

CHAPTER 1

THE HISTORY AND GROWTH OF THE CATHOLIC DIOCESE OF AUCHI UP TO THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF HER CREATION

Michael Ogunu

History

The history of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Auchi dates back to the latter part of the 19th century when the first Roman Catholic Missionaries arrived at Agenebode in the present Etsako East Local Government Area of Edo State. Although, evidences abound of earlier contacts of the Christian missionaries with the indigenes of Agenebode and environs, the officially recorded date for this is 1884 when Catholic priests started visiting Agenebode and environs from their then headquarters in Lokoja. Later on, the missionary headquarters was moved from Lokoja to Asaba. Rt. Rev. Monsignor Carlos Zappa became the prefect of the upper Niger at that time in Asaba. As Prefect, Monsignor Zappa again successfully resumed evangelization works into the interior of Agenebode and its surrounding towns through the River Niger. In 1897, a parish was officially erected at Agenebode (the first parish in the Diocese) with Rev. Fr. Peter Piotin, SMA, as the first parish priest. From Agenebode, other parish stations were opened in Etsako at Ivianokpodi, Iviukwe, Okpekpe and Apana. In 1908, he

established the first Major Seminary in Nigeria, St. Martin's Seminary at Ivianokpodi. The seminary was later transferred to Asaba in 1927 by Bishop Broderick. Among the Seminarians who moved from the seminary at Ivianokpodi to Asaba was the late Rev. Fr. Paul Emechete, the first Nigeria Priest, and the late Rt. Rev. Monsignor Joseph Agbodio Erameh, a native of Anebette in South Uneme Clan in present Etsako Central Local Government Area of Edo State.

With the death of Bishop Broderick in 1933, Bishop Leo Taylor was appointed his successor in 1934. Bishop Taylor who came to Asaba-Benin Vicariate from Lagos where he was principal of St. Gregory's College, created Uzairue Parish in 1935, with Fr. J. J. Healy as the first parish priest. Bishop Taylor ordained the first Edo priest who was also the second indigenous priest of the Vicariate Apostolic of Western Nigeria in the person of the late Rt. Rev. Monsignor Joseph Agbodio Erameh at Asaba, on December 20, 1936, and transferred the major seminary there to Benin City in 1938. Bishop Taylor was succeeded in the Asaba-Benin Vicariate by Bishop Patrick Joseph Kelly in the same year. With the unparalleled pastoral zeal of Bishop Kelly, the Catholic faith spread in Afemai land as in other areas of Benin ecclesiastical province by leaps and bounds.

In 1973, Bishop Kelly retired and handed over the Diocese of Benin City to Bishop Patrick Ebosele Ekpu (now Archbishop Ekpu rtd). As an indigenous bishop, Most Rev. Dr. Patrick Ekpu knew from the onset that the task of evangelizing the diocese was onerous. Fr. John Baur in his book entitled *2000 Years of Christianity in Africa* aptly remarks that “A local church run by foreign missionaries would be an anomaly”. Conscious of this fact, Archbishop Ekpu worked very hard to encourage growth in the number of indigenous clergy. He adopted various strategies and with fervent prayers, many more indigenous priests were ordained and new parishes were created. As at December 30th, 2002 the parishes in Etsako were as follows: Sacred Heart Parish, Agenebode, Holy Rosary Parish, Uzairue, Assumption Parish, Udaba, St. Vincent's Parish, Auchi, St. Teresa's Parish, Avianwu, St. Phillip's

Parish, Jattu, St. Vincent's Parish, Okpilla, St. Mary's Parish, Iviukwe, Mary, Mother of God Parish, Okpekpe and Holy Family Parish, Igiode.

The Catholic Church, during the episcopacy of Bishop P. J. Kelly also established four secondary schools in the area: Our Lady of Fatima College, Auchi, St. John's College, Fugar, St. Angela's Girls' Grammar School, Uzairue and St. Peter's College, Agenebode. These institutions were taken over by Government in 1973. Archbishop Ekpu's repeated attempts to have the schools returned to the Catholic Mission foundered on the stony rock of NUT's blind opposition to Government's attempt to return erstwhile Voluntary Agency schools to their rightful owners.

The Mission also established a hospital, Notre Dame Hospital, at Uzairue and a Medical Centre at Agenebode.

The history of the Catholic Church in the Diocese of Auchi would not be complete without accounts of its spread to Akoko-Edo and Owan Local Government Areas of the Diocese, which, with Etsako, constitute the geo-political areas comprising the Diocese.

In contrast to the warm welcome which the early Catholic Missionaries received in Etsako, their experience in Akoko-Edo and Owan Local Government Areas was one of initial resistance, if not down-right hostility, by the Church Missionary Society (the Anglicans) which was the first Christian Mission to establish its presence in the areas. The relatively slow pace of conversion to the Catholic faith and of vocations to the Catholic priesthood in the areas up-to-date can be attributed, in part, to this historical fact.

The first appearance of the Catholic Church in Akoko-Edo was recorded in Imoga in the early 20th century (c. 1911) and later in Igarra (c. 1916) through the Catholic missionaries based in Lokoja and Okene. Among the priests who came from Okene to plant the Catholic faith in Akoko-Edo were Rev. Fathers Keenan, Walsh, Felin, Mcfadden and Conboy.

In 1954, St. John the Apostle Parish was created by Bishop Kelly, with Fr. Morris Maquire SMA as the first parish priest. For a long time the whole of Akoko-Edo was one parish, St. John the Apostle parish. In 1983 St. Anne's Parish, Ososo was created by Archbishop Ekpu and in November 2001, Ibillo became a Mass Centre with a resident priest.

In 2002 St. John the Apostle Parish, Igarra had 11 outstations, St. Anne's, Ososo, 11 and Ibillo Mass Centre, 12.

The Catholic faith came into Owan from two directions, namely, through Uzairue in Etsako and Uromi in Esan land. Records indicate that itinerant Catholic missionaries from Uzairue under Fr. Piotin passed through Ihievbe, Uokha to Otuo (all in Owan East) and returned through Igarra back to Uzairue about 1933. With regard to the Western area of Owan, the faith came through Uromi and later, Ekpoma in 1955. Thus while all Catholic areas of Owan East were outstations of Holy Rosary Parish, Uzairue, those of the West were first under St. Anthony's Parish, Uromi and later under Mary the Queen Parish, Ekpoma.

Between 1945 and 1947, attempts were made by the Catholic missionaries to establish a primary school at Afuze as a first step to establishing a church there. These attempts were strongly resisted by the Church Missionary Society (CMS). In 1948, a Catholic primary school was eventually established at Afuze-Emai. At present, there are three parishes and two mass centres in Owan: St. Joseph's at Eme-ora, St. Jude's at Afuze-emai, St. Thomas Moore, Sobe, St. Joseph mass centre Otuo and St. Patrick's Mass centre, Ozalla, while St. Thomas Moore Parish, at Sobe was ceded to the Diocese of Auchi from Ondo Diocese in 2003; St. Mary's Catholic Girl's Grammar School at Eme-Ora was established in 1965, while St. James Catholic Grammar School, Afuze-Emai was established in 1969.

On May 22, 1981, Archbishop Ekpu divided the Diocese of Benin City (now Archdiocese) into three Deaneries, viz: Benin City,

Esan and Afemai. He did this “for the greater glory of God and in order to make for the better efficiency and promote greater zeal in pastoral efforts of the priests of the Diocese”. Thus, the creation of the Deaneries was meant to bring about administrative efficiency and pastoral effectiveness. Afemai Deanery remained a Deanery from 1981 to 2002 when it was raised to the status of a Diocese the Diocese of Auchi. Geopolitically, the Diocese covers Etsako Central, Etsako East, Etsako West, Owan East, Owan West and Akoko-Edo Local Government Areas of Edo State.

The struggle for the Diocese of Auchi actually began in the early 1980's. Year in, year out, the sons and daughters waited patiently for this gift to their land, but to no avail until finally on the 4th of December, 2002, the news came: Auchi Diocese has been created and Gabriel Ghieakhomo Dunia has been appointed its first Bishop. It was a joyful news not just because of the long expectation of it, but because with the church “nearer home”, evangelization will continue to be closer and made abundantly within the reach of the people more than ever before. And so it has been since then.

As at the date of the proclamation of its creation, 4th December, 2002, the Diocese had a total population of 723,905 out of which, 63,480 (8.8%) were Catholics, 39 priests, 37 of which were diocesan and 2 religious, 38 female religious and 14 parishes. St. Thomas Moore Parish, Sobe was later added, bringing the total number of parishes to 15.

There are also many Afemai sisters and priests in international congregations in Nigeria and in foreign countries. Among them are Rev. Fr. Jude Oseni Ogunu OMV, the first African Priest of the Congregation of the Oblates of the Virgin Mary, ordained by Pope John Paul II in Rome in 1985 and Rev. Fr. Daniel Aigbona CSSR, the first Nigerian Redemptorist priest.

Developments

Since the creation of the Diocese in 2002, there have been significant developments in the Diocese both in terms of pastoral structures and human growth. A statistical presentation of the growth in some of the items in the development of the Diocese is displayed in the table below:

STATISTICS ON THE GROWTH OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH IN AUCHI DIOCESE 2002 – 2021

S/N	Item	Total at Creation (2002)	Present Total (End of 2021)	Percentage Increase (%)
1.	Population (Catholics)	63,480	120,000	89
2.	Diocesan Priests	37	98	165
3.	Male Religious	2	17	750
4.	Female Religious	38	87	129
5.	Major Seminarists	50	66	32
6.	Catechists	28	79	182
7.	Parishes	15	33	120
8.	Mass Centres	1	25	2400
9.	Nursery/Primary Schools	14	27	93
10.	Secondary Schools	2	10	400

Source of Statistics for 2002 – 2021: Chancery, Catholic Diocese of Auchi 2021

As can be seen from the table, the population of Catholics in the Diocese grew by 89% from 63,480 in 2002 to 120,000 in 2021, while the number of parishes increased by 120% from 15 (2002) to 33 (2021) and Mass Centres increased by 2400% from 1 (2002) to 25 (2021).

Perhaps, the greatest increases in terms of personnel for the work of evangelisation were in the numbers of the Diocesan Priests which increased by 165% from 37 in 2002 to 98 in 2021, Male Religious which increased by 750% and Catechists which increased by 182%. It is also worthy of note that there was appreciable increase in the population of Catholics in the Diocese from 63,480 at the time of creation (2002) to 120,000 in 2021. That the percentage increase in the

population of Catholics is not as spectacular as one would have expected, can be accounted for by many factors, including Islamic predominance in the total population of the area covered by the Diocese, the influence of Pentecostalism with its promise of immediate materials rewards and lack of suffering for those who believe and the high rate of rural-urban migration which was quite significant during the period under consideration.

There is no doubt whatsoever that, all things considered, the Diocese has fared well during the 20 years of her existence. The period, among other things, witnessed the establishment of a Minor Seminary at Ivianokpodi, the growth in the number of Nursery/Primary and Secondary Schools from 14 Nursery/Primary Schools in 2002 to 27 in 2021 and from 2 Secondary Schools in 2002 to 10 in 2021 (in addition to the 54 Catholic Schools taken over by Civil Government) as well as the establishment of many communities of Consecrated Women Religious in the Diocese among which are the following:

- Sisters of Perpetual Eucharistic Adoration Community at Agenebode,
- Sisters of Notre Dame Community at Jattu with a Postulant formation house at Fugar,
- Sisters of Sacred Heart Communities at Auchi, Eme-ora and Iddo II, Okpella,
- Sisters of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus (home for the needy) at Ivioghe, Agenebode and
- Mother of Perpetual Help of the Archangels Sisters.

Conclusion

These 20 years would have been futile without the paternal care and guidance of His Lordship, Most Rev. Dr. Gabriel Dunia, the Bishop of

the Diocese, who stood firm in supporting his priests and people in order to bring the faith to every nook and cranny of the Diocese.

The priests and religious as well as the lay faithful, working in consonance with the Bishop have also put in enormous efforts to see to the growth of the Church in Auchi Diocese.

The celebration of the 20th anniversary of the Diocese should therefore be one of great jubilation and thanksgiving for all that God has enabled the Diocese to achieve despite daunting economic challenges. But beyond the jubilation, the occasion should be seen as an opportunity which the good Lord has gratuitously given us to re-examine the nature of our individual and collective response to the divine mandate we all have by virtue of our baptism to foster the extension of the Church founded by Christ in the Diocese which, by Divine providence, is our Diocese of origin, calling to mind the admonition of St. Paul to the Colossians in Col. 3:23: “Whatever you do, work at it with all your heart, as though you were working for the Lord and not for men ... for Christ is the real master you serve”. How we relate with our Chief Shepherd (the Bishop of the Diocese) and to one another in terms of what we do or fail to do impacts positively or negatively on non-Catholics' attitude to the Church and her growth in the Diocese. There is therefore urgent need for mutual forgiveness in whatever way we have hurt one another and work towards achievement of greater unity, cooperation and love among all the members of Christ's faithful in the Diocese in order to take the Diocese to greater height in terms of evangelization.

The Diocese of Auchi is 20 years old! To God be the glory.

“From the rising of the sun to its setting may the name of the Lord be praised!”
(Ps. 112).