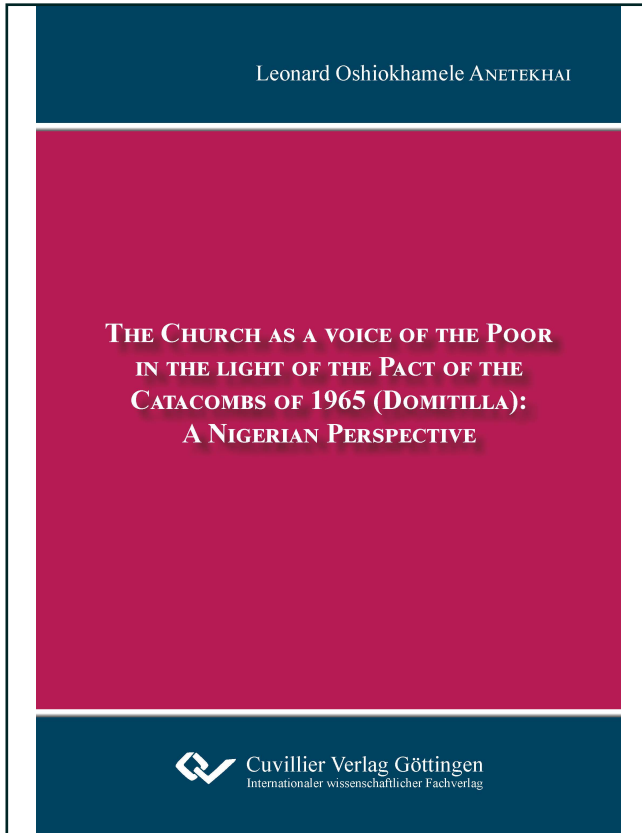




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**The Church as a voice of the Poor in the light of the
Pact of the Catacombs of 1965 (Domitilla)**
A Nigerian Perspective



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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

The general introduction provides an overview of the mission and objective of this research work. It states the problem to be examined and the research's scope and method, explaining how the study is carried out. The key terms in this study will also be defined - The Church, the Catacombs and the Poor – in terms of the basic idea of what they entail to understand better this paper's goals and the Church's mission of being a voice for the Poor.

1.1 STATEMENT OF PROBLEM

From its inception, the Church has been caring, and in Nigeria, from its beginnings through the missionaries' efforts (the earliest being the Portuguese in the 15th century) has contributed to the growth of Nigerian society as a nation. Despite the challenges, they attracted resources and funds to care for the Poor through schools, medical centres and social services. These were areas where the state failed in its responsibility for providing the essential means of livelihood with quality and consistency, forgetting its social task for freedom, equality and justice for its citizens as contained in its constitution.

The above-mentioned implies for Church leaders and her devotees at various levels a more ardent appreciation of the Church's prophetic ministry in giving the people both material and spiritual nourishment amidst their oppressed and distressed state. This situation presents a significant moral challenge to the Church that does not exclude keeping faith and hope alive among her people.

Like the universal Church, the Church hierarchy in Nigerian has done creditably well regarding her discerning and teaching roles. For George Omake Ehusani, the Church hierarchy has been systematic and conscientious in analysing Nigerian society's socio-economic and political situation while often consistently being on the side of truth, freedom, justice, human rights, and solidarity. The Nigerian Church can hardly be faulted in her social teaching,

which derives from an enlightened reading of the ‘signs of the times.’ However, what is clear to many is that the Church’s involvement in society’s social transformation has mostly remained on the level of social analysis and has been unaccompanied by action. Except, of course, the sort of action that is similar to supporting the oppressed while allowing the oppressor to go unpunished and continue his exploits.¹⁰

To this end, the Church in Nigeria must realise that to make concrete her effort in becoming the voice of the Poor, she does not speak and listen to her (self) and her members alone. Her dialogue is with the whole world. By the Divine command and the right to the knowledge possessed by the people whose lot she shares on earth, the Church is duty-bound to communicate her belief and way of life publicly. As *Communio et Progressio* teaches and reiterated in the words of the bishops at the Catacombs of Domitilla, she has ‘to read the signs of the times’, for these, too, affirm the message of God and reveal the unfolding of the history of salvation under Divine Providence. It is another reason why the Church needs to know contemporary reactions to ideas and events, whether they are Catholic or not (CP, n.122).

As echoed by Pope Francis, the above admonition is for the Church, through her leaders, to live and smell like the sheep; they lead, the people of God.¹¹ The Nigerian Church must see the tears in the citizens’ eyes who look up to her and God for solutions to life’s essential needs. She must begin to live by example outside the exotic cars, luxury houses and high standard of living, which are above the means of the Church, and become the voice of those left out in the scheme of government planning for the provision of essential amenities.

The Church must become a home that shares her goods in common and not be blinded by political promises and incentives from government officials. Incentives that hinder constant pastoral admonition from the pulpit and actions that keep the Poor far away from the Church as a home, a home within a community that cares for their needs.

She must become a voice that speaks in solidarity with and for the Poor in questioning how resources are utilised and how the economic and financial system functions to provide a better life for all. Furthermore, she must become a voice in moderation: calling for moderation in lifestyle in all spheres of life, and fighting for their fundamental human rights to healthful living through calls to the common good made for all.

¹⁰ Cf. George Omaku Ehusani, *A Prophetic Church*, Ibadan, Nigeria, 1996, p. 99.

¹¹ Cf. Homily during the Chrism Mass in St. Peter’s Basilica on March 28, 2013, in: http://w2.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2013/documents/papa-francesco_20130328_messa-crismale.html. Accessed on 18.10.2018.

By living such a way of life, the Church re-echoes Pope Francis' words that the Poor and the marginalised voices can only be heard through her. For through history,

“the Church has always understood the importance of this cry, and in the very first community of the people of God, through the Apostles men were chosen for the ministry of caring for the poor. This act of caring is undoubtedly one of the first signs of the entrance of the Christian community upon the world's stage: the service of the poor. The earliest community realised that being a disciple of Jesus meant demonstrating fraternity and solidarity, in obedience to the Master's proclamation that the poor are blessed and heirs to the kingdom of heaven (Matt. 5,3).”¹²

To this end of caring for the Poor and showing them solidarity through love, the focus of the Church as a voice is to create and maintain a unity of purpose between the mission of the Church and the realities that confront us as a world in our relations to the Poor in society.

1.2 AIMS AND RELEVANCE OF THE STUDY

‘Give them something to eat yourselves’ – The preface introducing the goal of this work reflects the responsible service towards humanity. It implies that it is not sufficient to pray but to share our abundance with the needy and the hungry. In the parable lines of the Gospel message, Jesus would always gather the people to receive the spiritual bread of life. Still, when the day draws to a close, he was also sensitive to their physical needs. The injection of Jesus here, “give them something,” is a call to responsibility on the part of the Church as a mission-oriented people to transform people and societies' lives by reflecting God's love in a practical, relevant and context-changing manner.

Given the above call to responsibility, this work aims to spur and reanimate the mission task of the Church in living up to her values of protection and caring for each other, especially the Poor. Caring, not only in words, giving charity, but through an exemplary lifestyle that reflects the Gospel message of Christ.

It also intends to address the trends within society to relegate the Poor even further. As the conscience of any community, the Church must be involved in their plight and the social issues that deal with human rights and the common good. When one fully interprets the words of Jesus in Matthew's Gospel 25,35, ‘*I was hungry, and you fed me, I was thirsty, you gave me a drink, I was naked, you clothed me,*’ in the context of today's society, it brings to bear the task and mission to care for each other. However, this ‘*call to show concern*’, that is, within the context of happenings around our human environment, growth in the

¹² Pope Francis, *Let us love, not with words but with deeds*, n. 2, November 19, 2017.

world economy, globalisation and advancement in technology, one wonders why most people still live in poverty.

Nigeria here, as a case study, is no exception. This research requires that our society's social, political and religious actors have an informed Christian understanding of the wide-ranging issues pertaining to wealth and poverty. In this light, the Church, on her part, must come out of her cover of abstract and frequently idealised theology and begin to live the Gospel message through words and deeds by 'being all things to all men' (cf. 1 Cor. 9,22).

Hence, this research is relevant to provide an avenue for an appreciation and concern for the Poor in any given society, especially the Nigerian society, in a bid to correct the neglected responsibility of both the Church and the civil authority in their everyday task of fighting the trend of selfishness and egoism in society.

1.3 LIMITATIONS OF RESEARCH

This essay does not pretend to exhaustively discuss the whole idea of the Poor and the Church in relation to the events of the Catacombs Pact of 1965. However, it tries to draw out a basic understanding, using a common understanding of the Church's teachings, especially within our modern world, for a better appreciation of our interconnection as humans.

Neither is it a compendium of historical facts about the Church's teachings as it concerns the Poor, nor is it one of the missionary activities in Nigeria and the Church's role in her fight for the people of God, for the Poor. As discussed, the nature and task of the Church are from a pastoral, social and political perspective, and this essay does not pretend to cover all aspects of the nature of the Church which go beyond the scope of this work.

The pastoral injunction thereof does not exhaust recent theological challenges to the Church's mission and endeavours to find solutions in solving the challenges of the Poor. However, it serves as a resource calling all (both citizens of faith and non-faith) to care for each other in words and deeds as brothers and sisters.

1.4 THE METHODOLOGY OF THE STUDY

In the quest for a veritable study of the pastoral challenges of the Church's mission and task in relation to the Poor, this work shall adopt an analytic-expository and historical method. Each chapter begins with a quotation that tries to picture its intended objective. It is divided into five chapters, starting with a preface and a general introduction which stands as the first chapter.

The second chapter gives an overview of the Catacombs Pact with a specific focus on the Catholic Church's social teachings before the Pact and the reasons

leading to the birth of the Catacombs Pact. In the course of the discussion, one or more leading figures of the Pact will be mentioned, and the 13 written commitments of the Pact with scriptural reference will be provided.

Chapter three is devoted to a brief historical analysis of Nigerian society with a basic geographical and religious description of it and of the Church, focusing on the Catholic and early missionary activities within Nigerian society. In chapter four, the Church's role (as a community of love, a sign and servant of Hope) in the life of her faithful and her task as a voice for the Poor will be discussed based on some Church documents. These documents include *Ad Gentes Divinitus*, *Africae Munus*, *Evangelii Gaudium*, *Gaudium et Spes*, *Redemptoris Missio*, amongst others.

Chapter five focuses on the central task, that is reflecting the Catacomb Pact within a Nigerian context and presents ways and means by which the Church and Nigerian society can lead and live a life that accommodates the Poor. Finally, an epilogue reiterating the opening statement of this research will be provided.

1.5 DEFINITION OF TERMS

1.5.1 THE CHURCH

From its inception, the birth of the Church, as claimed by Justo L. González, “was never disconnected from the world around it. The first Christians were first-century Jews, and it was as such that they heard and received the message. Then the faith spread, first among other Jews, and eventually among Gentiles both within and beyond the borders of the Roman Empire.”¹³

In complimenting this thought of Justo L. González, Leonard Doohan expresses that the followers of Jesus were at first called disciples and later Christians (Cf. in Acts 11,26). Through their mission task, they referred to themselves with terms that the Jews had used as descriptions of the chosen place they held in God's plan: the chosen assembly *Qahal*, the chosen people, the family of the Lord. In the cultures dependent on Mediterranean languages, two words arose to depict this belief. The first is based on the Greek word of the Patriarch of Constantinople using the term *kuriake oikia*, which signifies a family of the Lord, and from it, words like *church*, *kirk*, *Kirche* take their meaning. On the other hand, the second is dependent on the Latin world of the Pope at Rome and uses the term *ecclesia*, which describes the Church as the assembly of the Lord, from which words such as *chiesa*, *église*, *iglesia* stem.¹⁴

¹³ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Reformation*, Vol. 1, New York, USA., 2010, p. 13.

¹⁴ Cf. Leonard Doohan, *The Church*, in: Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig (eds), *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*, Collegeville, Minnesota, 1994, (pp. 173-177), p. 174.

Justo L. González, however, holds that the vast majority of Christians within the first three centuries belonged to the lower strata of society or at least did not fit well in the higher ranks, and according to the witnesses of the Gospel, Jesus spent most of his time with poor, ill, and despised people.¹⁵ In describing the Church in her various forms – political, social and religious, Hans Christian Knuth points out that “if one takes a closer look at the early beginnings of the external and internal mission, mission and development, witness and service, word and deed were always linked together. Alongside the churches, hospitals and schools were established. In the work of Jesus, preaching was from the very beginning connected with the healing of the sick, pastoral care, if one may say so, with the care of the body.”¹⁶

Jesus’ way of life had a significant influence on the first Christian community. It exemplified its members in the earliest conception of the Church as a caring community. This became obvious in their way of worship, which was one element in which people of all social classes had a common and shared experience.

Regarding this above conception, Church historians hold that from,

“the very beginning, the early Church had the custom of gathering on the first day of the week for the breaking of bread – the Eucharist or Lord’s Supper. The reason for gathering on the first day of the week was that this was the day of the Lord’s resurrection. Therefore, the primary purpose of this service of worship was not to call the faithful to repentance or to make them aware of the magnitude of their sins, but rather to celebrate the resurrection of Jesus and the promises of which that resurrection was the seal.”¹⁷

For this reason, Acts 2,46-47 describes the gatherings of the disciples and community as happy occasions. They ‘ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.’¹⁸ The most remarkable characteristic of this Christian worship was that it was considered a celebration. Such celebrations where they shared in common their meals were of joy and gratitude, rather than of sorrow and repentance.¹⁹

In the formation of the early Church, gathering for worship at the tombs of the faithful was a custom. From a historical perspective, some authors have

¹⁵ Cf. Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity: The Early Church to the Reformation*, 2010, p. 105.

¹⁶ Wenn man die frühen Anfänge der äußeren und inneren Mission genauer beseht, so war dort immer Mission und Entwicklung, Zeugnis und Dienst, Wort und Tat verbunden. Neben den Kirchen entstanden die Hospitäler und die Schulen. So war ja auch im Wirken Jesu von Anfang an die Verkündigung verbunden mit dem Heilen von Kranken, die Seelsorge, wenn man so will, mit der Leibsorge. Hans Christian Knuth, *Die Kirche und Ihre Soziale Verantwortung*, in: Klaus D. Hildemann (Hg.), *Religion, Kirche, Islam: Eine Soziale und Diakonische Herausforderung*, Leipzig, Germany, 2003, (pp. 87-103), pp. 87 – 88.

¹⁷ Justo L. González, *The Story of Christianity*, 2010, p. 107.

¹⁸ Cf. *ibid.*

¹⁹ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 108.

dramatised the ‘church of the catacombs,’ as they had depicted those secret places where Christians assembled in defiance of the authorities. Some of such claims were termed, at best, exaggeration. In reality, as will be discussed later, the catacombs were cemeteries whose existence were well known to the authorities, and Christians were not the only ones who made use of such cemeteries.²⁰ However, history holds that on several occasions and apart from gatherings to celebrate the Lord’s supper,

“Christians did use the catacombs as hiding places; the main reason why they gathered there was not that they feared the authorities, but rather two others. First, although the Church was not recognised by the government and therefore could not own property, funeral societies were allowed, and these could own cemetery property. In some cities, Christians organised themselves into such funeral societies, and therefore it made sense for them to gather at their cemeteries. However, even more importantly, many heroes of the faith were buried there, and Christians believed that communion joined them not only among themselves and with Jesus Christ, but also with their ancestors in the faith.”²¹

For Justo L. González, this tradition was also followed by the Christians in the mid-second century when they gathered together to celebrate communion on the death anniversary of martyrs. At that time, it was tradition to assemble around their tombs on the anniversary of their death because they believed that the martyrs, too, were part of the Church and celebrating together joined the living and the dead in a single body. This practice later gave rise to the celebration of the saints, not on the day they were born but the day of their martyrdom.²²

Community life was the base on which the Christian community, the Church, was founded. As contemplated by Charles Van Engen, this Church “is that congregation of believers in fellowship who seek God’s purpose.”²³ He went further to contemplate this Church as “the spiritual body of Christ in the world, and it grows as that body through the equipping of the Saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”²⁴

This spiritual body of Christ in our physical world is the Church as expressed by the Fathers of the Church in *Lumen Gentium* as

“a holy community of faith, hope and charity and a visible structure. She is the mystical Body of Christ and a hierarchically endowed society, a spiritual community and a visible group, that daily seek human resources to carry out its mission. Her focus is not set up to seek earthly glory, but to

²⁰ Cf. *ibid.*, p. 110.

²¹ *Ibid.*

²² Cf. *ibid.*

²³ Charles van Engen, *God’s Missionary People: Rethinking the Purpose of the Local Church*, Michigan, USA, p. 16.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, pp. 26 – 27.

proclaim, even by its example, humility and self-sacrifice. God the Father sent Christ 'to bring good news to the poor, to heal the contrite of heart' (Lk 4,18), 'to seek and to save what was lost' (Lk 19,10). Likewise, the Church encompasses with love all who are afflicted with human suffering and in the poor and afflicted sees the image of its poor and suffering Founder. It does all it can to relieve their need, and in them, it strives to serve Christ' (LG, n. 8).

This concept of the Church by the Second Vatican Council Fathers speaks of the Church as a people and family of God. As Avery Dulles articulates, Pope John Paul II sees the Church as a special kind of family. The Holy Father believes that persons are not assigned to categories in the family and treated as members of a class. In the family, the relationship that exists is the personal love and care extended to each member individually. The Church is such a family, a special kind of family because the members are bound together by a supernatural love that is poured into the hearts of the members by God. They love one another with love that originates in the most holy Trinity.²⁵

In the thought of Leonard Doohan, the Church as part of the world and in service to her brings to the knowledge of every Christian "that it is their task to work for the betterment of the world, using it with detachment but transforming it into what it is capable of becoming in a vision under God. This implies the Church's collaboration with all people of goodwill, but also implies the Church's prophetic task of challenging society's injustice, by socially criticising society's false values, denouncing injustice, and working to bring a Christian spirit to the creation of a better world."²⁶

Consequently, for Michael Schmaus,

"the presence of the Christ-event in the Church and through the Church continues until the end of time. When the end-time comes, the Church will cease to be an instrument of man's salvation. Because God's gift of Himself to man, although it is given once and for all and definitively at its source, brings fulfilled salvation only in the future, the Church as the instrument of God's saving design has an eschatological character. As a human society, the Church is always threatened by the temptation to want to rule rather than to serve. It must, therefore, in constant repentance and self-reflection, ever be conscious of the meaning of its existence and its task of service."²⁷

To this task of service, Pope John Paul II believes that the essential function of the Church in every age, and particularly in ours, is to direct every human person's gaze and point to the awareness and experience of the whole of

²⁵ Cf. Avery Dulles, *The Splendour of Faith: The Theological Vision of Pope John Paul II*, New York, USA, 1999, p. 47.

²⁶ Leonard Doohan, *The Church*, in: Michael Glazier and Monika K. Hellwig (eds), *The Modern Catholic Encyclopedia*, 1994, (pp. 173-177), p. 175.

²⁷ Michael Schmaus, *Dogma 4, The Church: Its Origin and Structure*, London, United Kingdom, 1972, pp. xiii.

humanity towards the mystery of God. By this act, she enables humanity to be familiar with the profoundness of the Redemption taking place in Christ Jesus. At the same time, the most resonant sphere of individuals becomes a common concern, namely their human hearts, consciences and events (Cf. RH, n. 10).

As expressed by the Church Fathers, the Church is a leaven in the world, witnessing to eternal values and helping society maintain family life values. She also supports human nature's dignity, promotes social unity, and urges its followers to fulfil their civic and political responsibility as part of their Christian commitment (GS, nos. 40-43). Through this work as a community of God's people, the Church will be considered a people who care for and support each other in love.

1.5.2 THE CATACOMBS

The name Catacomb was first used when “the location of the cemetery of Callistus on Via Appia near the circus of Maximus and the Basilica of St. Sebastian in a depression *κατά κήμβας* (near the low place) between two hills”²⁸ was discovered. However, Frank and Camille Korn hold that Giovanni Battista de Rossi, the renowned underground necropolis researcher of the 19th century, is said to be the first to have found the term in a document of the 9th century, unearthed in Naples. In this document, the word ‘catacomb’ describing the cemetery of Sebastian along the Appian way was used for the first time.²⁹

To these ancient findings, James Stevenson writes:

“on the Via Appia Antica, about two miles from the Aurelian walls of Rome, there is a locality that became known in antiquity as *ad* or *in Catacumbas*. From the second half of the third century AD, a centre of Christian veneration of the Apostles Peter and Paul existed here and, from the fourth century, a Christian underground burial place.”³⁰

In the third century, the phrase was used to represent the cemetery of Callistus, as it was the only underground cemetery known in the middle ages. However, upon the early Christian cemeteries’ rediscovery in the sixteenth century, the term ‘catacomb’ generally was used to refer to all such subterranean burial places.³¹

In concrete terms, James Stevenson holds that ‘catacombs’ has nothing to do with burial places. While, the early Christians called them *coemeteria* – places of repose, an appellation which persisted among them and was mainly used for

²⁸ Francis X. Murphy et al., *Catacombs*, in: New Catholic Encyclopedia, Second Edition, Michigan, USA, 2003, (pp. 221-225), p. 221.

²⁹ Cf. Frank J. and Camille M. Korn, *Below Rome: The Story of the Catacombs*, New Jersey, USA, 2017, pp. 42-43.

³⁰ James Stevenson, *The Catacombs: Rediscovered Monuments of Early Christianity*, London, United Kingdom, 1978, p. 7.

³¹ Cf. Francis X. Murphy et al., *Catacombs*, in: New Catholic Encyclopedia, 2003, (pp. 221-225), p. 221.

burial places above ground; for him, he states that the Latin expression *ad Catacumbas* conceals the Greek original, *kata kumbas*, which means something like ‘at the hallows.’³²

James Stevenson believes that the expression was from the ‘Via Appia Antica,’ “though in fact, not the earliest of its type; the name ‘catacomb’ has spread to other underground cemeteries in widely separated countries. The most notable catacombs are those near Rome, but important ones are to be found at Naples, at Syracuse and other places in Sicily, in Malta and North Africa, and in the Near East, at Emesa in Syria.”³³

Within the first and second century,

“Christians were known to have buried alongside pagan in communal cemeteries, such as those where Saints Peter and Paul were buried. If they could afford to do so, Christian families built new *mausolea* or adapted existing ones, and these were sometimes accompanied by small funerary banqueting halls. Wholly Christian cemeteries above ground, known as *areae*, were used throughout the Christian world from the third century onwards. They included graves, freestanding *sarcophagi* and small *mausolea* or *cellae*.”³⁴

Like their pagan contemporaries, the early Christians, says James Stevenson, regarded burial ceremonies as an essential duty, mostly when the dead person belonged to the same household or association (*societas*). It had been a practice even years before Christian communities took an interest in burials. For the Christians, it was a paramount duty that went beyond physical reality. It indeed belonged to that eschatological expectation³⁵ which they hoped to attain after their earthly life.

Matilda Webb believes that “the construction of underground cemeteries, known since their rediscovery in the last few centuries as *catacombs* were limited to areas such as Sicily, North Africa, Naples, Rome and Lazio. Here a soft, calcareous stone known as *tufa*³⁶ was found, which hardened permanently on being dug into and exposed to air. To save on labour expenses, some catacombs were made from an existing *tufa* quarry, a sandpit, cistern, or pagan hypogeum.”³⁷

³² Cf. James Stevenson, *The Catacombs*, 1978, p. 7.

³³ *Ibid.*

³⁴ Matilda Webb, *The Churches and Catacombs of Early Christian Rome: A Comprehensive Guide*, Padstow, Cornwall, 2001, p. xiii.

³⁵ Cf. James Stevenson, *The Catacombs*, 1978, pp. 7-9.

³⁶ A soft porous rock composed of joint volcanic fragments.

³⁷ Matilda Webb, *The Churches and Catacombs of Early Christian Rome*, 2001, pp. xiii – xiv.