

# Forms of Assigning Pastoral Care: Its Application in the Nigerian Context in the Light of the Instruction of the Congregation of the Clergy, “The Pastoral Conversion”

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## Abstract

On the 20th of July, 2020, the Congregation for the Clergy of the Roman Curia issued the Instruction “Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelizing Mission of the Church”. The aim of the document is to assist the parish structure to “read the signs of times while adapting both to the needs of the faithful and to historical changes”. On its release, the document has been greeted with various opinions. The aim of this article is to interpret the prescripts of the instruction in the light of the changing face of the African Parish, and the Nigerian Parish in particular. The author, using the analytical and comparative methods, has provided a Nigerian reception of the document with the conclusion that what the document has suggested, the collaboration between all cadre of ministry as available in the parish, is already fruitfully actualized in the Nigerian Church.

**Keywords:** *Church, Conversion, Parish, Society, Evangelization*

## Introduction

The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria alluded to the rapid and widespread transformation and secularization in the world today as major reasons why the training of priests in contemporary Nigeria should be taken more seriously (2004, 39). The modern priest must be thoroughly prepared for his mission in a complicated world of today. The Instruction, “The Pastoral Conversion of the Parish Community in the Service of the Evangelization of the Church”, brought with it a lot of criticisms especially by those I may call the progressives in the Church. This is because while many Dioceses and Parishes in Europe and America were busy modeling and remodeling their Dioceses and Parishes to accommodate the problem of scarcity of priests in their local communities, this Instruction by the Congregation came with a strong emphasis on the prominent role of the clergy in the liturgy and the non-delegable governing role of the clergy in the Church (Lahm, 2020). This is even more striking when we look at the aspect of pastoral conversion being sought for by this document.

### **The Church in Nigeria, A Young Church**

When compared with the Church in Europe and America, the Church in Nigeria is indeed very young. As a missionary Church she has a great number of young priests and many candidates to the Priesthood which gives the false impression that she has a vocation boom. Nevertheless, experience shows that the ratio of Catholics to one priest in Nigeria still outnumbers what obtains in Europe and America. Some fifty years ago, there were just a few parishes in the few ecclesiastical jurisdictions in Nigeria. For instance, the number of parishes in Enugu Diocese in 1962 when it was created was 17, with 19 priests serving the whole Diocese. At that time, the old jurisdiction had an area mass of 7.161 km<sup>2</sup>. This was before the Dioceses of Nsukka and Awgu were carved out of Enugu. Even with the creation of the two Dioceses out of Enugu, the number of Catholics in Enugu Diocese in 2018 has risen to three million, with just 442 priests to serve this number. This makes the ration of about 6,787 Catholics per priest in Enugu Diocese. In any case, the said ratio has not affected the leadership role of the Parish priest who, given the diocesan structures of collaboration, is still able to function where he has been designated by law and by the nature of the rite to.

This does not in any way mean that the present Parish structure in Nigeria is immune from the changes taking place in the global society, which is the subject the instruction tries to address. Such changes are often accompanied by myriads of problems like loneliness and boredom, gender and sexuality complexities with their attendant issues like homosexuality, gender identity crises, divorce, pornography and absence of religious freedom in some countries of the world (McCracken, 2020). Hence, the relevance of this document to the Nigerian situation.

### **The Parish Community: of What Purpose?**

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, in teaching about the Church, rightly observe that God continues to accept anyone who fears Him and does what is right not minding the time and race of the person (LG, 9). The Council Fathers went on to observe that the people God has gained for Himself (1 Pet2:9) were not left on their own; rather, He entrusts them to the care of Shepherds to ensure that they are properly taken care of and for them to increase in number (LG, 18).

The Shepherds to whom God entrusted the care of his flock are “commissioned to perpetuate the work of Christ, the eternal Pastor” (Christus Dominus, 2). They are to teach all peoples in all places and at all times, to sanctify humanity in truth and to give them spiritual nourishment. The commission God entrusts to the Shepherds further constrains them to “devote themselves to their apostolic

office as witnesses of Christ to all men" (Christus Dominus, 11). This is the task Diocesan Bishops are entrusted with and the individual diocesan Bishop in Nigeria together with their priests, the deacons and in collaboration with the Christ's faithful in their respective dioceses strive to achieve. To ensure that all the members of Christ's faithful benefit from this grace of being accompanied by God through the ministry of the Diocesan Bishop, there is need for a Parish where a more person-to-person encounter takes place across the diocese in smaller groups. This is an ecclesial community where most people experience their first call as priests, religious or members of the lay faithful (CSN 2006, 22).

### **"Pastoral Conversion" and New Evangelization in the Changes in Modern Times**

The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, has tried to address the problems arising from the modernization of society. Among other things it dealt with the dimension of the relationship between the Church and society; focusing on vital issues like the Church and family society; the Church and economic society; the Church and civil society and the Church and international society (Greg, 31). In many parts of the world, especially in Africa, life has become distasteful to the common man because of failed governments at all levels. On another front, the society has slipped into secularism and neo-paganism, such that the basic traditional value systems that had made Christian living practicable are gradually being eroded. Consequently, there has been an ugly development in that a great number of people have grown lapsed and lost the "capacity to listen and understand the words of the Gospel as a living and life-giving message" (Transmission of Christian Faith, 6).

This has translated into a general decline in the hunger for the sacraments and the word of God. Some have gone as far as seeing the parish pastoral approaches and the demand of her apostolate on all the baptized as infringements or intrusion into their private spaces. The more hostile groups have taken it to a higher level by using the tools of the entertainment industry to portray the essential aspects of the pastoral life of the Church as unwarranted restraints and tacit ways of alienating their individual fundamental rights to self-actualization and expression. Add to this, the challenges from social changes like globalization, syncretism, modernization, urbanization, industrialization, communication revolution (Kumar, 10-13) and the most recent Covid-19 pandemic and one has many factors that could destabilize the family as a basic component of the parish, and when this is affected, the parish is definitely affected; hence, the relevance of the document.

### **Parish Structure in Nigeria as a Living Example of *Communio***

The Parish as an ecclesial reality in Nigeria embraces both the psycho-social yearnings of humanity as a being seeking community. Its importance does not end with the close-knitted interpersonal communion it engenders; it translates into providing the inner spiritual longings and wellbeing of the human person. According to the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, the parish is a creation of necessity. It comes to supply to the faithful the much-needed spiritual life and liturgical nourishments. This life, as it were, is the life in Christ. It derives in some way and depends in some way on the bishop, who incidentally cannot always be everywhere. Hence, it is to bring the bishop closer to the people—where they live—that the parish was created. This grouping of the Christ's faithful is the most important of the groupings of the people of God (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 4).

Accordingly, the importance of the Parish cannot be over emphasized. It guarantees the presence of Christ among his people in their various locations and in the midst of their homes. Christ speaks to his people in the small communities of the parish families. The members of Christ's faithful people are born into the Church within the parish community and are nurtured to full maturity in faith within the parish. It is within this lived communion that the young ones begin the journey of discerning their vocation. They become aware of their being part of the Body of Christ and experience how to be a Church in the parish (Chiegboka, 144). The General Directory for Catechesis sees the parish as “the most important *locus* in which the Christian community is formed and expressed. This is called to be a fraternal and welcoming family where Christians become aware of being the people of God” (Directory for Catechesis, 257).

A standard parish in Nigeria has three other subdivisions that allow for closer interpersonal interaction among the faithful and their parish priest. These divisions are designated for convenience as: station, centre, and zone. These divisions are not equivalent to various types of groupings enumerated in Canon 518; rather they have been created for grass-root evangelization, closer pastoral contact and Christian communion. They fall under the Basic Christian Communities.

#### *The Station Church*

The station is a community of faithful who belong to a parish but, because the community of the faithful is not able to be erected as a Parish or quasi Parish, their pastoral care is provided for by the Parish to which they belong, basically through the instrumentality of the Parish Priest and his collaborators (Pastoral Conversion, 115). The goal of the station is to promote evangelization and

charity. These parish sub-structures grow into independent parishes with time. They are structured in such a way that they have their own administrative structures, though not independent of the parish. In most cases, they have the finance and pastoral committees. The finance committee manages the temporal goods of the station under the supervision of the parish council led by the parish priest. The pastoral committee arranges the pastoral life of the station with the parish pastoral council and led by the parish priest. In the Station Church, the station Catechist plays a significant role in the evangelization of the people. He is the nearest evangelizer to the people and helps the Parish Priest in taking delivery of the parish pastoral programmes for the benefit of the faithful.

### *Mass Centres*

Mass Centres often are places where the faithful gather, for the sake of convenience, to have the sacraments celebrated for them by their parish priest or his vicar. They are mostly created to address the pastoral needs of some members of the parish community who are living in a difficult terrain. These Centres help the parish priest and the priests working with him to draw effective pastoral plan for taking care of the pastoral needs of the members of the parish. Often the assistance of seminarians and trained catechists are enlisted to take care of the pastoral needs of the members of the faithful there. They often erect some quasi structures for the celebration of the sacrament which would eventually grow up into stations Churches and much later into Parishes. But these Mass Centres exist basically to solve some pastoral problems of distance from the Parish Centre and especially for people living in difficult terrains.

### *Zones*

A zone is a small Christian community model of administration of parish. It is an aggregate of families who gather to bring the life of the parish closer to their homes. They identify themselves as the members of the zonal community before being identified in the larger parish community. It is the last grouping under the parish before the families. It is the small center for Christian formation where the life of ecclesial communion is put into practice. Here in the zones, everybody is known by everybody. Correction and encouragement is given and taken in a closely knitted family circle. In this family-like community, the members share five elements of their life together: prayer life, the word of God, the teaching of the apostles, their earthly goods and the Eucharist (Gbuji, 2). Once in a while, the Parish Priest visits members of the zones and celebrates Masses for them, encourages them and addresses their pastoral problems. There are often zonal leaders who make it a point of duty to keep in touch with the different families that make up the zones.

### ***Pastoral Conversion and the Nigerian Church***

The 1983 Code of Canon Law describes the parish as “a certain community of Christ's faithful stably established within a particular Church, whose pastoral care, under the authority of the diocesan Bishop, is entrusted to a parish priest as its proper pastor” (CIC 1983 can 151 § 1). The identity of the parish community is found in her mission. There cannot be a proper understanding of the parish or an authentic living of its life unless the importance of her apostolic commitment to the community where she is located is found and lived. The much sought-after commitment of the parish to the community is located within the ambience of the organic communion between the common priesthood of the people and the ministerial priesthood; between the lay faithful and their priests (Pastor and Leader, 18).

It is under this understanding of the Church as a family-structure existing in parish evangelization that we take a look at the ordinary and extraordinary forms of assigning pastoral care in the parish in Nigeria. The parish as a family is built around the Parish Priest and other priests that might be working with him. The Parish Priest is the representative of the diocesan Bishop in the parish. He identifies with the bishop whole heartedly in trust. He takes upon himself the worries and concerns of serving the community daily (On the Most Holy Eucharist, 29). Because of this, he becomes the mystical and hierarchical bond between the parish community, the diocese and the universal Church. He stimulates the work of the apostolate and the unity of mission (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 2).

In the light of the central role of the Parish Priest in the parish structure as advocated for by the instruction, we note that in most dioceses, there is abundance of vocation to the priesthood such that even in areas where there is scarcity, the Church has never lacked in ensuring that the office of the Parish Priest must be taken up by an ordained priest. Where priests are lacking, the Parish Priest engages the catechists and other pastoral collaborators to run the out-stations. The office of the Parish Priest is never entrusted to a juridic person or a combination of clerics and lay members of faithful. Hence, the Parish Priest, as the representative of the diocesan bishop in the parish, remains the administrator and legal representative of the parish until he loses office.

### **Pastoral Agents within Parish Community**

#### *The Parish Priest*

The whole spiritual life of Christians flow from the Mass as they place themselves on the Altar and offer themselves with Christ to the father (Cullinane, 123), and it is the Priest who acts in *Persona Christi Capitis* during the

celebration of the Eucharist. The priest is a consecrated man (Suarez, 11). The norms of the 1983 Code of Canon Law practically guides the appointment and loss of office of the Parish Priest in Nigeria. The parish priest must be a presbyter even in scarcity of priests. By law, the parish priest is the legal representative of the parish and the administrator of its temporal goods. He should enjoy stability of office and be ready for a possible transfer in interest of the Church. He is at the service of the parish and should be in charge of only one parish. He could, however, be made to take care of a number of neighboring parishes in the event of shortage of priests. Once appointed, the parish priest enjoys full exercise of his function; he enjoys full right and responsibilities until he loses office. He is expected to resign once he attains 75 years of age. Moreover, the diocesan Bishop should weigh some considerations before accepting the parish priest's resignation. The bishop could consider leaving the parish priest with some assistance and gradually give way to his successor. The bishop could entrust a smaller parish or responsibility to a resigned pastor who should not see such as demotion.

#### *The Parish Administrator*

When it is not possible to immediately appoint a Parish Priest, a Parish Administrator is appointed. It is a transitory appointment waiting for the appointment of a Parish Priest. The pastoral care of a parish or of a number of parishes together, can be entrusted to several priests jointly, Priests *in solidum*. In this kind of arrangement, a moderator who represents all is appointed. The moderator is responsible for the coordination of affairs of the parish. The existence of many male religious orders in Nigeria makes possible this form of administration of the parish structure in Nigeria. In Enugu Diocese about sixty parishes are managed by different male religious bodies.

#### *Parish Vicar or Assistant Parish Priest or Curate*

The parochial vicar could be appointed with responsibility for a section of the apostolate in the parish like youth, elderly, sick, and the associations. In Enugu Dioceses, the Parish Vicar is often appointed to assist the Parish Priest in the over-all pastoral administration of the Parish. He could be assigned to a specific apostolate like youth ministry but he generally assists the Parish Priest in the discharge of his apostolic ministry.

#### *Deacons*

It is clear from the directive, "Pastoral conversion" and the 1983 Code of Canon Law that deacons are ordained ministers, incardinated in a diocese. They are collaborators of the bishop and priests in the mission of evangelization, serving in liturgy, ministry of the word and charity. They are not half priests and half laymen. They have the family vocation that requires service. The Holy Father,

Pope Francis calls them the custodians of service. Deacons exercise their ministry in Evangelization and charity. They are entrusted the ecclesiastical duties *that do not involve full care of souls*. In Enugu Diocese, deacons facilitate the overall pastoral function of the Parish Priest, often assisting in the celebration of benedictions, at marriages when the priests are not available. They work for a period of six months in the various pastoral locations where they are sent before they are ordained priests. In this diocese those to be ordained deacons stay in pastoral assignments after their theological studies where they are placed under the watch of some experienced Parish Priests. From the parishes where they are assigned, they often assemble two times in the week at the Secretariat for some practical courses like parish accounting, archive management and other courses which help them to adapt themselves to the life they shall be living in the parishes when they are eventually ordained as priests. In Enugu Diocese, this programme is referred to as “Post-theological assignment”

#### *Consecrated Men and Women*

Consecrated life in the Church is located within the charismatic dimension of the Church. Their life involves a radical following of Christ through the profession of the evangelical counsels and the works according to their charism. In the practical parish administration in our diocese, Consecrated men and women collaborate with the Parish Priests in the parish apostolate, teaching catechism, organizing marriage courses, managing parish schools where they exist, among other assignments.

#### *The Laity*

They seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and by ordering them according God's plan. They are invited to make a generous contribution to the service of the mission of evangelization through the general witness of their daily lives, lived in conformity with the Gospel wherever they are. Generally, we have a very active laity in Nigeria. The Catholic Laity Council of Nigeria stands out in the Church in Nigeria. The various organs like the Catholic Men Organization, the Catholic Women Organization, the Catholic Young Men Organization and the Catholic Young Women Organization constitute the laity Council in the Diocese. They exist to mutually help each other to attain holiness of life under the guidance of chaplains duly appointed by the Diocesan Bishop.

#### *Other Forms of Assigning Pastoral Care*

Canon 517§2 provides that, in the event of a shortage of priests, the diocesan Bishop, in order to sustain Christian life and continue the evangelizing mission of the community, can appoint a deacon or non-presbyter to share in the exercise of the pastoral care of the parish. These non-presbyters may be a deacon, a consecrated person, a lay person or even a group of persons. They

would be directed by a priest with legitimate faculties. He would be the moderator of pastoral care with the powers and function of a parish priest. This extraordinary remedy is, however, to be temporal and not permanent.

The people of God must be prepared for this type of pastoral care and the use of such terms as director, coordinator, moderator or governor of a parish as titles for the Lay persons deputed to these functions are not allowed. Moreover, there are conditions for appointing people to have a share in the pastoral ministry of the parish, and also a hierarchy of choice. In a situation where there is lack of priests, deacons stand the first chance to be appointed over consecrated men and women or the lay people. The priest who is appointed as coordinator possesses powers and faculties proper to the parish priest, whereas the others share in the exercise of the pastoral ministry.

The deacons together with the other non-presbyters are to perform only those functions which correspond to their respective status as deacons and lay faithful. This is to ensure that the original properties of diversity and complementarity of the charisms and functions of ordained ministers and the lay faithful are carefully observed and respected in accordance to the proper will of God. In making the decree of appointment, the bishop is to ensure that the reason for this appointment is clearly spelt out. Incidentally, this form does not yet exist in the country.

### *The Parish Priest in Collaboration in the Nigerian Experience*

In Nigeria the vast area and the number of faithful in the parish and those the Parish Priest takes care of their spiritual needs, do not constitute hindrance for the effective carrying out of the ministry of the Parish Priest, especially in the area of the administration of the sacraments. The effectiveness and the efficiency of the ministry of the Parish Priest come as a result of the close collaboration between the parish priest, the trained parish catechist and the catechetical instructors (members of the Confraternity of Christian Doctrine). The chain of collaboration in ensuring the success of the work in the Parish, especially as regards the administration of Sacraments, includes the religious, members of pious societies and sodalities, leaders and members of the four organs of the Church (Catholic Men Organization, Catholic Women Organization, Catholic Youths Organization of Nigeria and Holy Childhood). These arrays of willing and enthusiastic collaborators make the work in a vast parish easy to handle by just a priest. These collaborators form a network. Each group concentrates on an aspect of the parish apostolate. They strive to always reaffirm the ecclesial dimension of their apostolate by constant reference to the local Church through the parish priest.

### ***The Parish Priest and the Sacramental Life of the Parish***

Generally, there is a division of labor in the carrying out of pastoral assignments in the parish. The Catechists and the other members of catechetical instructors working as a team, identify those who are in need of the sacraments, instruct and prepare them for the reception of the sacraments, before inviting the Parish Priest to administer the Sacraments. They also accompany the candidates for the sacrament after the reception of the sacrament.

Generally, the parish is built around the sacraments and the deep-seated longing for the reception of the sacraments and the belief and acceptance of the priest as the sacrament of Christ's presence among his people stabilize the authentic sacramental life of the parish community. As such, the Parish Priest, who is associated with the Holy Eucharist through the Holy Mass, is seen as a sacrament of Christ in the community and revered as such. He is for the community the fulfillment of Christ's perpetual abiding presence among his people. This faith in the sacramental presence in the Eucharist, which the Priest brings to the faithful, moves the people to desire to bring Jesus through the priest to confront every situation. They make every effort to provide the logistics that would make it possible for the priest to reach as many people in need of the sacraments as possible within a short space of time. They take care of the means of transportation of the priest and other necessities that would make his work easier. They ensure that all the arrangements for any given ministry are ready by happily fulfilling their part of the apostolate before inviting their priest to come.

### ***The Parish and the Identity of Her members***

The members of the parish confidently identify themselves as indispensable members of the body of Christ. Each member tries to take up the task of building up this body in a unique way. For instance, the welfare apostolate of the parish, which is often carried out by the societies and members of the religious, broadens and deepens the life of communion of the parish community. The essential pastoral care of marriage and family is always taken up by experienced and devoted couples, who had lived their married life faithful and creditably well. The all-important pastoral care of children (Holy Childhood) is taken up by professionals in child-religious education and developmental psychology. These pastoral agents help to lay the solid foundation for living of the Christian faith in the homes and in the parishes. The members of the volunteer force who take up the works of mercy restore the image of God in the devastated humanity through their works of charity and mercy. Some lay theologians, otherwise known as commissioned evangelizers in Nigerian Church, are prominent among the heroes of the evangelizing mission of the parish communities in Nigeria. They embark on home to home visitation,

evangelizing the unbelievers and encouraging the lapsed Christians to return to the faith. They bring the feelings at the grass-root level of the parish to the parish priest and the parish pastoral council for proper pastoral approach.

Experience in Nigerian Church has shown that the full synergy among the different parts of the Body of Christ is the catalyst and the only means to growth in the evangelizing mission of the parish community. It challenges all the members to active participation in the life of the Church and helps all to realize that they are an important part of the community in their different capacities. Above all, the life of the community is solidified by the love of Christ shared among the members. The faithful take their priest as their own communal possession. They treat him with kind consideration. They receive him as one whom God engrafts on the stem of their community to reassure them of his faithfulness and abiding presence. The person of the priest makes the incarnation a concrete reality and livable for the community of the faithful.

The overwhelming support and encouragement the priest receives from the people spore him to go beyond what is humanly possible in the exercise of his pastoral ministry. The conviction that the priest is the concrete realization of the sacrificial victimhood of Christ makes the faithful to seek his company especially during the trying moments of the individual members of the community or when the community is in danger. The courage and the willingness of most of the priests to live the life of sacrifice even to the point of martyrdom in witness to the faith also encourage vocation to the priesthood.

### *Education and Formation of the Members*

The success and continuous growth of the parish community life in the Nigerian Church as has been described above, could be attributed to the interplay of a lot of factors. For instance, the practice of beginning the Christian instruction from the homes before moving out to the neighborhood prayer centres (Block Rosary Centres) has been of immense help in the smooth administration of the parish. The growth flows through the zones and finally comes to full development in the Parish Centre. This pattern explains the reason for the huge success recorded in the parish life in Nigeria. The life of the parish is cultivated through a thorough pastoral care of the family. This approach makes the family the primary catechetical instruction centre. With this approach, the family setup and model reflect in all the strata of the parish life. The division of labour and collaborative approach makes the chain of flow of information and the execution of pastoral functions seamless. Hence, the members of the family see God's presence in the faith community and his visitation in concrete terms in the person of the Parish Priest and the other priests working with him in their parish community. In this setup, the parish is alive and not just functional.

Everyone strives to carry out the ministry appropriate to the state of each in the body of Christ.

### ***Conclusion***

The instruction, “The Pastoral conversion in the service of the Evangelization of the Church” is a timely publication because it came at a time when the need for both individual as well as structural conversion is felt most for the parish structure, which is one of the primary institutions where vocations to both the clerical as well as family life begins. An in-depth consideration of this document shows that the Church is ever aware of her identity and mission. On the other hand, in consideration of the situation of the Church in Nigeria, especially the parish communities in some of the dioceses, one would realize that the Church in Nigeria, though still a missionary Church, is living already the mind of the Church universal. This does not mean that there are still no areas to be worked on. As such, the reception of this document is a step further in the reception of the teachings of the Fathers of the Vatican Council, as far as the Church in Nigeria is concerned. It is a beacon of light guiding the voyage of living the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council.

The Bishop of the Diocese of Enugu has already ordered seminars among the various clergy and lay in the Diocese to help the people to understand and digest the implication of this new document in the life of the members of our diocese. In line with the teachings of this document, I feel that it is time to begin a new form of discussion at the national and continental level, to identify the best way to deal with most of the challenges the evangelizing mission of the Church is facing, especially at the Parish level. In as much as it is expedient, concrete support ought to be given to the Church experts from different parts of the globe, who are researching towards realizing a converted parish community in the face of modern realities.

There is no over stating the fact that most of the teachings of the Church on the collaborative ecclesiology in line with the teachings of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council are not readily available in texts in local Nigerian languages for better assimilation on the part of most of the Christ faithful. The first thing to do in our situation, therefore, is to get the collaborators in the ministry of the priest well informed through education and training before assigning any responsibilities to them when the situation arises so that the threats coming from the prevailing Pentecostal trend, where people make themselves the determiners of faith content and sole directors of personal ministries does not arise.

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