

THE IMPERATIVE OF “SERVANT LEADERSHIP” IN NIGERIA

Celestine Chibueze Uzundu, PhD

Department of Philosophy

Veritas University Abuja

uzonduc@veritas.edu.ng

Abstract

Nigeria as an independent country is endowed with immense natural and human resources capable of transforming it into a leading democratic and prosperous country second to none in Africa. But more than six decades after independence, it is lagging behind other African countries in all indices of socio-economic development due to greedy and corrupt leadership which has become the bane of Nigerian politics. This essay analyses the problem of greedy and corrupt leadership in Nigeria and prescribes the principle of “servant leadership” personified by Jesus Christ as the antidote to the Nigerian political malaise

Keywords: Imperative, leadership, democracy, state-craft, corruption, justice and peace.

Prologue

Bad leadership has been identified by many as the problem with Nigeria. This view received its classic formulation in Chinua Achebe's opusculum -The Trouble with Nigeria. Achebe further identifies other perennial issues such as tribalism, corruption, indiscipline, social injustice, preference for mediocrity over excellence etc. But he opines that without good leadership none

of the other problems stands a chance of being tackled, let alone solved.⁴¹ The idea of good leadership, however, remains vague. It needs more precision. What type of leadership qualifies as good? In short, what is good leadership? How is good leadership possible?

In place of the egocentric and greedy leadership that has hitherto dominated the Nigerian political landscape since independence, I hereby propose another type of leadership: the servant leadership personified by Jesus Christ which has inspired and continues to inspire countless men and women of every time and clime to serve others rather than to be served. As the King of the universe and the Head of the human family, the kingship of Jesus Christ is not only the model but also the parameter for measuring earthly kings and rulers. He exercised his Kingship by bearing witness to the truth (cf. Jn 18:37). All kingship from Calvary onward is tested and judged by the standard of true kingship established there. To remind the kings and rulers of the nations of the world about this new reality is an integral part of the mission of the Church. Hence the importance and relevance of this essay in honour of the Vice-Chancellor of Veritas University Abuja, Very Rev. Fr. Prof. Hyacinth Ementa Ichoku, who is a model and advocate of servant leadership.

This essay comprises three interlocking parts circumscribed by a prologue and epilogue. The first attempts to recover the original meaning of the word “leadership”. The second spells out the imperative of “servant” leadership epitomized by Jesus Christ. The last examines the role of the Church in inculcating servant leadership education in the Church and society.

The Concept Of Leadership

The Chinese philosopher Confucius (552-479 BC) once said that the only way to cure the ills of the society is to restore original meanings to human words. The daily use of words wears them out to the point that their original meanings are lost in the

⁴¹ Chinua Achebe, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, p. 1.

labyrinth of history. Emptied of their original meaning, words no longer stand for what they ab initio denote and connote. In spite of this, human beings continue to use them since they cannot do without communication.

One of the words that have been emptied of their original meanings is leadership. It is used by all and sundry without consensus of meaning. It has become in the hands of many an instrument of manipulation and indoctrination. Hence the attempt to restore its original meaning is paramount for this essay.

According to Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language the word "leadership" can mean any of the following: (1) the position or function of a leader (2), ability to lead (3), an act or instance of leading; guidance; direction (4), the leaders of a group. Hence a leader is a person or thing that leads; a guiding or directing head, as of an army, movement, or political group.⁴² The word "leader" is, therefore, the English variant of the Latin "dux,-cis" or the Greek "archegos". Originally, it means the standard bearer of a group, one who leads the way.

Rulers lead, Confucius said, by good example. "If the ruler is honest, even though he gives no orders, people will behave. But if he himself is dishonest, even though he gives orders, people will not comply."⁴³ Surely, "If you lead the people by laws and restrain them by penalties, the people will try to evade them, but will not have a sense of shame. However, if you lead them by virtue and restrain them by the rules of decorum, they will have a sense of shame and will amend."⁴⁴ Good example from above makes all punishments unnecessary. For, "the virtue of the gentleman may be compared to the wind, while that of the commoner to the grass. The grass before the wind is bound to bend."⁴⁵ Thus, the Master's key to good government is widespread education to enlighten the citizenry, to train future

⁴² Webster's Unabridged Dictionary of the English Language, p. 1093.

⁴³ Confucius, Lun-yü/Analects, 13.6.

⁴⁴ Loc. Cit., 2.3.

⁴⁵ Loc. Cit., 12.19.

ministers and even rulers, and to arouse public opinion in favour of a government conducted by men of virtue and ability. Confucius' insistence on the primacy of human values explains the lasting appeal of his thought. Little wonder that the German philosopher Karl Jaspers enlisted him as one of the four "normative human beings" in human history.⁴⁶

But above him stands the figure of Jesus Christ, the Founder of Christianity, who taught the world more with his life than with his words. In fact, Christ has no doctrine in the strict sense of the word. His life is his doctrine and his doctrine is his life. He taught his disciples the greatest lesson that life is larger than logic, that examples are better than precepts, that actions speak louder than voice. This new teaching is exemplified in the Sermon on the Mount especially in the Beatitudes which the Fathers of the Church designate as *exempla Domini*, that is to say, "examples of the Lord."⁴⁷ In fact each of the Beatitudes is a mirror of the life of Christ. Hence Samuel Taylor Coleridge avers that "Christianity is not a theory or speculation, but a life; not a philosophy of life, but a life and a living process." Consequently, all Christians irrespective of gender, class, age, rank or status are called to live the life of Christ. In short, Christian existence is nothing else but imitation of the life of Christ (*imitatio vitae Christi*).

The Imperative Of "Servant Leadership"

The word "imperative" derives from the Latin verb *impero-are-avi-atum* meaning to command or oblige. It became a philosophical category through the German Philosopher Immanuel Kant (1724-1804) who made it one of the main concepts of his critical philosophy. Kant distinguishes two types of imperatives: hypothetical and categorical.

An imperative is hypothetical if it states that some action is right or advisable as a means to some specific goal. Such an imperative says: "If you would accomplish such and such a goal, you ought to do so and so." An imperative of this kind comes from our

⁴⁶ Cf. Karl Jaspers, *Die Maßgebenden Menschen: Sokrates, Buddha, Konfuzius, Jesus*.

⁴⁷ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. 1, pp. 84-85.

experience of the ways in which we may best satisfy our desires; it does not come from pure reason. Hence it does not “command” as a moral law does, but only “counsels” us to some line of action.

On the other hand, an imperative is categorical if it commands unconditionally. Such an imperative which seems to be involved in the moral consciousness that we ought to do our duty regardless of our wayward inclinations, cannot, be derived from psychological study of what our inclinations and their goals are. The Categorical Imperative is formulated by pure reason as follows: “Act only according to that maxim by which you can at the same time will that it should become a universal law.”⁴⁸

Kant further argues that the universality of law according to which effects are produced constitutes what is properly called nature in the most general sense. By analogy, then, the universal imperative of duty can be expressed as follows” “Act as though the maxim of your action were by your will to become a universal law of nature.”⁴⁹

From the two preceding versions of the Categorical imperative, Kant derives a supreme Practical Imperative for all rational agents. It reads: “Act so that your treat humanity, whether in your own person or in that of another, always as an end and never as means only.”⁵⁰

At this juncture, some posers are inevitable: Why is the Practical Imperative so strange to Nigerian rationality? How can we imbibe it as a principle of action in our society? When Nigerian leaders plunder and pillage our national wealth and deposit it outside should they will that the looting and siphoning of public wealth by public servants become morally acceptable all over the world? Put in another way, can they justify their corrupt practices before the bar of reason?

⁴⁸ Immanuel Kant, *Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, p. 39.

⁴⁹ *Loc. Cit.*

⁵⁰ *Loc. Cit.*, p. 47.

Philosophers according to Ray Ekpu agree that there are two types of leaders: “Those who are interested in the flock and those who are interested in the fleece. Those interested in the flock work for the well-being of their flock while those who are interested in the fleece work for the well-being of their belly.”⁵¹ Ekpu is of the opinion that Nigerian leaders from local and international reports belong to the second category. What can we do individually and collectively to change this type of leaders? After more than half a century of corrupt and unaccountable leadership the imperative of “accountable leadership” in Nigeria is more urgent than ever.

“Servant leadership” is not only a categorical but also a Christological imperative ensuing from the living example of Christ. The request of James and John, the sons of Zebedee, to sit on the right and left of Jesus in glory and the consequent indignation of the rest of the apostles against the two brothers provided Jesus the golden opportunity to impart to his disciples the understanding of power as service: “You know that among the Gentiles those whom they recognize as their rulers lord it over them, and their great ones are tyrants over them. But it is not so among you; but whoever wishes to be first among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (cf. Mk 10:42-44). The Son of Man who came to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many is Jesus. He accomplished this in his life and ministry but above all by his passion, death and Resurrection. In the words of Leslie Newbigin “The resurrection is the revelation to chosen witnesses of the fact that Jesus who died on the cross is indeed king – conqueror of death and sin, Lord and Saviour of all. The resurrection is not a reversal of defeat but the proclamation of a victory. The King reigns from the tree. The reign of God has indeed come upon us, and its sign is not a golden throne but a wooden cross.”⁵²

⁵¹ Cf. Ray Ekpu, *Newswatch*, 4th October 2010.

⁵² Leslie Newbigin, *Foolishness to the Greeks*, p. 127.

In the 2010 Ahajioku Lecture entitled “Nigerian Sectoral Underdevelopment and Leadership Challenges: The Igbo Perspective (Ka Obodo Were Ga N’iru)”, the presenter Prof. Chinedu Ositadinma Nebo sees servant leadership as the greatest leadership challenge of Nigeria today. For him “servant leadership is primarily a principle of leadership that believes that the leader is first and foremost a servant of his people or followers.”⁵³ Consequently, he paints a picture of such a leadership as follows: “Servant leadership sees leadership as a trust that should never be betrayed. It sees leadership from the perspective of influence and not that of coercion, intimidation, bullying, threats, dictatorship, etc. Servant leadership sees leadership as an opportunity to serve, using ones giftedness to bring about the greatest good to the greatest number of the people. Servant leadership embraces the principle that the leader is a *primus inter pares* and not a commander. Servant leadership has little room for ego wars that undermine the needs and welfare of the people... The model servant leader is our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. In one clear example we saw Him washing the feet of His disciples with the instruction to His followers to follow His example.”⁵⁴

Another advocate of servant leadership Prof. Hyacinth Ichoku in a paper delivered in a symposium during the 2016 Philosophy Week of the National Association of Philosophy Students at Seat of Wisdom Seminary, Ariam, Ikwuano Umuahia Abia State entitled *Inequalities, Social Violence and Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria* opines that “the key factor underlying the distribution of resources in any society is the power relation in that society.”⁵⁵ Power relation is here conceptualized as arising from networks, formal and informal affiliations, patron-client relationships, social and economic alliances which are the basis of claims and counter-claims in the political economy of any society. According to this eminent professor of Econometrics “In Nigeria, power relations and prebendal politics are root causes

⁵³ Chinedu Nebo, *Ahajioku Lecture 2010: Nigerian Sectoral Underdevelopment and Leadership Challenges: The Igbo Perspective (Ka Obodo Were Ga N’iru)*, p. 30.

⁵⁴ *Loc. Cit.*

⁵⁵ Hyacinth Ichoku, “*Inequalities, Social Violence and Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria*” in: *Lumen Christi*, Vol. 10 (June 2016-June 2017), p. 6.

of inequality.”⁵⁶ He further observes that “The struggle for power capture and patronage has increased the fissiparous tendencies in the country. The threats of secession, war and violence have therefore become the regular feature of Nigeria's inter-ethnic and intra-national relationship.”⁵⁷ In view of the present Nigerian political and revenue sharing formula which concentrates too much power and resources at the Federal level to the detriment of economic development of the subnational units, Ichoku affirms that “There is need for restructuring the Federal system through the redistribution of powers, resources and responsibilities between the Federal Government and the Federating States.”⁵⁸

Seven years after, the submissions of Professor Ichoku in the above-mentioned brilliant paper are more actual than ever. Politically, Nigeria is on the brink of disintegration because of secessionist violence along regional and tribal lines caused by political exclusion and marginalization. Economically, Nigeria, though rich in human and natural resources, is classified among the poorest countries of the world with more than 80 percent of its population living below the poverty line. As the political and economic situation worsens, the burning question of the moment in our national history is: “Who can salvage Nigeria?”

The Role Of The Church In Servant Leadership Education

The role of the Church in educating her members as servant leaders both ad intra and ad extra derives from her identity as a serving Church (*Ecclesia servans*) in accordance with the principle of *agere sequitur esse*. From the first beginning of her existence the Church is called to imitate her founder Jesus Christ “who came not to be served but to serve”. Consequently, the Church is by nature a servant (*serva*). The Church as servant is the ecclesiological model that underlies the Second Special Assembly of the Synod of Bishops for Africa which took place in Rome from 4th – 25th October 2010. The Theme of this Synod:

⁵⁶ *Loc. Cit.*, p.8.

⁵⁷ *Loc. Cit.*

⁵⁸ *Loc. Cit.*

“The Church in Africa in Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace. 'You are the Salt of the Earth ... You are the Light of the World (Mt 5:13-14)’ brings to relief the image of the Church as a servant.⁵⁹ Like her Lord and Master, she lives in order to serve. The form of her existence, again like that of her founder, should be pro-existence, that is to say, living for others. Since human beings are more inclined to be served than to serve others, the Church in Africa and in Nigeria in particular should constantly remind her members especially her ministers as well as leaders in the secular society that true leadership is first and foremost love and service of others.

Aside exhorting the lay faithful to participate actively in partisan politics in order to promote the common good (*bonum commune*) and transform the temporal order, the Catholic Church in Nigeria should establish Leadership School(s) or organize Leadership Forum for grooming or rather forging the future servant leaders of our country. Nigeria has not been able to achieve the desired greatness because most of the nation's past and present leaders didn't acquire necessary skills in leadership before taking up the mantle of leadership. In fact a former Head of State went to the University to study political science after ruling Nigeria. Leadership is a big challenge that requires certain skills to make positive impact on the lives of others. A leader that is not well groomed before assuming office is bound to falter and fail. By inculcating the philosophy of servant leadership into the future leaders of our country the Church contributes to the emergence and growth of a new democratic Nigeria.

Epilogue

Nearly forty years after, Chinua Achebe's diagnosis of “the problem” with Nigeria is more *ad rem* than ever. Our country is not just in trouble, but in tumult and turmoil. It is not only in distress but also in despair. There is insecurity everywhere, from East to West, from North to South. No corner of this geographical space is safe, even the Federal Capital Territory Abuja. Nigeria is

59 Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Africae munus*.

under siege by terrorists and bandits, kidnappers and armed robbers of all hues. And the steersman of the national ship seems to have lost control amidst the turbulent waters of sea navigation. At this point one cannot but ask: quo vadit Nigeria?, that is, “where is Nigeria heading to?”

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Nigeria is in dire need of a “new democratic steersman” and a “new democratic state-craft.” The forthcoming elections in 2023 offer Nigerians yet another golden opportunity to change the steersman of the national ship and usher in a new state-craft inspired by the principle of servant leadership. Servant leadership is not only an imperative but also the parameter for measuring the manifestos of all the political parties and their candidates in the forthcoming elections in 2023.

In fine, servant leadership is an idea whose time has come. It has prevailed in other democratic entities and nothing can stop it from prevailing in Nigerian democracy.

Bibliography

- Achebe, Chinua, *The Trouble with Nigeria*, Edinburgh: Heinemann, 1984.
- Benedict XVI, *Jesus of Nazareth vol 1.*, New York: Doubleday, 2007.
- , *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Africae Munus, African Commitment*, Vatican City, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2009.
- Ekpu, Ray, in: *Newswatch*, 4th October 2010.
- Ichoku, Hyacinth, “Inequalities, Social Violence and Sustainable Democracy in Nigeria”, in: *Lumen Christi vol. 10* (June 2016-June 2017), pp.6-8.
- Jaspers, Karl, *Die Maßgebenden Menschen: Sokrates, Buddha, Konfuzius, Jesus*, München, Piper Verlag GmbH, 2013.
- Kant, Immanuel, *Grundlegung zur Metaphysik der Sitten - Foundations of the Metaphysics of Morals*, trans. by Lewis White Beck, New York: The Liberal Arts Press, Inc., 1959.

Nebo, Chinedu, Ahiajoku Lecture 2010 "Nigerian Sectoral Underdevelopment and Leadership Challenges: The Igbo Perspective (Ka Obodo Were Ga N'iru)."
Newbiggin, Lesslie, Foolishness to the Greeks, London: SPCK, 2001.