid Christian families stands. The first in line of his tactical objectives is that women must be educated so that they would know their right in the society. Actually, the women in the parish responded positively and before the society knew what was happening, they have become a formidable force to be reckoned with in their different families and their various communities at large. Iwene Tansi also set great store on couples beginning their new marital life on the bases of chaste wedlock (Arinze, 1973). He therefore established institutions where engaged ladies were housed before their wedding. There, they were not only safe from pre-marital sexual relationship with their fiancés, but also from other temptations. They learnt Christian families' upbringing and moral building. In ministering to such women as a group, Burns (2005) remarks that Fr. Tansi actually opened "a floodgate of creativity and injected it into the traditional rhythms they inherited from their forebears" (p. 307). This he did creating series of opportunities for the advancement of women which would be kept for posterity. There are three categories of women he attended to according to their age group namely: the young unmarried girls, the young ladies not yet married in the Church but living with their various husbands and the married women.

Despite all the efforts Iwene Tansi made to see that he helped in elevating the status of women however there are still certain problems he faced in training women in those early days. The Igbo society right from the onset practices patriarchy and in this regard, women traditionally had no local standing to equate themselves with their male counterpart. This concept of gender has been a serious discourse for some time. Nwokocha (2007) remarks that a typical Igbo man, in an Igbo society attaches much significance to the concept of gender inequality and this apparently is very noticeable in situations where a woman does not have a male child for the husband, she of course knows that her position is being threatened. However, Fr. Tansi knew actually what the position of these women was and decided to train them, although he encountered series of antagonism from the indigenous people in various Igbo communities in those days during the training process but later, he excelled.

Establishment of Women Religious Organizations in Roman Catholic Churches

Iwene Tansi contributed immensely to the development of women through the origination of women religious organization in the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria. Igwe (1977) records that "Iwene Tansi was the person who singlehandedly originated the Mary League for the young unmarried girls and equally the Saint Annes Society for married women which are still in existence in different parts of Nigeria till date" (p. 109). The two religious organizations up till date still form the part and parcel of the basic teachings of Catechist in Igboland. However, Fr. Iwene Tansi dedicated so much of his time and energy to the training of women because of the way his beloved mother died. This actually made him to dedicate himself to women development. According to Wareing (1998):

In 1922 Michael's mother died through a tragic circumstance. This was traceable to series of sudden deaths of several young spinsters in her community. She was pointed out by the medicine man as the one who was changing her way out of death. Religious custom held her bound to drink poison and die, and this she did (p. 3).

Nevertheless, Fr. Iwene Tansi proved them wrong by attributing his dedication to promote women as a result of their negligence in the society. Iwene Tansi also believed that women in Nigeria are talented and creative like their male folk. For this singular reason, women should have a part to play in the development of this great nation. That is why Trinitas (1998) echoes that "let it be quite clear to you all that the fate of Nigeria is their hands at least in great part. The ruin of this dear country is in theirs, the rising of this country, to a status worthy of honour is also theirs" (p. 15). He equally realized that some men turned down the idea of Christian marriage because of the philosophy of monogamy. Iwene Tansi as a parish priest had a vision and passion for the Church and he knew that for the Church to create a conducive ambience that would foster Church marriage, the women's status in the society must undergo some kind of revolution and social change.

Sponsoring of Christian Monasteries

Iwene Tansi's village which is Aguleri was described as the cradle of Igbo civilization. This is rooted in a myth that a man called Eri who was sent from God once lived there (Idigo, 1980). This town also entered the map of the early missionaries because it was a river port in the neighborhood of Onitsha as the Holy Ghost congregation actually started their incursion of eastern Nigeria in 1885 from Onitsha. These Holy Ghost Fathers as described by Ojigbo (1998) were men of courage whose unrelenting efforts and dedication to the cause of evangelism about the kingdom of God was to be equated with that of Pope John Paul II whose age and physical disability may have not been apparently constituted in an obstacle to carrying out his papal destiny of leading the Church into the next millennium. The Holy Ghost missionaries made efforts in building a Christian village at Aguleri. Madukasi (2021) further explains that, the Christian village gave room for the separation of Christians from non-Christians and set them in a location different from where Christian laws and tenets would constitute their rule of life. However, Michael Iwene Tansi was a product of the Aguleri Christian village and as a first-generation Christian, he was completely seized by his firm concept of separation from the world. He cherished and hungered to live in solitude where he could be with God alone and completely. According to Madukasi (2021), the ambition of Christian mysticism is the contemplative life of beaming fruit in the pre-emptive beatific vision where we see or confront the divine face to face. Iwene Tansi always sought succor in the biblical verse which is "what will it profit you if you gain the whole world and lost your own soul?" (Matt, 16: 26). This biblical verse for Fr. Tansi should not be disobeyed. Thus, after Fr. Tansi's ordination to the priesthood and some pastoral apostolate in the Onitsha Archdiocese, he was not discouraged by the fact that Eastern Nigeria was still a pagan territory that is in dire need of foreign missionaries (Ojigbo, 1998).

Iwene Tansi later wrote to the Pope of the Roman Catholic Church and he was given permission to pursue his vocation in the monastery. Madukasi (2021) reveals that, the present world's interest on this already forgotten monk bears serious testimony to the genuineness of his choice of vocation in a situation that would have been given an interpretation as flight from incumbent responsibility. In our contemporary world, people are highly fascinated by secular Christianity but during the time of Fr. Iwene Tansi, the understanding of holiness was to fly away from the world, go to the desolate area and live, thereby denying yourself of worldly pleasures. Iwene Tansi's quick response and reaction to the call of the divine was resolute and decisive as he entered the monastery to devote himself to pray with a positive, forceful, proactive and undivided attention. He also entered the monastery to practice what could be described as practical Christianity.

Advocating for Reconciliation and Peaceful Co-existence amongst Christians

Iwene Tansi was born at the time in Aguleri history when his community was ravaged for the misconduct and mistreatment launched out to the Royal Niger Company palm oil depot which was caused by an aged man from the town by name Onwuerume. According to Oborji (2018), when Iwene Tansi was come of age to be enrolled into school, he was sent by his parents to live in the house of a maternal aunt whose son was named Robert Orekie. His intention was that when Tansi eventually graduates from school, he would be equipped with the education to revenge what the White people had done to the father. However, things did not go as Iwene's father had wished, because while in school the young Iwene Tansi met his vocation to the Catholic Priesthood and this changed his life forever. Instead of toeing the path of revenge as his father had wished for him, God had another plan for him. Iwene Tansi became a Catholic Priest in the order of a new reconciliation, love and forgiveness as taught and lived by the Master, Jesus Christ. Little wonder then that from the moment he was ordained a priest at Onitsha in 1937, Fr. Tansi made reconciliation the focal point of his priestly ministry and life.

In fact, in contrast to the wishes of his father, Fr. Tansi as one of the pioneer indigenous priests in Eastern Nigeria became a collaborator of missionaries. In the seminary, Ojigbo (1998) studied under the supervision of the expatriate priests and he was entrusted with the most delicate function, the procurator which he discharged creditably to the admiration of his superiors and fellow students. In an active and contemplative life, Fr. Tansi spent himself entirely for God through the ministry of reconciliation in the church and society in all the places he had worked as a Parish Priest. He spent time in helping the people and reconciling them and also helped many people who were experiencing difficulties in living together whether as husband and wife or as neighbours to reconcile, first with God, with oneself, among themselves and with the created reality. As an assistant parish priest at Nnewi, Fr. Tansi lived in the company of both African and European priests and it was recorded that he had no problem with any of them nor did he manifest any sign of animosity against the expatriate missionaries. He mixed up very well with his fellow African priests as well as the expatriates with whom they shared the presbytery at Nnewi. Again, in the pastoral ministry, he spent himself entirely to helping the people in the area of penitential reconciliation. According to Appiah (2010), Fr. Tansi helped neighbouring towns that share the same parish in order to accept a common name and center for their parishes.

This he did at Dunukofia, Orumba and Aguata Parishes as the names and choice of these parish centers of these two large parishes were as result of Fr. Tansi's effort in order to promote good neighbourliness and peaceful co-existence among the people of different towns and villages that make up the Parishes.

More so, Fr. Tansi had a great sense of respect for Nigeria's diverse ethnic, cultural and religious identities. Having this cultural sensitivity, he never spoke ill of other people's culture, religion or ethnic identity. Iwene Tansi was recorded as a Cistercian monk in England and at the beginning of his sojourn there, he was the only African amidst the large community of European monk and he never had problem of living together with the Europeans at the monastery.

Conclusion

The man Michael Cyprian Iwene Tansi made immense contribution to the growth of Catholicism in Onitsha and its environs. Iwene Tansi's contribution elevated him to be considered as a 'blessed' which is a major step towards sainthood as we celebrate him today. The Catholic missionaries helped to make facilitated efforts in the tremendous transformation of Igboland within a few decades of the advent of Roman Catholicism in Onitsha, this could not only have been achieved except through their influence. Iwene Tansi directly learnt from the white missionaries who were highly influenced by their formal training at Igbariam and the long years of close interaction with the pioneer white missionaries. This research undertook the task of giving Iwene Tansi a place in Roman Catholic history of Anambra state. Iwene Tansi made multi-faceted influence on education, religion, evangelization, society, economy and politics. The departed saints attained such status because of the divine essence in them. In other words, it is not the physical body that is being deified rather, it is the divine essence that is being recognized and translated into the spiritual realm to which it really belongs. All that Fr. Tansi achieved was made possible through the enablement of the divine essence of God in him.

Recommendations

The following recommendations are made seeing the depth of this research.

- i. Iwene Tansi helped the people to know what they believe, how to worship and to know how to live as followers of Christ. Therefore it is recommended that Church workers should not be ignored in their local assembly, rather they should treat with honour, respect and dignity as they are very important.
- ii. The wealthy members of the society should contribute meaningfully for the welfare of their fellow human beings who are suffering. The youths should be encouraged to be self-reliant. The government policies should be made to allow for ease of development of talents to ensure fulfilled live of the citizens.
- iii. Priests and Church leaders should incorporate pastoral care which is almost near extinction in our contemporary society. This should be revived and sustained as it is a veritable tool of evangelism forward.
- iv. Church workers should shun distraction and live a consecrated life because it is a calling for a servant of Christ.

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