

THE TITHE: NOT A CATHOLIC PRACTICE¹

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Abstract

Tradition testifies that the Church first lives out her faith before she dogmatizes it. The Dogmas of the Church, therefore, are the product of her lived faith. It is the faith of the Church lived out over a period of time that is codified as a tenet of her belief and worship. When a dogma is formulated, it becomes binding on all believers as expressive of their faith.

The reverse becomes the case when the Church stands against a practice and does not consider it as part of the deposit of her faith and practice. Viewed from the latter perspective, the recent incursion and practice of the Tithe in some Catholic parishes in the country has caused some disturbance among the Catholic faithful and calls for some theological reflection.

Key Words: Tithe Collection; Tradition; Sustenance; Church Hierarchy.

Preamble

A common theological dictum says: *Do not disturb the faith of the weak believer who does not need to be disturbed.* The implication of this aphorism is that if such theological disturbance would yield a positive result, then the weak believer should indeed be disturbed. But if on the contrary the reverse could be the case, it is, therefore, neither expedient nor morally permissible to introduce such a theological disturbance that could lead to loss of faith, which is a greater harm indeed. There are echoes of this stance in the recent Post-Synodal papal document on the Second African Synod of Bishops titled: *Africæ Munus*. One such echo states: “The contribution of Christians in Africa will only be decisive if their understanding of the faith shapes their understanding of the world.”² This is an underlying factor in the practice of the Christian faith in our Continent, with particular reference to Nigeria. The Fathers at the Synod got it right when they clearly spelt out that:

The task we have to set for ourselves is not an easy one, situated as it is somewhere between immediate engagement in politics which lies outside the Church’s direct competence and the potential for withdrawal or evasion present in a theological and

¹ This article was originally published by the *Good Shepherd*, a weekly publication of the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja (Nigeria) in 2010 in a form that was meant to serve the Laity. The original thoughts have been revised and articulated afresh as a scientific and scholarly contribution. Here in this publication, the article is given a scholarly bent that serves the need of the *APT*. This is the first scholarly write-up from me on this subject.

² Benedict XVI, *Africæ Munus*, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Bishops, Clergy, Consecrated Persons and the Lay Faithful on *the Church in Africa in Service to reconciliation, Justice and Peace*, n. 32.

spiritual speculation which could serve as an escape from concrete historical responsibility.³

The current wave of the practice of the *tithe* in some Catholic parishes in the country has caused some *faith disturbance* among some traditional Catholics who now feel that their faith is being disturbed for no justifiable reason. This is the backdrop of the genesis of this investigation, which is geared towards fostering and strengthening the faith of those Catholics who feel aggrieved since their non-compliant posture is often misconstrued by their fellow Catholics, as being anti-Catholic.

Source and origin of Catholic practices

It is important to note, from the outset, that Mother Church does not on her own authority and free volition introduce or invent anything in her belief, worship and life that does not originate from, or is not traceable to the words, actions or teachings of Our Lord Jesus Christ. The words, teachings and actions of Jesus are contained in the Sacred Scriptures, the Tradition and the Magisterium of the Church. The *Africæ Munus* articulated this position of the Church thus:

The Word of God and the testimony of life go together. But testimony on its own is not enough either, for "even the finest witness will prove ineffective in the long run if it is not explained and justified - what Peter called always having your answer ready for people who ask you the reason for the hope you all have" - and made explicit by a clear and unequivocal proclamation of the Lord Jesus.⁴

The Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation (henceforth abbreviated: *DV*) of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council notes with precision:

The Church has always venerated the divine Scriptures as she venerated the Body of the Lord, in so far as she never ceases, particularly in the Sacred Liturgy, to partake of the bread of life and to offer it to the faithful from the one table of the Word of God and the Body of Christ. She has always regarded, and continues to regard the Scriptures, taken together with Sacred Tradition, as the Supreme rule of her faith.⁵

What the above norm of *DV* affirms as orthodox practice of the Church is that everything Mother Church does and teaches is based on the authority of Our Lord Jesus Christ, either as evidenced in the Sacred Scriptures or contained in the Sacred Tradition of the Church. In consonance with this norm of the *DV*, the *Africæ Munus* eloquently stated as follows:

³ Benedict XVI, *Africæ Munus* n. 17

⁴ Benedict XVI, *Africæ Munus*, n. 32

⁵ Vatican Council II, "Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation", n.21, in Flannery A., ed. *Vatican Council II: The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents* (New York⁴, 1988) 762.

For her mission of evangelisation, the Church in Africa draws upon several sources: sacred Scripture, tradition and the Sacramental life...the Church's ministry builds effectively upon the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. Moreover, the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* is a guide to the Church's Mission as "Mother and Teacher" in the world and in Society...⁶

This is a fundamental theological point of departure [*terminus ad quo*] and the expected point of arrival [*terminus ad quem*] of our investigation. From the above text, the bond of unity between the Sacred Scripture, Tradition and the Sacraments is testimony of how the Sacred Scripture and the Church's Sacraments and praxis are not diametrically opposed to one another but rather affirm each other. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* makes this remarkable distinction between the Sacred Scripture and Tradition:

The living transmission, accomplished in the Holy Spirit, is called Tradition, since it is distinct from Sacred Scripture, though closely connected to it. Through Tradition, *the Church, in her doctrine, life, and worship perpetuates and transmits to every generation all that she herself is, all that she believes*.⁷

Now, with regard to the relationship between Sacred Scripture and Tradition, the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* further stipulates:

Sacred Tradition and Sacred Scripture, then, are bound closely together and communicate one with the other. For both of them, flowing out from the same divine well-spring come together in some fashion to form one thing and move towards the same goal. Each of them makes present and fruitful in the Church the mystery of Christ, who promised to remain with his own *always, to the close of the age*.⁸

Going by the Jewish religious system, Jesus was not a priest because he belonged to the Davidic Kingly dynasty. His priesthood bears no earthly descent but completely divine. The only earthly comparism to his priesthood was that of Melchizedek from the point of view that Melchizedek's priesthood had neither origin nor end, but was eternal.⁹ Because Jesus' priesthood did not descend from the Levitical priesthood, his priesthood could not enjoy the privileges attached to the Levitical priesthood such as the tithe. Strictly speaking, therefore, the Tithe goes against the priesthood of Jesus which is not based on human descent but of divine origin. The text from the Letter to the Hebrews is quite instructive. It states:

⁶ Benedict XVI, *Africæ Munus*, n. 95.

⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 78 (Boston, MA, USA², 1994) 25. [Henceforth abbreviated: CCC].

⁸ John Paul II, *Catechism*, n. 80.

⁹ Psalm 109/110.

Melchizedek, King of Salem, a priest of God Most High, went to meet Abraham who was on his way back after defeating the Kings, and blessed him; and also that it was to him that Abraham gave a tenth of all that he had. By the interpretation of his name, he is, first, King of righteousness and also King of Salem, that is, King of peace; he has no father, mother or ancestry, and his life has no beginning or ending; he is like the Son of God. He remains a priest for ever.

Now think how great this man must have been, if the patriarch Abraham paid him a tenth of the treasure he had captured. We know that any of the descendants of Levi who are admitted to the priesthood are obliged by the Law to take tithes from the people, and this is taking them from their own brothers although they too are descended from Abraham. But this man, who was not of the same descent, took his tenth from Abraham, and he gave his blessing to the holder of the promises. Now, it is indisputable that a blessing is given by a superior to an inferior. Further, in the one case it is ordinary mortal men who receive the tithes, and in the other, someone who is declared to be still alive. It could be said that Levi himself, who receives tithes, actually paid them, in the person of Abraham, because he was still in the loins of his ancestor when Melchizedek came to meet him.¹⁰

The issues here are as follows: Firstly, the tithe and its practice preceded the descendants of Abraham. Secondly, Melchizedek to whom Abraham paid tithes was not of the Jewish race and so the practice of tithe is not of Jewish origin but pertains to the whole Ancient Near East region. Thirdly, the tithe, strictly speaking does not originate from monthly earnings but rather from the *product of one's labour*, whatever that labour entailed. Abraham paid it on his return from his conquest expeditions, and not from monthly earning. Fourthly, the tithe, from its etymological derivation and practice, as evidenced in the above cited text from the Letter to the Hebrews, was not primarily tied up with sustenance of the priest, in this case to Melchizedek, but with cult and thanksgiving to God for the successful expedition of Abraham. Fifthly, among the Israelites, however, the tithe had a different origin and practice. It was attached to priestly sustenance. And more so, it was attached to a particular tribe, the tribe of Levi.

The Old Testament Priesthood and the Jewish practice of Tithe

The fundamental scriptural text for the practice of the Tithe in the religious history of the people of Israel is found in the Book of Genesis.¹¹ Here in the text, Israel as a nation-state was still in the loins of Abraham and not yet born. The priesthood of Melchizedek pre-existed and was superior to the later priesthood of the Levites, the descendants of Abraham, because Abraham submitted himself to the priesthood of Melchizedek by receiving blessing from the latter and paying Tithe to him as attested to in the Hebrew text cited above. Again, in the narrative about the dream of Jacob, the

¹⁰ Heb. 7:1-10.

¹¹ Genesis 14: 18-20.

grandchild of Abraham, Jacob pledged to give to God a tenth of all his possessions if God protected him and brought him safely back to his Father's house, from the journey he had embarked upon.¹² In these two different scriptural texts, Tithe has two objectives: Thanksgiving sacrifice and Pledge to God. In both instances, the nation of Israel was not yet born. When later in the book of Leviticus, at which period the Jewish nation had come into existence both politically and religiously, there emerged as well a third meaning and significance of the notion of Tithe. In the Book of Joshua we read: "to the tribe of Levi alone no land was given. Yahweh the God of Israel was their inheritance as he had told them."¹³ In accordance with the divine decree, the children of Levi were apportioned towns or areas to live in the lands belonging to the remaining eleven children of Jacob.¹⁴

Now, in the Book of Leviticus, the tithe became a cultic and legal prescription to be faithfully observed. The instruction read: "In all tithes of flock or herd, the tenth animal of all that passed under the herdman's staff shall be a thing dedicated to Yahweh."¹⁵ The final stage of the regulation regarding the tithe: "See, to the Levites I give as their inheritance all the tithes collected in Israel, in return for their services, for the ministry they render in the Tent of Meeting."¹⁶ From this time onwards, the tithe became a payment for sustenance made to the priestly tribe of Levi. To further buttress this point, the text states:

The Levites will take care of the Tent of Meeting and have the full responsibility for it. This is the law forever for all your descendants; because of this the Levites are to have no inheritance among the Israelites. The Tithes that the people of Israel set aside for Yahweh, I give to the Levites for their inheritance. For this reason I have told them that they are to have no inheritance among the people of Israel. Yahweh spoke to Moses and said: „You are to say to the Levites: when you receive the tithe that the people of Israel must pay and which I am giving you as your inheritance, you are to set aside a part of this as a special contribution for Yahweh. This will take the place of the offerings of new grain and new wine that all the people have to give me. Thus, you too will set aside a share for Yahweh, of all the tithes you receive from the Israelites, and you will give to Aaron the Priest this part you have set aside for Yahweh. Out of all the gifts you receive you will set aside the best as a share for Yahweh.¹⁷

It is worth noting at this juncture that even the Levites were not exempt from the law governing the tithe.¹⁸ The Levites were obliged to set aside some portion of the tithes collected from the people of Israel and to pay this choicest and special portion to Aaron the priest. Aaron and his children, therefore, were the Priests in the priestly clan. Thus, the

¹² Genesis 28: 12-22.

¹³ Jos. 13:14.

¹⁴ Jos. 21:1ff.

¹⁵ Lev. 27:32.

¹⁶ Num. 18:21.

¹⁷ Num. 18:23-29.

¹⁸ Cf. Heb. 7: 11-28.

Aaronine priests became the High Priestly Class and by virtue of this privileged position they alone did not pay Tithe to anyone but received tithes in the name of Yahweh from their fellow tribesmen. The Aaronine priests alone ministered to Yahweh in the Temple in Jerusalem. Theologically, it could be inferred that the one priesthood embodied in Aaron's family and the One Temple in Jerusalem may be linked to Jewish Monotheism.

Old Testament Theology of the Tithe

The tithe, in Jewish religion, is an offering dedicated to God. Technically, it was attached to priesthood and in this case, only to the priestly clan of Levi. Even when the Tithe was offered as peace offering to Yahweh, the priest had his own share as established by the law.¹⁹ Another theological bent to the Tithe is that it called to mind that the Old Testament priesthood was fundamentally tied up with consanguine descent. The Old Testament Priesthood was not a vocation in the sense of a *call* according to the New Testament usage but only when viewed from the divine election that was hereditary and not transferable to non-Levites. The Priesthood in the Old Testament was strictly limited. One was not called to the Old Testament Priesthood but born into the priestly clan. Tithe in the Old Testament necessarily was a technical terminology. It was tied up to cult and lineage. Tithe was strictly exclusive and did not admit or made any room for admission of other people outside of the Levitical tribe.

Contributions in the Early Church

All through the New Testament, there is no mention or reference to the *Tithe*. The omission was not accidental or a case of forgetfulness. It was deliberate and for a clear purpose. The persecution that followed their expulsion from the Jewish religious practice made the followers to disperse. However, wherever the followers found themselves, they preached Jesus as the Christ and gathered together to *Break the Bread* in his memory especially on Sunday, the day Our Lord rose from death. The conscious and deliberate avoidance of the term by the early Christians was due to the technicality of the term which made it to be strictly associated with the cultic acts of the Levitical priesthood. Likewise, the term *Liturgy* was also tied to the ministry of the Levites and no one outside of the tribe could appropriate the term. The expulsion from the Temple and the dispersion of the early Christians following their persecution combined to bring about the formation of the early Christians into a separate religious body distinct from the traditional Jewish religious system. With the grouping of the early followers of Jesus into a religious body or *sect*, they were referred to then, there arose other needs such as *welfare, sustenance, governance, evangelisation, etc.*

To support the nascent and fast growing Church, some members made contributions by selling their properties and brought the proceeds to the Apostles as

¹⁹ Cf. Lev. 7:28-38.

read in the Acts of the Apostles.²⁰ As a matter of fact, it was a bid to cater for the Widows among the early followers that brought about the *Institution* of the Order of Deacon.²¹ Furthermore, in a bid to support some poor communities, the more established Churches made contributions that were sent to these Churches in need.²²

In no place whatsoever in the New Testament was Tithe cited as one of the means by which the early Church supported the Churches in need or their Clergy. The early Church distanced herself from anything that connoted Levitical Priesthood and their Cultic practices. It was this distancing of the early Christian Community from the Old Testament religious practices, following their earlier expulsion from the Temple worship that won for the early Christians the appellation: *The people of the New Way*.

New Testament Theology of the Priesthood

Jesus was not a priest by Jewish religious standard and tradition. His priesthood bears no earthly descent but completely divine. Commenting on the first letter of St Peter, St Bede the Venerable opined:

You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood This compliment was addressed through Moses in time gone by to God's people and now the apostle Peter rightly addresses it to the Gentiles. For they have come to believe in Christ, who as the cornerstone has associated the Gentiles with the salvation which belonged to Israel. He calls them *a chosen race* on account of their faith, to distinguish them from those who rejected the living rock and themselves have been rejected. He calls them a *royal priesthood* because they are members of the body of the supreme King and true priest. As King he grants to his people a Kingdom; as high priest he washes away their sins by the sacrifice of his own blood. He names them a *royal priesthood* as a reminder to hope for an eternal Kingdom, and to offer to God without ceasing the sacrifice of a sinless life. They are called also *a holy nation and God's own people*, in accordance with the apostle Paul's explanation of the teaching of the prophet: *My righteous one lives by faith; and if he shrinks back, my soul shall have no pleasure in him.* But we are not of those who shrink back and are destroyed, but of those who have faith and keep their souls. And in the Acts of the Apostles Saint Paul says: *The Holy Spirit has made you guardians to rule the Church of the Lord which he obtained with his own blood.* We have become *God's own people* through the blood of our Redeemer; for in time gone by the people of Israel was redeemed from Egypt by the blood of the lamb.²³

All the baptized share in the common three-fold office of Jesus: *Priesthood, Kingship and Prophecy*. The *Africæ Munus* understood the need for the African Church to

²⁰ Acts 2:42-47.

²¹ Acts 6:1-7.

²² Rom.15:25-29; 2Cor. 8:1-2; 9:1-15; Acts 4:32-37.

²³ Bede the Venerable, *Commentary on the First Letter of St Peter*, Culled from: PAUL VI, *The Divine Office: The Liturgy of the Hours according to the Roman Rite*, vol. II (London-Dublin, 1974) 533-534.

put to practice these offices which make us Christ's followers and so admonished. *Catechesis must therefore integrate its theoretical dimension, which deals with concepts to be learned by heart, and its practical dimension, which is experienced at the spiritual, ecclesial, cultural and charitable levels....*²⁴

To codify in dogmatic terms the new theology of the Christian priesthood, Vatican Council II Fathers noted with clarity:

God who wills that all men be saved and come to the knowledge of the truth (1 Tim. 2:4); who in many times and various ways spoke of old to the fathers through the prophets (Heb. 1:1) when the fullness of time had come sent his Son, the Word made flesh, anointed by the Holy Spirit, to preach the Gospel to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart, to be a bodily and spiritual medicine: the Mediator between God and man. For his humanity united with the Person of the Word was the instrument of our salvation. Therefore, in Christ the perfect achievement of our reconciliation came forth and the fullness of divine worship was given to us.

*The wonderful works of God among the people of the Old Testament were but a prelude to the work of Christ Our Lord in redeeming mankind and giving perfect glory to God. He achieved his task principally by the paschal mystery of his blessed passion, resurrection from the dead, and glorious ascension, whereby dying, he destroyed our death, and rising, restored our life. For it was from the side of Christ as he slept the sleep of death upon the cross that there came forth the wondrous sacrament of the whole Church.*²⁵

The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy makes a clear distinction between the dispensation priesthood and that of Christ in the New Testament. Both priesthoods little in common and their ends and objectives are indisputably different. Another no SC succinctly states: *

The Liturgy, then, is rightly seen as an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ. It involves the presentation of man's sanctification under the guise of signs perceptible by the senses and its accomplishment in ways appropriate to each of these signs. In it full public worship is performed by the Mystical Body of Jesus Christ, that is, by the Head and his members.

From this it follows that every liturgical celebration, because it is an action of Christ the Priest and of his Body, which is the Church, is a sacred action surpassing all others. No other action of the Church can equal its efficacy by the same title and to the same degree.²⁶

It follows, therefore, that the priesthood of the New Testament is that of Christ, the Mediator between Man and God. No practice or practices that belie

²⁴ Benedict XVI, n. 165, pp.81-82.

²⁵ Vatican Council II, *The Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*, n. 5, in Flannery, A., *Vatican Council II*, 3.

²⁶ Vatican Council II, *The Constitution*, n.7.

priesthood of Jesus or put it on the same pedestal as that of the Old Testament is/are to be tolerated. The priesthood of Jesus stands as a Class of its own. The priesthood of all the baptized is but a *participation in the self-same priesthood of Jesus*. Jesus is the Priest of the New Testament.

Contributions in the Church Today

The Decree on the Apostolate of Lay Peoples (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*), states:

Participants in the function of Christ, Priest, Prophet and King, the Laity have an active part of their own in the life and action of the Church. Their action within the Church communities is so necessary that without it the apostolate of the Pastors will frequently be unable to obtain its full effect. Following the footsteps of men and women who assisted Paul in the proclamation of the gospel [cf. Acts 18:18-26; Rom. 16:3], Lay persons of genuinely apostolic spirit supply the needs of their brothers and are a source of consolation no less to the pastors than to the rest of the faithful [cf. I Cor. 16:17-18]....²⁷

Contributions in the Catholic Church are well organised, coordinated and ecclesial oriented. There is a *tripartite structure* in Church Collections: 1. The Vatican Collections [for the Universal Church]; 2. The Local Church Collections [The Arch/Diocesan Collections]; 3. Parish Collections [the lowest unit in the Church's hierarchical ladder]. The Vatican Collections are made annually, quarterly or periodically. The Arch/Diocesan Collections are clearly publicized in the local bulletins and announced in the parishes. The practice varies from diocese to diocese. The Parish Collections are usually published in parish bulletins and announced to parishioners.

In Nigeria, the Vatican Collections are: Holy Child, Pontifical Mission Society, Holy Places, Peter's Pence, Opus Caritatis, Mission Sunday, etc. The Arch/Diocesan Collections are the followings: Aid/Health, Laity Council, PMS Office Maintenance, Lenten Appeal, Poor (Holy Thursday), Youth (CYON), Communications, Seminary, Catechists, Social Welfare, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Nigeria Confederation of Women Religious, Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC), (Bishop/Priestly) Ordination, Quarterly Returns, Catedraticum, Projects, etc. The Parish Collections differ from Parish to Parish. In general, the following are the parish collections in some Arch/Dioceses: *AMC, Stole Fees, Harvest and Bazaar, Workers salaries, Projects, Priests' upkeep, Bills [Electric, Water, Post Office], Birthdays in the month, Weekly Parish Collections: Sunday Mass Collections, Child dedication, Special Collections, Thanksgivings, Pre-harvest levies, etc.*

²⁷ Vatican Council II, *Decree On the Apostolate of Lay People*, n. 10, A. Flannery, ed., *Vatican Council II*, 777.

It is important to observe that Church Collections are made in the spirit contributing to the growth and the spread of the faith, and for the welfare of the Church. That is why collections in the Church, strictly speaking, do not attract penalties, especially for those who cannot sincerely afford the contributions. The reason for this is that Church is *not a business venture* and the Sacraments of the Church are not for *salvation*. Therefore, these collections do not fall within the category of civic duties but are strictly religious and pastoral.

Theology of Contributions in the Church

The Church draws her theology on her contributions from the actions, activities and teachings of Jesus Christ. Furthermore, Mother Church relies on the repertoire of tradition for the building up of her faith and practices. The *New Catechism of the Catholic Church* states as follows:

From the very beginning Christians have brought, along with the bread and wine for the Eucharist, gifts to share with those in need. This custom of *Collection*, even though appropriate, is inspired by the example of Christ who became poor to make us rich.²⁸

To buttress that this action is strictly Liturgical and traces down to the early Church time, the *CCC* cited the earliest liturgical document extant, the *Apology of St Justin the Martyr*:

Those who are well off, and who are also willing, give as each chooses. What is gathered is given to him who presides to assist orphans and widows, those whom illness or any other cause has deprived of resources, prisoners, immigrants and, in a word, all who are in need.²⁹

The above norm of the *CCC* is strictly applied to offering or collection during liturgical celebration which we refer to as *Offertory Collection*. The *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* of the Vatican Council II stipulates as follows regarding Offertory Collection:

Then the gifts are brought up to the altar. It is both meaningful and desirable that the faithful should bring up the bread and wine; [...] Money and other gifts for the poor or for the Church may be collected from the faithful and carried to the altar; but these should not be put on the altar itself; they can be deposited in some other convenient place.³⁰

²⁸ John Paul II, *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1351 (New York², 1999) 304.

²⁹ *Ibidem*.

³⁰ Congregation for Divine Worship and Discipline of the Sacraments, *General Instruction on the Roman Missal* n. 49, in Flannery A., (Ed.), *Vatican Council II*, 175.

It is based on this theology that other collections in the Church are made as explicated above. There is only one *Offertory Collection* at any Eucharistic celebration. And that forms part of the celebration. Any other collection, strictly speaking, is aliturgical. Such other collections are for pastoral purposes hence the practice should not be abused. They should not take much time. The *Africæ Munus* cautions that *the Eucharist should be celebrated with dignity and beauty, in compliance with the established norms.*³¹

The Temptation in the Tithe

Temptation is not a sin.³² Our Lord Jesus Christ himself was tempted but did not sin. There is a gradation in the temptation of Our Lord. First, he was tempted with *food* which indeed stands for our daily biological needs; second he was tempted with *glory and power*, which borders on pride, egoism, self importance; and finally on *riches and wealth* which covers the vast areas of avarice, idolatry, property ownership, insatiability, unbridled quest for amassing and acquisition, dishonesty, cheating, money, fame, etc.³³

Apart from the theological arguments on the Tithe, the inherent danger in it is the tendency to *rob Peter to pay Paul*. Here lies the danger in the temptation. What level of accountability is practised by those involved in Tithe collection for whatever reason? Is Tithe considered as Church collection since it is done within Liturgical celebration? What about the law governing collections in the Church? Are such laws applicable to Tithe collection? In other words, are just and lawful returns made to the appropriate ecclesiastical authorities on Tithe collections? Are the parishioners informed properly and accurately on the use made of the Tithes collected? Are there records to justify both income and expenditure with regard to Tithes collected? Why create an avenue for sin when it could conveniently be avoided? The latter is what I consider *the temptation in the tithe*. When tithes are collected from the people, they have the right to question what use their tithe is being put to. This is *justice* which is a central issue of Pope Benedict XVI *Post-Synodal Exhortation*.³⁴ Issues on finance and accountability could be volcanic in their eruption. And what *Service to Reconciliation, Justice and Peace* would the Nigerian Church be giving to Christians and non-Christians in our Country Nigeria, especially when accountability on the tithe generates problems of mistrust, suspicion and what have you? To avoid this inherent danger that could tarnish the image of the Church the *Africæ Munus* says to

³¹ Benedict XVI, *Africæ Munus*, n.153

³² Onyenibadi, M. F., *Know Your Faith and Grow in it* (Lagos, 2010) 22-25.

³³ Cf. Matt. 4:1-11.

³⁴ Benedict XVI, *Africæ Munus*, nn.17-50.

priests: *Build up the Christian communities by your example, living in truth and joy, your priestly commitments, celibacy in chastity and detachment from material possessions.*³⁵

How did the Tithe come into the Catholic Church in Nigeria?

The introduction of the tithe into some Catholic Churches (or Catholic parishes, to be more precise) can be traced to two sources: *Influence of Pentecostalism* and *Pressure from some Lay Catholic members*. The Pentecostal Churches use the Tithe as their main source of generating funds to run their respective Churches. To the best of my knowledge, I am not aware of any official Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria publication on the collection of Tithes as an official Catholic practice in Nigeria.

Some Lay Catholics have formed the habit of frequenting conventions, crusades and vigils of the Pentecostal Churches and taking active part in these functions. They pay tithes to the Pastors or the organizers of these functions. Now, when these catholic members come back to the Catholic Church, they begin to put undue pressure on their respective Parish Priests for the introduction of the practice. Their argument is that such practice is a way of obtaining God's blessings for progress or promotion in their jobs or businesses. Who would not want to receive God's blessing? Who would not want to be guaranteed God's protection and progress? If giving God a tenth of one's salary or income would do the *magic*, why not? (moreover, giving money to the priest is not a bad idea! Or is it? Priests need money, do they not? It is optional and those who like it will go by it! Is the tithe not in the Bible?). Thus, the idea of tithe collection began by personal contact with the parish priest, and gradually it graduated to a parish collection. Nevertheless, such an attitude demonstrates lack of true conversion of heart! The *Africæ Munus* notes, *inter alia*, "*conversion is possible only if one is sustained by the convictions of faith, supported by a genuine catechesis. It is right then, to 'maintain a living connection between memorized catechism and lived catechesis, which leads to a profound and permanent conversion of life.'*"³⁶

But does the isolated practice of the tithe in some Catholic parishes make it a Catholic practice? By no means! As for the parishes that practice the tithe, did they obtain the Bishop's written permission before or after they commenced the practice? What specific purpose does the tithe serve that is not covered by myriads of collections done in the parishes? However, is pressure from the laity enough reason for a priest to introduce a non-Catholic practice into the Catholic Church? And on whose authority?.

The Priests' Remuneration

The Catholic Church has official regulation on the remuneration of her priests. The Church is not silent on the matter. While local practices that are in consonance with the

³⁵ Benedict XVI, *Africæ Munus*, n. 111

³⁶ Benedict XVI, *Africæ Munus*, n. 32

official Church regulation on the matter are permissible, there is the need to state what the official regulation is on the remuneration of her priests worldwide. *Presbyterorum Ordinis* of the Second Vatican Council states:

Completely devoted as they are to the service of God in the fulfilment of the office entrusted to them, priests are entitled to a just remuneration. [...] the faithful are bound by a real obligation of seeing to it that the necessary provision for a decent and fitting livelihood for the priests is made. This obligation arises from the fact that it is for the benefit of the faithful that priests are working.³⁷

What the above norm of *PO* puts in simple language is codified by the *Code of Canon Law*. The first of the two canonical norms states:

Since clerics dedicate themselves to the ecclesiastical ministry, they deserve the remuneration that befits their condition, taking into account both the nature of their office and the conditions of time and place. It is to be such that it provides for the necessities of their life and for the just remuneration of those whose services they need....³⁸

The second norm of the *CIC*, among other things, states:

In every diocese there is to be a special fund which collects offerings and temporal goods for the purpose of providing, in accordance with canon 281, for the support of the clergy who serve the diocese, unless they are otherwise catered for. [...]. If possible, these funds are to be established in such a manner that they will have standing also in the civil law.³⁹

It is indeed an unacceptable practise, to say the least, that priests should on their own authority create their own means of sustenance without a clear authorization from the competent ecclesiastical authority. It is even a worse situation when priests employ some non-Catholic practice to raise funds for their maintenance and other sundry personal needs or for that of the Church. Mother Church frowns at any practice that gives any false impressions about the Church as a religious institution whose objective is the spiritual well-being of the people of God.

³⁷ Vatican Council II, *Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests*, n. 20, in Flannery A., Ed. *Vatican Council II, 898-899*. Henceforth, abbreviated *PO*.

³⁸ *The Code of Canon Law*, can. 281. The Canon Law Society of Great Britain and Ireland in association with The Canon Law Society of Australia and New Zealand and The Canadian Canon Law Society (London², 2001) 48.

³⁹ *Code of Canon Law*, can. 1274.

The Way Forward

The injunction of St Paul to Timothy sets the pace for the way forward, instructed in his First Letter to Timothy:

This is what you are to teach and urge. Anyone who teaches anything different and does not keep to the sound teaching which is that of Our Lord Jesus Christ, the doctrine which is in accordance with true religion, is proud and has no understanding, but rather a weakness for questioning everything and arguing about words... Religion, of course, does bring large profits, but only to those who are content with what they have... The love of money is the root of all evils and there are some who, pursuing it, have wandered away from the faith and so given their souls any number of fatal wounds.⁴⁰

The Catholic Church is well organised and structured. It is a fallacy to hold that the Church has to borrow from the Old Testament practice of the tithe to fend for her ministers and raise funds to run the Church. And the deliberate avoidance of the terminology in the whole of the New Testament is a demonstration that the Church never used the system.

Conclusion

It is a moral imperative on the part of the Clergy to lead and to direct the faithful aright. While it could be argued that the practice of the tithe is not of the making of the Church's hierarchy, it still remains urgent that a formal pronouncement from the Church's hierarchy be made, either at the Arch/Diocesan or at the National levels, distancing the Church from the unwholesome practice. *Silence is consent*, as the old adage goes. Some priests claim that their Bishops are in the know of the practice or even gave them written permission to that effect. My contention about that stance is whether the permission was given before the commencement of the practice or after the practice had begun. The two situations are not the same. Of course, any Bishop can permit certain things for some pastoral reasons in his diocese. However, such exceptional cases are permissible after all other factors have been considered. It is not an arbitrary legislation.

It is not an understatement to opine that members of the Catholic clergy differ on the issue of tithe collection. Some clergy who are prone to the practice argue that if the practice is prohibited, those Catholic faithful who are into the practice could donate the same to the Pentecostal churches and their pastors for prayers for their businesses or jobs. The fundamental question is: are we to be concerned about the tithe or the theology of the practice? Some other proponents of the practice would advance priest sustenance as the justification for the practice. As observed above, there is no truth in that assertion. An elderly staunch practising Catholic man once approached a priest to ask if the Tithe had now been introduced into the Catholic Church practice because all through his life as a Catholic he had never heard of such a practice. The old man was worried because he thought that he had been failing in his *Easter duty*! The priest looked at the old man and

⁴⁰ I Tim. 6:3-10.

said to him: *Baba! You are right. The Catholic Church does not practice tithe collection. It is our insatiable greed that makes us to allow the practice.*⁴¹ The old man heaved a big sigh of relief, thanked the priest and walked off to his home. Now, contrast this with another instance where a Priest, on a Sunday and from the Pulpit, called fellow priest unprintable names before the Congregation just because his fellow priest differed with him on the issue of Tithe collection.⁴² Such an appalling situation should not have occurred at all!

I go with the first priest's response to that elderly Baba, and do agree wholeheartedly with him. Priests are not the only custodians of the Catholic faith and practice. The Laity are partners in the custody and in the defence of Catholic doctrines and practices. Priests should beware of *Scandalum pussilanimus* (The scandal of the weak) in our actions and utterances.

Indeed, there is a real pastoral issue with the practice of the tithe. It breeds an unhealthy class distinction among the worshipping community. To call up those with Tithes for blessing at the end of the Mass signals an unintended indictment on those who have no job or source of income, or the likes of the Baba above, who cannot come up for the blessing. Psychologically, they feel marginalized by the practice. Meanwhile, this latter group's time is taken up in blessing those who have jobs and means of livelihood. Are those without jobs not entitled to God's blessing for a better future? Even in a situation whereby everybody in the Church has the tithe, since the practice is an Old Testament legislation that was abrogated by the New Testament practice, of what liturgical importance is the Tithe in a Liturgical Celebration? What then is the theology of Thanksgiving all about? What is the theology of Mass offering? Some parishes practice monthly contribution for the sustenance of their priests. Parishioners are always willing to make contributions towards Parish projects. In some parishes members of the Catholic Women Organization or the *Christian Mothers* in some dioceses, see it as their bounden duty to feed their priests. And this is an officially approved practice by the Catholic Church in Nigeria. Why then the tithe, why the duplication of issue without necessity and justifiable reason?

My humble submission is that the Tithe is *not a Catholic practice*. It is borne out of pride on the part of the Laity who are champions of the practice, and greed on the part of the clergy who give in to such an un-Catholic practice due to pressure from some members of their flock.

⁴¹ This is a true story testified to by a person who knows both the priest and the Baba in the above narrative.
⁴² This writer can attest to the veracity of the ugly incident.

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