

OKPALEKE: A Review of the Book “The Institution of the Seminary and the Training of Catholic Priests in South-Eastern Nigeria (1885-1970): A Historical Evaluation” authored by Angelo Chidi Unegbu

BOOK REVIEW

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| Title: | The Institution of the Seminary and the Training of Catholic Priests in South-Eastern Nigeria (1885-1970): A Historical Evaluation |
| Author: | Angelo Chidi Unegbu |
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Prominent scholars like J.F. Ade Ajayi, Edmund Ilogu, Elizabeth Isichei, F.K. Ekechi, Kalu Ogbu and others have examined the shapes and contours of Christianity in Nigeria and Africa. Of these, only a few paid sufficient attention to church history in Igboland, and there is no updated, extensive study on the Catholic Church in this part of the world. Attempts in the 1980s by Rose Njoku, Frederick Nnabuife, Vincent Nwosu, Ikenga Ozigboh and Celestine Obi that focus on the Catholic Church in Igboland, have continued to serve as the primary sources, despite their limitations. In fact, the edited work by Obi, *A Hundred Years of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nigeria 1885-1985*, has not been updated till date. Admittedly, the book contains various interesting historical areas that are yet to be further explored despite being deficient in so many ways.

From the deluge of topics that require historical investigation, Unegbu’s book, although published 4 years ago, critically pries into the early beginnings of the training of indigenous Catholic clergy in Igboland. In

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this elaborate historical work of 14 chapters, Unegbu brings on board the genius of a seasoned church historian as he uncovers not only the historical questions, political intrigues but also the power negotiations at play. Historical presumptions are critically examined and deconstructed with resources from archives in Rome, France, Ireland and Nigeria. This research's unique contribution is better summed up in questions that challenge the predominant narratives in this field: Was bishop Shanahan really the champion of education in Igboland as popularly conceived? Was the project of the training of indigenous clergy delayed due to some political reasons? What is the history of annual reunion of seminarians with their bishop? Who is really the first priest to be ordained in Igboland and when did this happen? These and many more make this work an interesting read. In fact, the research point to two key issues: a) that some historical presumptions on the background of Igbo Catholicism are simply historically inaccurate and need to be re-examined, and b) that there is need to re-define the identity of the church in Igboland in the light of both the contemporary challenges as well as the historical discoveries. Obviously, some of what could be claimed as the 'traditions' of the Catholic Church in Igboland, and by extension Nigeria, are merely pre-Vatican II practices, which emerged the provisional ingenuity of the missionaries.

Meanwhile, this work deviates from the usual aridity of most historical works by going beyond facts to advocate transformative practices (in 23 recommendations) that flow therefrom. It maintains the key objective of arguing for the improvement and transformation of the current formation of the Catholic clergy in Nigeria. Some of the recommendations focus on a better relationship between bishops and seminarians, the challenge of formators, and the discernment of vocation. The historical contexts within which these recommendations are framed challenge us as a local Church to think critically about the future. Meanwhile, Unegbu's suggestions on topics like sex education, self-formation and vocation boom may appear unsettling to some people. It demonstrates a rare courage of being prophetic on the grounds of verifiable history. Yes, God speaks to us through the events and actions of history, and so there is need to pay attention to what a look into the past may be saying to the present and future. The truth is that

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the Catholic Church in Igboland (and in Africa in general) is in crisis. To move forward, a critical examination of our history remains indispensable and this is what this work represents. It behooves on Church authorities and laity, particularly the theologians, to map out the strategy for training of priests in Igboland, and in Nigeria by extension. Indeed, I unreservedly recommend this book for all and sundry, especially for historians, theologians, church authorities and scholars in diverse fields, while at the same time anticipating more research output on the history of the Church in Nigeria from Unegbu.