

Revisiting the Early Roots of the Catholic Church in Nigeria

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Abstract

The Church in Nigeria is now sufficiently mature to reflect deeply on its roots and to cherish and own them in a manner which was not previously possible. Part of this process requires the involvement of Nigerian scholars, whose research and writings will bring deeper insight to bear on those early, critical, formative years when the character of the Nigerian Church was forged. A previous generation of Nigerians, between 1950-1970, many of them associated with the University of Ibadan, undertook this task for their generation. Now, almost fifty years later, the time has come for a new generation of scholars to address the early history of the Nigerian Church. This paper gives a brief survey of what is generally known about the period in the hope that it may inspire readers with a desire to inquire more deeply, conduct research and eventually put pen to paper.

Introduction

Recently I was giving a series of lectures on the History of the Church in Africa to Nigerian seminarians. Preliminary discussions about the course led me to a sense that these eager and intelligent young men had rather vague notions about the early history of the Catholic Church in their own country. For example, few had heard of that first founding figure of the Catholic Mission, Francesco Borghero, or of the first Nigerian priest to be ordained, Paul Emecete. For these young men, the Church was something much more recent, a creation of modern times, perhaps of the past 50 years. This was entirely understandable, since the Nigerian Church is a young Church, where the focus has been firmly on the present and the future, whose problems and glories are those of growth and expansion, a Church where a phenomenal development has

taken place in the course of the past 50 years.

At the same time the Church is now firmly established and is reaching a point where the first fervour of success and growth needs to be tempered by more reflection on the past, on the endeavours and sacrifices of those who went before, who laid the groundwork for the astonishing developments of recent decades. My conviction that such a time has come was reinforced by a day spent at a golden-jubilee of priesthood celebration of an Irish missionary who had spent his priestly life in Nigeria. What struck me most at the celebration, held in Northern Nigeria, was the sight on the altar, among the 50 or 60 priest-celebrants, of a cadre of about 15 older men, venerable, faithful, grey-haired, veterans of the Church, and all of them Nigerian: striking symbols of the reality that the Nigerian Church is both here to stay, secure in its roots, and has a history deserving of study.

Sometime later on a visit to the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS) in London - which houses perhaps the most extensive library of books on Africa - I decided to see what exactly had already been written on the subject, what published sources might be available to the student who wished to learn about the roots of Catholicism in Nigeria. Interestingly the best study of the early period which I have seen was not in that library, for the simple reason that it had never been properly published. This is the two-volume work *Mission To West Africa*, written by Patrick Gantly, and printed (rather than published) by the Society of African Missions (SMA) in 1991 and 1992. This comprehensive description of the early years of the Church in Nigeria was based on primary source material located principally in the SMA archives in Rome and in the Archives of Propaganda Fide.

In terms of what was available in the SOAS library it was striking that there has been very little scholarship in recent years not only on the history of the Catholic Church or other Churches, but on the history of African institutions in general. Biographical and narrative history, like institutional and political history, and to a lesser extent economic history, have clearly gone out of favour and have had to yield to anthropological writing about Africa. Well-researched and well-composed studies within the general compass of anthropology now abound in both book form, monographs and in scholarly journals. Of course each particular branch of scholarship has its value and no single

approach has a monopoly of wisdom. Writing about the development of the Catholic Church in Nigeria, the history of a faith institution, is as valid a scholarly exercise as exploring the characteristics of ethnic groups, in adding to the sum of human wisdom about the African continent. Because of the wide variety of new primary sources now available, in the archives of the missionary agencies and in the recently-formed diocesan and archdiocesan archives, there is ample scope for fresh writing on the early history of the Church in Nigeria.

Early encounter of Christianity with Nigeria

The starting point for any survey of Christianity's encounter with Nigeria in the modern era, must be those efforts by British commercial, political, humanitarian and religious interests to open up the Niger river to trade, 'civilization' and Christianity in the 1840's . There were, of course, some earlier signs of interest, in the decades before the pivotal Niger River expeditions, occurring within the wider West African region. Protestant missionary societies were first in the field, spurred on by the exciting reports of 'explorers' and by a desire to bring 'humanitarian' and 'Christian' standards to these 'newly-discovered' people, including freedom from slavery. Leading the field were the Baptist Missionary Society (William Carey) founded in 1792, the London Missionary Society (1795), the Church Missionary Society (1799) and the Methodist Missionary Society (1813). Freetown, where returning slaves were landed by British naval patrols, was the main hub for these activities.

It was in 1841 that the first of the 'Niger Expeditions' was mounted. The failure of this expedition, during which most of its European participants died, led to the conviction among missionary agencies in Freetown that the task of Christianising and 'civilising' West Africa must be undertaken by Africans themselves. This prompted, among other things, the ordination of the Yoruba missionary Samuel Adaji Crowther in 1843. With increasing numbers of returned slaves, many of them already Christianised, taking up residence in Badagry, Lagos and Abeokuta, mission stations began to be established, the first being at Badagry in 1842 by the Wesleyan Methodist Missionary Society (founded by Thomas Birch Freeman born of an African father). C.M.S. missionaries were to come there in 1845 and to Abeokuta in 1846. Baptist

missionaries came to Calabar in 1844 (Alfred Saker); other Baptist foundations were made by Thomas Bowen who went to Old Ijaye in 1852 and Ogbomoso in 1855 (Marioghae and Ferguson, 1965, 32-34). Hope Waddell of the Church of Scotland came to Calabar in 1846. The intrepid Crowther pushed up the Niger from Onitsha, becoming a Bishop in 1864 with responsibility for 'the whole of West Africa except Bathurst, Freetown, Cape Coast and Lagos' (Marioghae and Ferguson, 1965, 35), fulfilling the CMS dream of 1841 by establishing a mission at Lokoja in 1866.

Beginnings of Catholic mission to Nigeria

The Catholic mission to Nigeria came later in the 19th century. It was the product of a great missionary revival taking place in mainland Europe and centred in France. The Church in France had emerged from the ravages of the French Revolution purified, lean and single-minded. This was a Church which had come through fire, whose members were self-confident, idealistic and driven by a spirituality which placed a premium on endurance and sacrifice. The notion of missions to those who had never heard the gospel preached, the so-called 'pagan lands', took hold and from the second decade of the 19th century led to the creation of several new religious congregations of men and women specifically dedicated to missions. Among those male missionaries which were to play a major role in bringing the Church to Nigeria in the 19th century were the Congregation of the Holy Ghost (1848), the Society of African Missions (1856), and the Missionaries of Africa ('White Fathers') (1868). Among the most influential congregations of female missionaries were the Sisters of Our Lady of Cluny (1806), Sisters of Our Lady of Apostles (1876), and the Sisters of Our Lady of Africa (1876) (See, Hogan, 1992, 193ff).

This missionary movement, which extended beyond Africa to Asia, Oceania, and the Americas, benefited greatly from the existence of the Congregation of the Propagation of the Faith (*Propaganda Fide*). This Congregation had been formed in 1622 to wrest control of missions back from the great European Catholic Monarchies – given to them under the *Padroado* arrangement. The *Padroado* ('*patronato real*' in Spanish, 'padroado real' in Portuguese) was an arrangement between the Papacy and the monarchs of Spain and Portugal, sealed by treaties, whereby the

administration of the new missionary Churches was delegated to the monarchs of these countries.

Propaganda Fide's primary purpose was to direct the conduct of missions in a more appropriate and competent manner. The strong support of the 19th century papacy was also a factor in promoting the missionary movement. Pope Gregory XVI (1831-1846) had formerly been Prefect of Propaganda Fide and had played a critical role in restricting the influence of the *Padroado*. He had restructured the Church's missions, creating more than 70 new jurisdictions and appointing some 195 missionary bishops. Pope Pius IX (1846-1878) was glad to be able to turn his attention from 'the intractable problems of his papacy in Europe' and encourage the growth of missions. Pope Leo XII (1878-1903) saw missionaries as crucial to victory in the fight against slavery. At a time when ecumenism was unknown the missionary movement was also spurred on by the success of Protestant missions. 'The fear that Africa and the Far East might be lost to Protestantism was a constant theme in Catholic literature urging the necessity of missions' (Hogan, 1992, 59).

The very earliest arrival of Catholic missionaries in West Africa dates from 1819 when the Sisters of Our Lady of Cluny landed at Gorée, an island off Senegal, establishing themselves in Senegal in 1832 (Hogan, 1981, 12). The arrival of American freed slaves to colonize what is now Liberia prompted John England, Bishop of Charleston, North Carolina, to send chaplains, leading to a mission in 1842 headed by Mgr. Edward Barron (vicar general of the diocese of Philadelphia) who was appointed Prefect Apostolic of Upper Guinea (a territory consisting of Liberia and Sierra Leone). It was Barron who in 1843 attracted a party of missionaries from Francois Libermann's recently-formed missionary institution, the 'Congregation of the Immaculate Heart of Mary' to come to Liberia. In the event the mission proved a failure, but some Holy Ghost missionaries remained on and established themselves in other parts of West Africa. The amalgamation of Libermann's institute with the older 'Congregation of the Holy Ghost' in 1848 (the new institute was named the 'Congregation of the Holy Ghost and the Immaculate Heart of Mary') was followed by further efforts to establish missions in West Africa.

In the meantime another young missionary Society, and the one directly responsible for the earliest Catholic Church missions in Nigeria, was

directing its attention to West Africa. This was the Society of African Missions (SMA), founded by Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac, in Lyons France, in 1856. De Brésillac had been a member of the 'Missions Etrangères de Paris' ('Paris Foreign Missionary Society') and had worked in India for some twelve years before resigning his post as Vicar Apostolic because of issues relating to the adaptation of Christianity to local customs (the Malabar Rites controversy) and differences of opinion with other missionaries about the establishment of an indigenous clergy and hierarchy. Founding the SMA he died leading its first missionary expedition to Sierra Leone, in 1859. His successor as Superior General, Augustin Planque, under the guidance of the forceful Prefect of Propaganda Fide, Cardinal Barnabo, ensured the SMA's survival. A new mission was assigned to the Society, the Prefecture Apostolic of Dahomey.

With the failure of De Brésillac's expedition the entire coast of West Africa reverted to the charge of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. Now, however, Propaganda Fide had detached from the Holy Ghost region this new Vicariate of Dahomey, a vast jurisdiction stretching from the mouth of the Volta river to the Niger delta. With regard to leadership of the new jurisdiction Propaganda decreed that such a territory, in which there was as yet no Catholic mission or foundation, did not merit a Bishop. Instead it appointed what was known as a '*Superior ad interim*', pending progress in the region when a Vicar Apostolic with Episcopal rank might be appointed. In the meantime, the '*superior ad interim*' would act under the direction of the SMA Superior General. The man chosen to establish the mission as superior ad interim was an Italian member of the SMA, Francesco Borghero (Gantly, 1991, 40-43).

Francesco Borghero SMA: Towards a permanent Catholic presence in Nigeria

Francesco (Francis Xavier) Borghero was born in 1830 at Ronco Scrivia in the diocese of Genoa and ordained a priest in 1854. In 1857 he met Mgr de Brésillac and two years later joined the SMA. On December 2nd 1860 he was nominated '*superior ad interim*' of the Vicariate Apostolic of Dahomey. On January 5, 1861, the 30-year old Borghero, accompanied by two priests, set sail for West Africa on a French war-ship. Reaching Gorée, the destination of the ship, they were well received by the Holy Ghost Fathers who had been based there and in Dakar (on the mainland

opposite Gorée) for almost two decades. Then, after waiting two months for another ship they made their way to their final destination, Ouidah (Whydah), the seaport of the kingdom of Dahomey, disembarking on April 18, 1861 and taking up residence in the old Portuguese fort in that town. However prospects for evangelisation in the kingdom of Dahomey were soon dealt a blow when the King of that country refused entry to the interior. This compelled Borghero to consider locating his mission headquarters elsewhere along the West Coast within the bounds of his jurisdiction, in territories more favourable to the gospel (Gantly, 1991, 57-63).

In March 1862 Borghero commenced a tour of his jurisdiction with this end in mind. The only ship available at the time bore him first to Lagos where he lodged with an Italian trader, Carena, saying Mass for a group of Christians (mainly returned slaves from Brazil and their families) and sailing on next day to Accra and later Cape Palmas. Here he met the President of Liberia who assured him that he would be most welcome in that country. On 19 April he arrived in Freetown where he performed the Holy Week Ceremonies and visited friends and acquaintances. On May 13th he commenced his return journey to Dahomey, stopping off first in Cape Palmas, then in Accra and finally, on 21st May, in Lagos. He was already inclining to the view that Lagos was the most suitable place for the Vicariate headquarters. 'This town', he wrote, 'is the most important on the Coast... the natural headquarters of the Vicariate'. Thus Borghero concluded his first investigative journey. There were to be others before he finally settled on Lagos for the Vicariate's headquarters. In the interim a second mission station was founded at Porto Novo (1864) - west of Badagry - which had just come under a French Protectorate.

Borghero's third visit to Lagos took place in September 1863, when he was besieged by delegations of Christians asking him to open a station. These were mainly returned slaves and their families and descendants who were uneasy with the necessity of sending their children to Protestant schools. During his stay he baptised some 13 adults and ministered to a congregation of some 200 people on Sunday September 27th, baptising on that day a further 45 adults. Borghero returned to Lagos in April 1864 where on 11th of the month he was given a plot of land for the mission by the Governor. His companion, Fr. Hector Noche (he was to die later that year in Porto Novo), remained on after Borghero's departure, and presided over the blessing of the mission land

in a ceremony attended by some 500 people, including a number of Protestants (Gantly, 1991, pp 159-160).

Differences with his Superior General, Propaganda Fide and the Archbishop of Lyon (then deeply involved in SMA affairs) – relating to the exercise of authority on the mission – occupied much of Borghero's energies in subsequent years and delayed the founding of a residential station in Lagos. However contacts were maintained through the visits of several SMA missionaries, including Philibert Courdioux and Pierre Bouche. It was Bouche who, after a visit in June 1866, told of an encounter with 'Padre' Antonio, a freed slave from Brazil (he was told) who 'said Mass' followed by 'carousing and dancing' (Gantly, 1991, 160). Antonio, he discovered when eventually he met him, had been a catechist in Brazil and had conducted services in the absence of the priest. He continued to perform these functions when he came to Lagos, also conducting baptisms and funerals. By the time a residential mission was finally established in Lagos, Borghero was no longer in charge of the mission and was shortly to leave the Society. Fr Courdioux, who succeeded him as 'superior *ad interim*', was determined to proceed, writing to the Superior General in July 1867 that he had been receiving continual messages from the Christians there pleading for a foundation. Eventually on 21 October 1868 Pierre Bouche and a Spaniard, Brother Elias, arrived in Lagos, and commenced the construction of a bamboo house on the plot blessed by Fr Noché four years previously. The Catholic Church had at last taken up a permanent presence in Nigeria.

And the Church in Nigeria expands

In 1876 the Vicariate (re-named the Vicariate of the Benin Coast in 1870) had an additional station, Topo Island, near Lagos. Its other three residential stations were Lagos, Porto-Novo and Agoué (west of Whydah, which station had been abandoned by the missionaries in 1872). In 1882 a portion of the Vicariate was detached and erected as the 'Prefecture of Dahomey'. Within the Benin Vicariate, now under Jean-Baptist Chausse, the mission station of St Peter was established at Abeokuta in 1880. In August of the following year Lagos had its first large permanent church which in time was to develop into Holy Cross Cathedral.

The energetic Fr. Chausse, who in 1891 was to become substantive Vicar

Apostolic and Bishop of the jurisdiction, was anxious to move further inland from the coast. "Rumours had reached him that there were large cities and towns in the interior, inhabited by people who would welcome missionaries" (Gantly, 1991, 364). In 1882, accompanied by Theodore Holley, he commenced a number of journeys to discover the reality. The first lasted four months during which they reached Bonny in the Niger delta and then Brass from which they commenced an ascent of the Niger by steamer, reaching Onitsha and then Lokoja. During the course of this epic voyage, which is described in an article in *Les Missions Catholique*, they then travelled on to Bida and finally to Ilorin. Everywhere they estimated the suitability of the districts through which they passed for mission stations. Other voyages took Chausse throughout Yorubaland, to Ibadan, Ogbomosho, Oye, Isehin and Ado Ekiti. These explorations were followed in time by the establishment of residential stations in Oyo (1884), Ibadan (1895), Badagry (1885), Ibonwon (1903), Oshogbo (1915), and Ado-Ekiti (1917). There was an inevitability too that pressure would grow for the creation of a separate jurisdiction to cater for the vast territories along the northern reaches of the Niger and Benue. Eventually on 2nd May 1884 Propaganda Fide erected this area as an independent jurisdiction under the title 'Prefecture of the Upper Niger' with its capital at Lokoja. Fr Jules Poirier, who founded the Lokoja mission on November 9, 1884, presided over the new jurisdiction until 1893. He was followed there by Fr. Carlo Zappa, like Borghero, an Italian member of the SMA. On the advice of a leading official of the Royal Niger Company, the Catholic Sir James Marshall, and following the removal of the Royal Niger Company's administrative headquarters from Lokoja to Asaba, the mission headquarters were moved to Asaba in 1888. Finally the Prefecture of the Upper Nigeria, renamed the Prefecture of Western Nigeria in 1911, became a Vicariate in 1918 under Bishop Thomas Broderick.

Territory along the left bank of the Niger was to be the principle pioneering ground in Nigeria for the Congregation of the Holy Ghost. Fr. Joseph Lutz of that congregation founded a mission at Onitsha in 1885, which he intended as 'a centre for the evangelisation of Igboland' (Marioghae and Ferguson, 1965, 36). The initial difficulties encountered in this mission are described graphically by Fr. V.A. Nwosu (Makozi and Afolabi Ojo ed., 1981). The success of this mission exceeded Lutz' wildest expectations and by July 1889 the mission had developed sufficiently to be erected into the Prefecture of the Lower Niger. This jurisdiction

continued to thrive, not least because of the success of the schools apostolate, energetically pursued by Bishop Joseph Shanahan (1905-1932). Shanahan had come to the region in 1902, succeeding Mgr. Leon Lejeune as Bishop in 1905. Bishop Charles Heerey continued and further developed the schools apostolate inaugurated by Shanahan leading to sustained progress of the Church in the region. In 1920 the Prefecture became the 'Vicariate of Southern Nigeria', renamed in 1934 the 'Vicariate of Onitsha-Owerri'. In 1934 the Prefecture of Calabar was erected by a detachment of territory from the Vicariate of Western Nigeria. The dioceses of Ogoja, Ikot Ekpene, Uyo and Abakaliki were later to develop from the Calabar jurisdiction. 1948 saw the erection of the Vicariate of Owerri as an independent entity, from which the dioceses of Umuahia, Port Harcourt, Orlu, Okigwe, Ahiara, Aba and the mission *sui juris* of Bomadi later developed. The erection of the Vicariate of Onitsha in the same year paved the way for the dioceses of Enugu, Nnwei, Awka, Nsukka and Awgu. Comprehensive up-to-date details of the development of each Nigerian jurisdiction is readily available on the website <http://www.catholic-hierarchy.org/> so there is no necessity here to devote further space to this topic.

Paul Emecete was Nigeria's first Catholic priest, ordained on 6th January 1920 at Asaba by Bishop Thomas Broderick. Paul came from the town of Ezi, which had been a centre of resistance to British rule during the Ekumeku disturbances of 1898. Paul had been for many years a school master and catechist. He received his training in philosophy and theology from different priests with whom he lived, coming to priesthood essentially through a system of apprenticeship. Paul gave faithful service as a priest in the Vicariate of Western Nigeria, later the Vicariate of Asaba-Benin, dying on 3rd May 1948. A personal account of his own life is given by Emecete in John Todd's *African Mission* (Todd, 1962, 129; see also Hogan, 2011).

Catholic presence in Northern Nigeria

The origins of the Catholic Church in Northern Nigeria go back to 1904 when Bishop Paul Pellet (formerly Vicar Apostolic of the Benin Coast jurisdiction) and then Vicar General of the SMA, conducted a comprehensive visitation of the Society's West African missions. The following description is taken from a book recently published by the

present author.

After visiting the Ivory Coast, the Gold Coast (now Ghana) and Dahomey, he (Bishop Pellet) crossed the border into Nigeria. His final port of call there was the Prefecture of the Upper Niger where he spent a period of six weeks conversing with Fr. Zappa and examining the options. On his return to Europe he levied the Society's seminaries and apostolic schools, hoping to raise sufficient money to establish a single mission station north of the confluence of the Niger and the Benue rivers. Once that station was established he planned on petitioning Propaganda Fide for a simple division of the Upper Niger jurisdiction into two Prefectures.

The man chosen to establish the new station was Oswald Waller, a 40 year-old Alsatian, described by a colleague as 'having the stature of a giant, and the constitution of an ox'. Waller was accompanied by a 25-year old Breton, Ernest Belin, by Joseph Mouren, a 24-year old Dutch confrere who had been ordained in Cork, Ireland, and by a young Igbo cook who had a knowledge of Hausa. They set out from Asaba on 26th December 1906 and, after 120 days travelling by water and on foot overland, arrived in the town of Shendam, some 350 miles from Lokoja. Access to the headquarters of the 'pagan' Goemai people at Shendam was facilitated by Captain William Ruxton, the Resident Officer of Muri Province who, unlike most of his fellow-Residents in the North, was well-disposed towards Christian missionaries, both Protestant and Roman Catholic. Ruxton's attitude towards the latter may have been influenced by his French wife, Genevieve, who was a committed Catholic and whose brother, a Holy Ghost missionary, had been killed in Martinique during the volcanic eruption of Mount Pele. He himself was High Church Anglican.

After learning of the establishment of the mission at Shendam, Pellet wasted little time in petitioning Propaganda for the division of the twenty-two year old Prefecture of the Upper Niger, dispatching with his letter reports from Zappa and Waller. Rome took its time before granting his request, saying that the erection of the new Prefecture would have to wait until the mission in the North was more solidly established. And it was true that the Shendam mission was no more than a foothold. It was also a foothold that took some years to consolidate. Little progress was made among the Goemai

people, whose traditional religion was robust and who were not easily impressed by Christianity.

There were virtually no baptisms of Goemai, but a number of freed slaves sent by the government administration to the stations were baptised. The first baptisms of local people took place under strange circumstances in 1910. Two men, convicted of murder, were recipients of the sacrament moments before their execution. It was a poor precedent and few locals followed them into the Church. It can be said, therefore, that during the first five years of its existence, the mission to the North made negligible progress in terms of evangelisation. Nonetheless roots had been set down, solid houses and churches had been built in Shendam and Demshin, there was adequate personnel and it was clear that the mission would survive. This was the analysis of Propaganda Fide when, finally, on 24th August 1911, it conceded the division of territory which the Society had been seeking since 1904. On that date the territory north-east of Lokoja was detached from the Asaba jurisdiction and named – peculiarly, because it bore little relation to its geographical location – the Prefecture of Eastern Nigeria, with Oswald Waller as Prefect. The Prefecture of Eastern Nigeria was to be renamed the Prefecture of Northern Nigeria in 1929. In 1934 this jurisdiction had grown to such extent as to warrant its division into the separate Prefectures of Kaduna and Jos. These were to become dioceses in 1953 and from them developed all the subsequent jurisdictions found in Northern Nigeria (Hogan, 2011, 6-8).

Conclusion

The foregoing brief sketch is intended as a very basic introduction to the early history of the Church in Nigeria. For those interested in pursuing the topic in more detail I am attaching a short bibliography. The keen researcher, however, will discover many more books, articles and monographs on the topic. I would also draw attention to the rich resource of primary material now available in the archives of the missionary societies and congregations which engaged with Nigeria and in the more recently-created archives of the various Nigerian dioceses. Of particular relevance, too, are the Public Records Office, in London, which house the colonial records, and the archives of Propaganda Fide in Rome.

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