

BUILDING A CHRIST-CENTERED AND RESILIENT FAITH IN CHRISTIAN STUDENTS IN TERTIARY INSTITUTIONS IN NIGERIA

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Abstract

Nigerian tertiary institutions are challenged by many problems such as cultism, armed robbery, examination malpractices, corruption, strikes, sexual permissiveness, rivalries and inordinate competitions among staff, power struggles in departments and faculties, drug addiction among students and even staff, etc. These problems that confront tertiary institutions also confront Christian students and hinder them from practicing their Christian faith vibrantly and healthily. This paper argues that Christians in tertiary institutions in Nigeria should be taught and empowered to defend their faith in Christ-centered communities. Christian chaplaincies in tertiary institutions are responsible for building a Christ-centered and resilient faith among students to enable them to combat and overcome the peculiar challenges they face. The paper uses critical analytic and hermeneutical methods to unravel the issues in the paper. The paper finds that Christian students in tertiary institutions face a lot of challenges that threaten their faith. The paper concludes that Christian chaplaincies should educate students to live and witness to Christ without giving in to the problems that they face.

Keywords: Building, Christ, resilient, faith, chaplaincies, church, tertiary institutions, Nigeria.

Introduction

This paper comes from a reworking of a paper presented at the 2024 annual National Conference of Catholic Chaplains in Tertiary Institutions in Nigeria, with the theme: “Building a Christ-Centered and Resilient Faith Based Community in Tertiary Institutions, held from 14th – 16th May, 2024, at Abbey Louis Bautain Retreat and Catechetical Centre, Ijebu-Itele, Ogun State. The Christian faith is an important heritage to humanity coming from the Judeo-Christian tradition. While it is true that there are many other faiths and religious persuasions, the Christian faith is the one that appeals to many of us and we are convinced about it. We have accepted it as our faith, so we have a duty and obligation to propagate it. Christian believers should not be ashamed of their faith. While the Christian faith is challenged and opposed in Nigerian society in all areas and places, one of the places where it is most challenged is tertiary institutions in the country. It is imperative that attention then is paid to tertiary institutions regarding this issue. Tertiary institutions are critical places for faith formation and education for the bulk of people in them are youths/young people who are already in leadership or will take over the leadership of

society. It is also critical for the Christian faith, for without these crops of people tomorrow, it will be poorer. The Christian church needs these youths for her present and tomorrow. The church has no future if young people in educational institutions and society, in general, were to abandon their faith or fail to practice it. It is important then that a strong, dynamic, and resilient faith is cultivated and inculcated into these young people at this stage.

Many scholars such as Ogunode, Audu and Ahaotu (2020), Birabil and Ogeh (2020), Ekpo, Okpa and Swem (2024). have all asserted that tertiary education in Nigeria is inundated with various problems like incessant strikes, cultism, poor funding, etc. And by implication whatever problems that tertiary education faces in Nigeria negatively affects the students, including Christian students. The task before this paper is to show that amid education problems in tertiary institutions, Christian students ought to be resilient and Christ-focused. The role of Christian chaplaincies and the church is to help to foster this. In carrying out the aim of this paper, conceptual clarifications will be made, followed by an examination of some of the challenges confronting Christian students in practicing their faith. After this some way forward in building the faith of students to be Christ-centered and resilient will be looked at before the paper is brought to a conclusion.

Conceptual Clarifications

Some basic concepts are crucial to understanding this paper. These concepts are building, resilient, faith-based, community, Christ-centered, and tertiary institutions. The word, “build” is used in this paper to refer to the process of creating, bringing into being or existence, growing or developing, raising, fostering, nurturing, nourishing, etc. The act of building is keeping alive. It is to fortify, strengthen, en-capacitate, and make empowered. Merriam-Webster defines build as: “to form by ordering and uniting materials by gradual means into a composite whole: Construct.” (p.1). Building is normally a continuous process. When it comes to an issue like religious faith, you keep building it. One's faith is not a finished product as long as one is still alive. It is in this sense that the apostle Saint James writes to believers, “But you, beloved, build yourselves up on your most holy faith; pray in the Holy Spirit” (Jude 1:20). Faith is to be built and not allowed to die, wane and grow weak. Various things can be done to build faith, and these will be examined later on.

Another concept that is vital to define is resilient faith. Hurley (2024) cites the American Psychological Association to state that resilience is the ability to adapt to life challenges and difficulties. Hurley (2024) also cites Amit Sood, MD to state that is the ability or capacity to withstand adversity and bounce back in life amidst downturns. The American Psychological Association (n.d) defines resilience as follows:

...the process and outcome of successfully adapting to difficult or challenging life experiences, especially through mental, emotional, and behavioral flexibility and adjustment to external and internal demands. A number of factors contribute to how well people adapt to adversities, predominant among them (a) the ways in which individuals view and engage with the world, (b) the availability and quality of social resources, and (c) specific [coping strategies](#). Psychological research demonstrates that

the resources and skills associated with more positive adaptation (i.e., greater resilience) can be cultivated and practiced (p.1).

The US Department of State defines resilience as adapting successfully to stressors, cultivating psychological well-being at times of adversity, and bouncing back from setbacks. Every human being carries a resilient ability. It is to be cultivated and exercised when need be. On resilience, Cherry (2023) writes that: “A resilient person is someone who has strong coping skills and is able to marshal their available resources, ask for help when needed, and find ways to manage the situation they are facing. People with psychological resilience are able to use their skills and strengths to respond to life's challenges, which can include those related to: Death of a loved one, Divorce, Financial issues, Illness, Job loss. Medical emergencies, Natural disasters.”

Grenz, Gurentzki, and Nordling (1999) write that faith is “a biblical word that refers to both to intellectual belief and to relational trust or commitment. The biblical authors generally do not make a distinction between faith as belief and faith as trust, but tend to see true faith as consisting of both what is believed...and the personal commitment to a person who is trustworthy, reliable, and able to save...”(p.50). Lang (1989) states that faith is a divine virtue by which we accept what is revealed by God through his church and live out the content of that revelation in our lives. Carbine (2007) writes that faith comes from the Latin word (*fides*) meaning belief which is epistemological and also experiential in relating to and living out the teachings about God and divine revelation from him. One of the most fundamental definitions of faith is that given by Parks (2000) who opines that faith is meaning-making or making meaning. The human being is here in this world to make meaning. Faith is the vehicle that helps people to make meaning.

The word faith is used to refer to one's beliefs concerning doctrine, ideologies, practices, persuasions, etc. Your faith is what you adhere to and are often convinced about. It is often used in a religious or spiritual sense. But one can have faith not just about religious or spiritual matters. Whatever you put your trust in is a form of faith. Ekstrom (2010) defines faith as trust, conviction, and responsive belief in a person or thing; “Religious faith can be defined, in a way, as trust in ...a response to and commitment to the creator God who has revealed many things throughout the history of the world to humankind” (p. 121). The concern in this paper is with the Christian faith.

A resilient faith is a faith that has the ability and capacity to withstand life challenges, obstacles, and problems. A person with a resilient faith does not give up his faith amid persecutions, trials, and tribulations. Such a person stands by his/her faith. You see many examples of resilient faith in many bible characters. These figures include Joseph, Moses, Daniel, Shadrack, Meshach, and Abednego, etc. The heroes of faith mentioned in Hebrews 11 are all people with resilient faith. Together with resilience a Christian believer's faith should be Christ-centered. Christ is the heart of the believer's faith. Christ is the one who has called Christians to follow him. The life, mission, ministry, and example of Christ should inspire the Christian believer. A Christ-centered faith is rooted in Christ and finds

meaning in Christ. It is difficult for a Christian's faith to be resilient if it is not rooted in Christ. Christ is the major source of resilience. Christ, the one that believers believe in and follow categorically stated in John 15 that if believers abide in him, they will bear fruit in plenty. A Christian student in this paper refers to one who has embraced the Christian faith and its tenets and is studying at a tertiary institution.

The concept of tertiary institutions in Nigeria here refers to formal educational institutions, schools, and centers that are above the secondary level of education. The World Bank (2024) defines tertiary education as follows:

Tertiary education refers to all *formal* post-secondary education, including public and private universities, colleges, technical training institutes, and vocational schools. Tertiary education is instrumental in fostering growth, reducing poverty, and boosting shared prosperity. A highly skilled workforce, with lifelong access to a solid post-secondary education, is a prerequisite for innovation and growth: well-educated people are more employable and productive, earn higher wages, and cope with economic shocks better (p.1)

The Law Insider (n.d) states that:

...tertiary institution. (tersièrè instelling) means buildings used for tertiary educational purposes, such as (but not limited to) lecture buildings, administrative offices, residential buildings, libraries, laboratories, hostels, recreational and sports facilities, and any other uses and buildings which may be ordinarily associated with a university/college and its activities as a diverse multi-faceted learning and research institution, whether or not such buildings are located on the same land unit.

Tertiary institutions refer to all the places where tertiary education takes place and include, colleges of education, universities, polytechnics, etc. The time of tertiary education is important in the life of young people especially. It is an important time also when they need to be reached spiritually and morally. They need to be formed not just by academic skills but also by spiritual and moral skills. This is where building their faith is crucially important. The ethical skills and values inculcated into them can help them navigate through life, overcome life challenges, make them resilient, and help them to contribute building a better human society. This period in the life of young people must be taken seriously. As it is said, "Catch them young." This is an important time that the church and Christian ministers should accompany young people. These young people form a great part of those who will build society. Many Christian students are young people and are confronted by many of the problems that young people face, though there are also peculiar problems that they face in tertiary institutions.

Some Challenges Confronting the Faith of Christian Students in Tertiary Institutions

Many challenges confront the faith in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. The intention here is

not to list and explain all the problems. A few of them are selected here and explained. They include the following: materialism (get rich quick syndrome), hedonism, the quest for power and pleasure, radical Islamism, biblical fundamentalism and extremism, biblical illiteracy, alcoholism, and drug addiction, occultism, cultism, secret societies, peer group pressure, globalization and westernization, youth phenomenon, new age influences, armed robbery, sexual permissiveness, etc. Matthew (2014) also notes that students in tertiary institutions also face problems like incessant closure of institutions, ill-equipped libraries, inadequate classrooms, cultism, non-commitment of some lecturers, etc. All these can also disrupt the processes that can be used to build the faith of students. Incessant strikes for instance can disrupt religious services and activities that are necessary to foster faith in Christian students.

Right from the beginning of the Christian faith, it has always faced challenges and problems. In the beginning, the faith was persecuted by the Sanhedrin and other religious leaders. The Sanhedrin hated Christ for his messianic claims and hated his message. They persecuted the apostles and early Christians for preaching and continuing the message of Jesus. Despite persecution, the early Christians were resilient and did not allow persecution to stop them. The church was also troubled by false teachings, heresies, erroneous deviations, etc. The church was able to overcome all the Christological controversies, trinitarian heresies, and all other errors. The church has also been challenged by the protestant reformation, the failures of some clerics, greedy civil authorities, etc.

If the Christians in the Roman empire were not resilient the Christian faith would have died. All through Christian history, the Christian faith has survived the power of empires and persecutors. But it is also true that there are places where the Christian faith is dying and waning. Much of the Middle East was once Christian land filled with Christians, but today the Christian communities in Turkey, Iraq, Egypt, etc have become a small minority. It is erroneous to think that the faith must survive. It is what people do that will make the faith survive or not. Chaplains and teachers of the faith in tertiary institutions should put in more effort that ensure that the faith is well taught and that their students get grounded in it.

Radical Islamism is one of the gravest threats against the faith. In much of northern Nigeria, the Christian faith is persecuted and Christians are living under great pain. The Christian church has been denied physical spaces to build their chaplaincies in some institutions in northern Nigeria. Christian students should be resilient and not give up their faith because of persecution. Some students are being lured to leave their Christian faith for economic motives. They are offered jobs by adherents of other religions. This has made some to abandon their faith. Islamist terrorist groups like Boko Haram and other terrorist groups have also bombed Christian places of worship in higher institutions and instilled fear in Christians. All these impacts negatively on the faith.

Another challenge comes from Pentecostal groups who have a narrow and literal interpretation of scripture. They are bible literalists who affirm, only scripture. They interpret biblical texts without considering the historical context, and they pay no attention

to the unity of scripture. They are biblical fundamentalists and extremists. They are the ones who believe that they are the only true Christians, the only bible believers, and the only people who are Holy Spirit-filled. They condemn all others to hell who differ from them. They use psychological force to intimidate people. For many of these Pentecostal groups, their main target is the Catholic Church. They even have a special ministry to Catholics to save “lost” Catholics. Many Catholics easily fall gullible to their preachings as they are not strong themselves. This is one area where chaplains and teachers of students in tertiary institutions have a great role to play. They must devise more timely means and mediums to teach the faith. The new media which includes Facebook, X, Tik Tok, WhatsApp, etc must be deployed to teach the faith. There is a need to organize more bible study classes, essay competitions on the bible and doctrine, more bible and doctrinal quizzes, etc. There is a need to tap more catechists, evangelizers, religious brothers and sisters, etc to reach out to students in our campuses. The problem of narrow interpretation of the bible does not only affect Catholic students, students who attend Pentecostal and other churches are indoctrinated into errors. These errors inform their worldviews in life and can make them intolerant of others.

A weak, narrow, and parochial gospel of prosperity also poses a danger to the faith. Young people and many students in tertiary institutions often fall to this gospel. This is the gospel that promises wealth, riches, health, and victory without any cross. It is a cross-less Christianity. While the gospel is not a bad or sad phenomenon, there is a place for carrying the cross in life. The Pentecostal brand of the gospel of prosperity is often not attendant to social problems and the dilemma of oppression and the poor. It is the gospel of my God is not a poor God. It often enriches the pastor to the detriment of the people. In many of our campuses on Sundays and weekdays, you see students' troop to the prosperity gospel churches. There are now Yahoo churches on many campuses where the pastors pray for Yahoo boys and girls. It is the gospel of getting rich and instantly. It is rooted in materialism. God indeed blesses and prospers but God does also allow each human being at one time or the other to pass through trials and tribulations.

Prioritizing a hedonistic lifestyle is also another issue. Many young people and students are desirous of wealth, power, privilege, and pleasure by all means. In the desire for all these, they have turned to alcohol, drugs, pleasure, cultism, the occult, secret societies, witchcraft, sorcery, etc. Students are promised and seduced by what they will gain when they join various satanic and demonic groups. As students join all these, their faith is endangered, and often die. Adebayo (2021) relates that students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria are confronted by cultism, drug addiction, frequent harassment, examination malpractice, etc. The inordinate quest for power, negative forms of pleasure, etc impacts the faith of students. A hedonistic lifestyle should be discouraged. The pressure on Christian students is much and they need more strength to resist, and this is why their faith needs to be built.

Globalization and Westernization have also invaded our campuses in Nigeria. The world is now a global village. In this time of globalization, the values of one culture are easily

carried to other parts of the world through people, transportation, or the modern means of communication. Satellite television now comes into the living room with Western music and lifestyles. Much of the music is rooted in words and lyrics that promote nudity, subjugation of women, etc. Students know more of musical stars and film personalities than they know of the saints and bible personalities. Many students prefer to dress like the characters in the music they listen to than to dress modestly.

All of the above are seen as challenges and problems confronting the faith. This is so because they make it difficult for students and others to uphold their faith. As students who share many of the traits of young people's quest for money, sex, power, pleasure, instant gratification, etc they move away from ethical and moral values. Some see their faith as depriving them of freedom.

Ways to Build a Christ-Centered and Resilient Faith among Tertiary Christian Students

The US Department of State (n.d) offers some ways that resilience can be built. They are: maintaining perspective amid problems, helping people realize they have a choice in handling problems, accepting challenges, anticipating challenges, learning to be calm in the midst of problems, overcoming fear, letting go of anger, taking action when needed, and laughing. Christian students can see in the apostle Saint Paul one who was resilient and strong. The apostle Paul was an audacious person. Amid the problems of persecution, hardships in ministry, hunger, etc; the apostle had the "I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me" spirit. The many examples of young people with noble characters in the bible should be presented to young students to inspire them not to give up or give in to the problems that they face in tertiary institutions. These examples include Joseph the dreamer who overcame sexual challenges from Potiphar's wife and others and exhibited good political and economic leadership in Egypt (Genesis 39, 41); the dynamic and bold David who conquered Goliath (1 Samuel 17), young King Solomon who displayed wisdom in his earlier life in governing Israel (1 Kings 3), etc. In mentioning these stories some of them may have some failings in their lives like David and Solomon. It is the good aspects of their lives that should be emulated. Christian students who often are young people need models and examples to follow. Many young saints in Christian history should be presented to young people to emulate and their stories should be used to counteract many negative examples of film stars and musicians that many Christian students imitate.

The word of God is a major source of resilience. The teaching of Jesus in Matthew 7 should be kept in mind. In his teaching in Matthew 7, Jesus spoke of two builders, one built on rock and the other built on sand. The one who built on rock survived the pressures and difficulties of life. That one was resilient. The one built on sand gave way amid the turmoils of life. You find a similar idea in the parable of the Sower in Matthew 13. To build a resilient faith, especially in the young, they should be continuously engaged in bible education. Those who teach and educate youths in tertiary institutions have a duty and responsibility to engage their students in rigorous and well-planned bible studies. They should press ahead; they should not be discouraged by poor attendance in bible study classes which is

normally the case in many tertiary institutions. You are a Sower, keep sowing the seed. A Sower like a farmer should never be discouraged. Great Lake Christian College (2022) writes that Christian students should: "...build regular time with God into your schedule. College is an incredibly busy time, with lots of new experiences and challenges. Don't forgo studying the word of God when you probably need it the most." Christian students in Nigerian tertiary institutions should cultivate the habit of studying the word of God daily. They should ensure that they have quiet time with the Lord.

Another key factor that can help in building a Christ-centered and resilient faith is counseling. Every person, especially young people face life challenges and difficulties. Students encounter a lot of problems in tertiary institutions. These difficulties can border on relationships, finances, academics, examinations, health, etc. It is very easy for students who cannot find counsel at the hands of their chaplains to go astray and give up their faith. In the quest for more power and meaning in life, many often turn to cultism, secret societies, the occult, superstition, sorcerers, etc. The reality is that many have left the faith for they did not find counsel when they were looking for it. Chaplains and teachers of the faith in tertiary institutions should make themselves available to assist young people in their faith journey.

Related to counseling is sacramental confession. For Christian students of the Catholic tradition, sacramental confession is a powerful avenue that can help restore their faith and life. Confession is not the same as counseling. There are young people in tertiary institutions who are burdened by sin. Speaking of sacramental confession here the concern is with Catholics who are baptized. They should not despise the sacrament. They should frequent it. They should never be discouraged when they find themselves in sin. Christ waits for them in the sacrament to say to them: "Neither do I condemn you, but go and sin no more." Catholic priests who are chaplains should make themselves available to help the young people. When people see themselves encouraged and not condemned, they feel empowered. The Christian liturgy is important in building a strong faith. Christian students should not despise it. Catholic students in tertiary institutions should be active in participating in the Sacraments of the Church, especially the Holy Eucharist which is the food and strength for the journey. They should do all that is needed to participate in the Holy Eucharist.

A Christ-centered and resilient faith can also be created and built through a hospitable community. Community is an important and key issue in the life of every human person, especially young students. The human person is created as a social and communitarian being. A friendly, hospitable, and caring community can help people go through life and overcome life challenges. The community is important in the life of the individual. The example of resilient people in the history of the community can help the people. This is why Hebrews 12 encourages people to look to the example of the great crowd of witnesses surrounding them. This is where also the stories of the saints are crucial. The saints are our heroes. We should school young people to have the saints as their models instead of popular persons in the movie or music world. It is the duties of chaplains and teachers of the faith in

tertiary institutions to make the stories of the saints attractive to the young and students. Adebayo (2021) rightly notes that the Church should teach exemplary living to students and foster a spiritual and moral education that helps them to live right. Ugwu and Chukwuma (2021) write that Christian campus fellowships must play in educating against cultism. This paper notes that their role goes beyond that of educating against cultism, they are to educate against all vices and immoralities.

Cultivating positive faith, positive thinking, and potentiality thinking is also a way to build a Christ-centered and resilient faith. People's attitude to life matters a great deal. Some people say that attitude is everything. The way people approach what happens to them matters. Problems, difficulties, pains, and suffering happen to all people in life. Cultivating a sorrowful attitude to life can destroy resilience. Cultivate the attitude that all things are possible (Luke 1:37). Have the attitude in James 1:3, "Count it all joy when you fall into different temptations." If people in our tertiary institutions think that challenges do not happen to all, then when they face difficulties, they are likely to give up. Chaplains and teachers of the faith in tertiary institutions should teach the students and young persons positive thinking rooted in the word of God. Positive thinking supersedes prosperity preaching. Prosperity preaching or what has come to be known as the gospel of wealth, riches, health, and victory can be destructive when not well taught in a balanced manner. While having the attitude of the 10 spies in Numbers 13, they must also have the attitude of the three Hebrew children. Even if God does not deliver, he remains God. "Submarine Christianity or bread, beans, and butter faith should be discouraged" (This phrase is used to refer to Christians who only keep their faith when things are moving well for them but when trouble comes, they go into hiding or turn to other religions). A resilient faith is a faith that is rooted in Christ and weathers all storms and tempests. The apostle Paul confesses that he can do all things through Christ, but he also enumerates all the persecutions, trials, sufferings, and hardships that he had to undergo to preach the gospel (See 2 Corinthians 11:16-33). An unbalanced prosperity gospel often gives people false hopes. When they come to challenges in life, their faith easily wanes down or even dies.

Conclusion

The paper has examined some of the challenges faced by Christian students in tertiary institutions in Nigeria. Most Christian students in tertiary institutions are young persons and face many of the problems and challenges faced by young people. Many of the problems that Christian students face in tertiary institutions include persecution from some of those in the Islamic faith, Boko Haram terrorism, cultism, secret societies, negative peer group pressure, alcoholism, drug addiction, examination malpractices, sexual permissiveness, and many others. These problems the paper showed hinder their faith in Christ and can make Christian students not resilient. The paper showed that it is important that Christian students confront and overcome these problems. This is why it is necessary for Christian chaplaincies through those who work in their chaplaincies help to build a community of faith in which Christian students are resilient and witness to their faith. The paper enumerated some of the different ways that this can be done such as: presenting positive models of noble characters to Christian students, building them in the word of

God, availing them of opportunities for counseling, participation in the Church's liturgical life and sacraments for those who are Catholics, encouraging them to be positive and potentiality thinkers, showing them hospitality, etc. It is believed in this paper that if these and many others are done it will help Christian students to be resilient and focused on Christ as they confront the adversities of life.

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