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THE SPIRITAN CONTRIBUTION TO EDUCATION IN IGBOLAND



Joseph O. Okafor, C.S.Sp.

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Introduction

The Igbo have played a vital role in the life of Nigeria and the world especially since the second quarter of the 20th century. Igbo personalities have distinguished themselves in various fields of endeavor, including academics, technology, politics, management, and entrepreneurship. A good educational background contributed immensely to such achievement.

In the last three or four decades, however, the quality of education and educational institutions dropped in Igboland. Many point at the 1971 government take-over of church schools after the Nigerian Civil war (July 1967 to January 1970) as the root cause of the problem. Acknowledging this, various state governments, hoping that the churches will revive the schools and bring back qualitative education, have returned schools to their original church owners. The Catholic Church is a major stake-holder in the church schools taken over and now returned to the owners. In Anambra State, for instance, as far as primary education is concerned, the Catholic Church owns more than sixty percent of the church schools returned to their former owners: 456 primary schools as against 301 Anglican primary schools.¹

People everywhere are highlighting the importance of education to socio-economic, industrial and technological advancement. In Nigeria, people recall how the Catholic schools of pre-1970 Nigeria contributed so much to education and people's welfare, producing locally and internationally distinguished personalities, such as Francis Cardinal Arinze (Prefect Emeritus of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, Vatican City, 2002 to 2008), the late Emeka Odumegwu Ojukwu (leader of the erstwhile Republic of Biafra), the late Dr. Pius Okigbo (renowned international economist and chairman of the 1994 "Okigbo Report" that investigated the activities of the Central Bank of Nigeria), the late Dr. Chuba Okadigbo (former President of the Senate of Nigeria). This paper assesses the Spiritan contribution to education in Igboland.²

The Spiritans and Education

The two founders of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit (Spiritans) were Claude Francois Poullart des Places (1679-1709) and Francis Mary Paul Libermann (1802-1852). Poullart

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des Places, a brilliant and highly educated lawyer, chose to do theology in the Jesuit Theology College of Louis-le-Grand where his studies would have no State recognition, rather than at the famous University of the Sorbonne in Paris. This was because at the time the Sorbonne was tinged with a heresy called Gallicanism (a movement that resisted papal control over the Catholic Church in France). Des Places was more interested in his men acquiring authentic and deep-rooted Catholic formation than in academic laurels. The Seminary of the Holy Spirit that he left behind gave itself to the formative education of the clergy. It became "primarily a society of educators and professors."³ Father Libermann was initially only desirous of forming pious and holy priests who would give themselves to the work of evangelization and the liberation of the poor and the oppressed freed slaves of color in the French dominions of Haiti and Bourbon (Reunion). He, however, soon recognized the role of education in this task; he wrote:

... civilization is impossible without the faith. Therefore, it is the task of the missionary to work towards it, not just concentrating on morality, but also on the intellectual and physical side, that is to say, instruction in agriculture and the crafts ... If the missionary concentrates exclusively on the moral aspect, without bothering about the rest, others will come will come along to fill the gap and this could easily result in the destruction of all that he has tried to build up with so much labor and suffering...⁴

When some of his missionaries on the West Coast of Africa insisted that they were missionaries, not school masters, he wrote as follows to Fr. Arragon on February 12, 1847:

I was very happy with what you wrote about the schools, especially as I was rather alarmed at the reasoning in a letter of Fr. Bessieux and which Fr. Graviere supported. This reasoning tended towards abandoning the schools. My opinion is that to abandon the schools is to destroy the future of the mission. One could say, "but we could take that up later." This is a farce: a mission badly begun is difficult to end well. As much as the work of the schools is slow and difficult, so much more is it important to take it up right from the start.⁵

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Spiritans have thus been outstanding for the training of the clergy and the education of the masses. For example, in 1850 Archbishop Purcell invited them to run his seminary at Cincinnati. In 1853 the French bishops invited Spiritans to open and run the French Seminary in Rome, a task they fulfilled until

recently. In 1859 the Congregation accepted to run a college and a junior seminary in Martinique.⁶ It seems that towards the close of the 19th century the drive for the education apostolate became a major part of the mission of the Congregation. From then on large educational initiatives appeared in the works of the Congregation, including the establishment of institutions like Blackrock College, Dublin, Ireland (1859) and the Spiritan college that later became the Duquesne University in Pittsburgh, U.S.A (1878). These have remained institutions of world acclaim. It was about this period that the Spiritans arrived in the Lower Niger (of which Igboland is a part) to begin their missionary enterprise; the date was December 5, 1885. These pioneers were four: Fathers Joseph Lutz and Jean Nicolas Horne and Brothers Hermas Huck and Jean Gotto.

Education in Igboland before the Arrival of Spiritans

Before 1885, what generally obtained throughout Igboland was informal education. Families educated their children on societal values and conduct. Vocational education was also informally acquired through apprenticeship to “experts.” Western education and its schools were almost non-existent; no public or government schools were yet established. In fact, before 1885 there was no government controlling Igboland as a whole; whatever “government” existed was indigenous and limited to individual towns and villages. The Royal Niger Company had just assumed power, but could exercise that power only along the coasts of the Niger and the Anambra basin of Igboland. It was there for business and did not worry itself about the education of the local people. For its needs, the Company was to a great extent satisfied with the services of returnee ex-slaves and immigrants from Sierra Leone and clerical staff it drew from India.

The Protestant Church Missionary Society (CMS) who arrived in Igboland in 1857 established a few schools in Onitsha, where their few converts were instructed in the Bible and given mainly religious education in view of mission. Nicholas Omenka indicates that the first CMS school at Onitsha was a girls’ school since the male folks were then apathetic to education; however, by 1885, the Protestants must have run some schools for men seeing that “the pioneer Catholic catechists and interpreters were men who had been educated in Protestants schools at Onitsha.”⁷ It has, however, been very difficult to establish the number of schools opened by the CMS in Igboland before 1885. Whatever the number of the schools, they were all elementary schools and only the vernacular language and religion were taught. This was the situation of education in Igboland when the Spiritans arrived in 1885.

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Educational activities became a hallmark of the missionary strategy of the Spiritans right from the inception of their mission in Igboland. Even in granting the land at Onitsha to the Spiritan missionaries, the *Obi* (king) and his chiefs stressed the need for the education of children by making it a part of the terms of the agreement. In the agreement, the land was granted in perpetuity and free of all tributes and dues, while the Spiritan missionaries on their part would undertake and foster the care of children, teaching them religious and secular subjects.⁸

During his Prefecture, Father Leon Lejeune, C.S.Sp. strongly consolidated and expanded the school apostolate in the Lower Niger mission. He informed the religious Superiors that “he was striving with all his power to increase the number of children in school and also to improve the quality of education offered.”⁹ Father Joseph Shanahan, C.S.Sp. who succeeded Lejeune saw the school apostolate almost as an “act of faith.” To realize the emphasis put on schools in the Spiritan evangelizing mission, it is be noted that the Annual Missionary Report for the year, July 1905 – July 1906, indicates that the young mission in Igboland already had twenty-two schools: 9 under Onitsha Wharf; 2 under Ogboli; 8 under Aguleri and 3 under Nsugbe.¹⁰

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From the earliest period of the mission, Spiritans maintained that education was more than a matter of learning the white man’s language and arithmetic. Hence they also established trades schools at this early stage of the mission. The schools at the early stage were mainly patronized by ransomed slaves and the rejects of the society. Results were very slow in coming. It was a difficult task building the future of a mission or a society in such an area by assembling the rejects of the society. Nonetheless, the effort yielded some results. The schools soon witnessed the influx of the freeborn, including the wards of the notable men of Onitsha. These wanted especially to acquire the “white man’s knowledge.” The school project became a major source of converts in the Onitsha mission. The trades school, in particular, became very attractive to young men who came to learn various trades. According to Nnabuife, the trades taught at the Onitsha Catholic workshop reached five by 1899 and included carpentry, shoe-making, tailoring, and so on.¹¹ The progress of the trades school was particularly to the credit of the Brothers, especially Brothers David Doran, Barnabé Kurtz and Geronce, who joined Brother Hermas in the mission. However, not all the Brothers were engaged in the trades school.

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From 1905, the use of schools in evangelization in the area increased in tempo, encouraged by requests from the villages and towns for the missionaries to establish schools in their areas. Aguleri for instance, petitioned the missionaries to come with their schools. It was desirous to acquire the white man's language and knowledge. Since the schools were attractive as they taught both the western language and ways of life, the Spiritan missionaries spared no time in obliging such requests as much as possible. Furthermore, the schools were needed to train those who would assist the missionaries as catechists, teachers, clerks, and so on, and in particular would be vital in preparing the minds of those who in future would make up the local clergy.

Father Shanahan (later Bishop) as the head of the Spiritan Mission in Igboland linked the school apostolate with "a true and healthy Christian evangelism."¹² A report from the Onitsha-Town mission in 1906 clearly highlights the intentions of the Spiritan missionaries as regards the Catholic schools.

Our objective would not be to train clerks or employees for commerce or for the Government. Our aim, especially in this big town [Onitsha], which is like a gate to the interior, is to form future catechists and future school masters for the Igbo country... In accordance with the strict demands of the government education regulations, the pupils are scrupulously drilled in reading, writing, arithmetic, geography, English composition, and some elements of science, however, the emphasis is on religious instructions, catechism, church songs, and the Scriptures.¹³

Finding this strategy very useful and in the bid to expand the mission frontiers, Father Shanahan began his drive into the interior, establishing teacher/catechist stations with schools wherever possible. Twenty years after he became the Prefect (1925), the schools that were barely 22 in 1906 had risen to 1,190 in number in the whole Vicariate.¹⁴ It was, however, not possible for this researcher to establish how many of these schools were actually in Igboland since the Calabar Mission had been started by this time. Nonetheless, it is probable that more than three quarters of the schools were in Igboland since the Calabar mission was relatively a young mission and counted less than a quarter of the entire Lower Niger mission.

Bishop Charles Heerey, C.S.Sp. (later Archbishop), who took over from Bishop Shanahan in 1932, understood the Igbo admiration for literacy and the contribution the schools could make to the Spiritan mission in Igboland. He, therefore, did not

Joseph O. Okafor, C.S.Sp. shy away from expanding the schools. It was Heerey who divided the Vicariate into Education Zones, built the Catholic Education House at Onitsha, established the post of the Education Secretary in the Vicariate, and started the Secondary Schools.¹⁵ He was later joined in the drive to consolidate Catholic education in Igboland by Bishop Joseph Whelan, C.S.Sp. of Owerri Diocese, Bishop Anthony Nwedo, C.S.Sp. of Umuahia Diocese, and Bishop Godfrey Okoye, C.S.Sp. of Port Harcourt, and later Enugu Diocese.

At the dawn of the Nigerian political independence in 1960, Igboland with three dioceses had, according to that year's Sacred Returns, the following record for the schools:¹⁶

<u>Diocese</u>	<u>Primary Schools</u>	<u>Secondary Schools</u>	<u>Teachers' Training</u>
Onitsha:	853	18 (1957)	5 (1957)
Owerri	658	12	13
Umuahia	297	5	11
Total	1858	35	29

One notes in the above that the record of Secondary Schools and Teachers' Training Colleges as indicated in the Onitsha Archdiocesan Sacred Returns did not go beyond 1957. In addition to the above figures, however, there were 178 primary schools in the areas under the present Abakiliki Diocese in 1960 and these had grown to 249 schools by 1967.¹⁷ [Though the beginnings of the mission and schools here originated from the Spiritans, the area came under Abakiliki Diocese which fell under the Ogoja zone handed over in the 1930s to the St. Patrick Fathers (Kiltigans)]. Considering the above figures, one immediately observes the importance of schools in the Spiritan evangelizing mission in Igboland.

Considering the above figures, one immediately observes the importance of schools in the Spiritan evangelizing mission in Igboland.

Unfortunately, it has not been possible for this researcher to access the figures of Catholic schools in Igboland between the period 1965 to 1970. The disturbances and the eventual Nigerian Civil War (1967 to 1970) seem to have affected the keeping of such records. This, notwithstanding, one is inclined to agree that with the creation of new dioceses and many parishes within the period (1960 – 1970) there must have been a phenomenal growth in the school statistics as observed in the Abakiliki area above.

Some Aspects of the Spiritan Contribution to Education in Igboland

Creating Educational Environment and a Longing for Education

Spiritans provided the Igbo people an opportunity to acquire Western education. In the first place, they furnished the people with an appetite for education by teaching their pupils the western language and the formative culture that goes with it. This novelty made for progress and instigated a competition for placements in government and industry. No surprise that many towns and villages kept requesting the Spiritans to build and run schools in their areas.

It is important to note that the schools earlier established by the Church Missionary Society (CMS) before the arrival of the Spiritans received very little patronage. While it was patronized by a few girls, the men kept away from the classrooms which they considered as idle venture that could only pass for a lazy man's occupation. Serious and hardworking males preferred to accompany their parents to the farms, hunt, or engage in various handcrafts.¹⁸ Another reason was that the CMS schools had earlier insisted on instructing their pupils in the vernacular. Recognizing the fact that the Spiritan mission schools attracted more pupils, the CMS local Secretary said, "I believe it is a fact that the Romanists have a really good school..., the chief attraction being that nothing is done in vernacular and English is taught by an Irishman."¹⁹ Ekechi noted that "from all appearances, it seemed that the acquisition of the language skill was more possible through the attendance in Catholic schools. The CMS, on the other hand, frowned upon the teaching of the English language in schools..."²⁰ Because Spiritans taught the English language and other subjects, males who earlier saw classroom education as idle work turned out more than their female counterparts, asking to be enrolled in the schools. They had discovered that acquiring western education made them the elite of the society and also offered opportunities for the white-collar jobs.

Provision of Schools and free Education

The Spiritans went about looking for funds which they used in building schools. They also mobilized towns and villages to build their own schools where possible. From the above, one observes that by 1960 the effort of the Spiritans had already resulted in the establishment of at least two thousand, one hundred (2100) more schools (primary, secondary, and teacher training schools) in Igboland, when there were only three schools seventy-five years earlier when they arrived in 1885. In addition to this, education in the Spiritan mission schools in Igboland was

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Joseph O. Okafor, C.S.Sp. free for the early decades of the mission. This gesture encouraged many to go to school and thousands took advantage of it.

Provision of Teachers and Educators

The Spiritans also contributed greatly to the provision of educators for the schools. Initially, being short of education personnel, the missionaries took up the teaching jobs themselves and though most of them were not trained teachers or specially trained for the subjects they taught, they did the job very well. The government Inspector of Education for the Eastern Provinces, who visited a Catholic mission secondary school in 1945 said of these Spiritan teachers:

*There are few schools
where the history
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Latin...*

There is a very pleasant tone in the college and an air of ‘humanism’ which only too often is lacking in Nigerian schools. There are few schools where the history master teaches physics and chemistry, and the biology master takes Latin, and where all four subjects are effectively taught.²¹

Spiritans recruited teachers from the intelligent and gifted graduates of their schools. However, with time they began the special formation of teachers by establishing teachers’ training schools. From available records, they had established at least twenty-nine (29) Teachers’ Training Schools by 1960.²²

Broadening the Scope of the Education Curriculum

In the area of the curriculum, some critics have argued that the church schools produced individuals who were neither European nor African, people alienated from their traditional culture. Professor A. E. Afigbo accused the Catholic Church schools in Igboland of being responsible for the unimpressive development of the Igbo language which was neglected by the schools in favor of the English language.²³ Despite such criticism, the Spiritans contributed very much in diversifying and broadening the scope of the curriculum of education in Igboland. Before the arrival of the Spiritans, the brand of education offered by the CMS to the people revolved around the Bible and religion and was given in the vernacular. The Spiritans changed that curriculum by introducing the English language and arithmetic. They also introduced technical subjects in the trade schools, as noted above. Also, when the colonial government began education reforms and called for the expansion of the curriculum, the Spiritans rose to the challenge while the CMS was still challenging the reforms. In 1901, the Spiritans opened a Roman Catholic High School at Onitsha (the first high school in Igboland) in which was taught industrial education, elementary algebra, geometry,

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book keeping and foreign languages.²⁴ The expanded curriculum of the Spiritan mission schools encouraged a drove of pupils and students to enter these schools, even from the CMS schools. The situation pressured the CMS into modifying the curriculum of its schools to include the use and the teaching of the English language. The Spiritans were thus “pace-setters” in education in Igboland. Their contribution was such that the Colonial officer of the Fr. Lejeune era, Sir Ralph Moor, postponed the proposed opening of a government school at Onitsha, stating that he was:

... of the opinion that there is a fair chance of the Roman Catholic Mission Schools at all events being rendered effective with some little Government assistance and it is therefore wise to postpone the establishment of [Government] schools until there has been a fair trial given to the Mission.²⁵

Changing the Perception of Education as strictly Evangelistic

The different Christian missionary groups that evangelized Igboland during the period under review perceived education from an evangelistic point of view. For a very long time the CMS held unto this view and resisted necessary changes, afraid that introducing secular subjects in their schools would make them lose their converts to worldly quests. Some scholars similarly saw the Spiritan school apostolate in Igboland to have been purely evangelistic. One such scholar flagrantly concluded that “the school phenomenon presented a perfect example of a game of mutual deception and exploitation between the mission and the Igbo village. The key missionary tool of the period was the village school.”²⁶ It is true that the school was part of the Spiritan mission strategy, however, the fact remains that right from the start Spiritans also took to heart the task of improving the social and economic well-being of the Igbo, as their *Rule of Life* demanded. This concern accounted for the kind of school curriculum which paved the way for their school graduates to gain employment with the companies and the Government. The Spiritans in Igboland in the period under review thus saw education as a means of integrally developing human beings. Ayandele could declare that “With the exception of the Presbyterian Mission and the Society of the Holy Ghost Fathers, Christian missions in Nigeria continued to look at education from the strictly evangelistic viewpoint ...”²⁷

Quality of Education

The challenge provoked by the Spiritan education apostolate in Igboland also led to the improvement of the quality of the education being offered. The colonial government had based

Joseph O. Okafor, C.S.Sp. the amount of grant being offered to mission schools on their results. That the Catholic schools received higher grants than the CMS schools in a government controlled by Protestants was a signal to the CMS mission that they had to improve the quality of education in their own schools.

Conclusion

The Spiritan contribution to education in Igboland would be better appreciated if the figures for the Government schools and those of other voluntary agencies could be placed side by side with those of Spiritans. Unfortunately, adequate information is not available for this paper. We can, however, infer some conclusions from available data. What has been presented joined to the ratio of schools so far returned to former church owners by the Anambra State Government, as noted earlier (456 Catholic primary schools as against the Anglican 301 primary schools), go to show that between 1885 and 1970 the Catholic Church, headed by Spiritans, bore more of the burden of developing education in Igboland than other Christian missions or even the government. It is therefore not an exaggeration to say that for the period 1885 to 1970 a history of education in Igboland will have the Spiritans front and centre. Spiritans were able to adjust to ongoing challenges and to keep the school system growing in number and excellence.

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Endnotes

¹Anambra State of Nigeria: December 9, 2011. Law No.4 – Public Education (Transfer of Schools) (Special Provisions) (Amendment) Law, 2011. *Official Gazette No. 8*. Awka, Government Printer.

²In this paper, “Igboland” refers to the Igbo living east of the River Niger who formed part of the former Eastern Nigeria established in 1937 but are now found in Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu, and Imo States, and parts of the Rivers State.

³Koren, Henry J. *To the Ends of the Earth: A General History of the Congregation of the Holy Ghost* (Pittsburgh: Duquesne University Press, 1983), 218.

⁴*N.D.* VIII, 248-249 : 1846 Memorandum to Propaganda Fide. English translation in *A Spiritan Anthology. Writings of Claude-François Poullart des Places (1679-1709) and François Marie-Paul Libermann (1802-1852)*. Ed. Christian de Mare, C.S.Sp. (Congregation of the Holy Spirit, Rome ; Spiritan Publications, Onitsha, Nigeria : 2011), 384-385.

⁵*N.D.* IX, 44.

⁶Koren, *To the Ends of the Earth*, 218-219.

⁷Omenka, Nicholas. *The School in the Service of Evangelization: The Catholic Educational Impact in Eastern Nigeria, 1886 – 1950*. (New York: E.J. Brill, 1989), 32.

- ⁸Eke, Casimir. *In the Footsteps of Our Founders: A History of The Spiritan Province of Nigerian (1953 – 2002)*. (Onitsha: Spiritan Publications, 2006), 91.
- ⁹Ekechi, F. K. *Missionary Enterprise and Rivalry in Igboland, 1857-1914*. (London: Frank Cass and Company Ltd, 1971), 177.
- ¹⁰C.S.Sp. Archives, Onitsha, Box 3, File 2.
- ¹¹Nnabuife, F.C. *The History of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nigeria, Vol. 1, the Foundation Period, 1885 – 1905*. (Rome: Pontificia Università Gregoriana, 1983), 134.
- ¹²Omenka, *The School in the Service of Evangelization*, 96.
- ¹³*Ibid.*, 97.
- ¹⁴Obi, Celestine A. “The missionary contributions of Bishop Joseph Shanahan, C.S.Sp. 1902-1932”, In Obi, Celestine A. (ed.) *A Hundred Years of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nigeria, 1885 – 1985*. (Onitsha: Africana-Fep Publishers Limited, 1985), 106-174, here 167.
- ¹⁵Ozigbo, Raphael. *Igbo Catholicism: the Onitsha Connection, 1967 – 1984*. (Onitsha: Africana-FEP Publishers Limited, 1985) 21.
- ¹⁶Source: CSSP Archives, Onitsha, Box 3, File 4 and 5.
- ¹⁷Eke, *In the Footsteps of our Founders*, 294.
- ¹⁸Omenka, *The School in the Service of Evangelization*, 33.
- ¹⁹Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise*, 179.
- ²⁰*Ibid.*, 178.
- ²¹Omenka, *The School in the Service of Evangelization*, 244.
- ²²CSSP Archives, Onitsha, Box 3, File 4 and 5.
- ²³Cf. Mbefo, Luke. “In Defence of the Missionaries in Eastern Nigeria.” *The Nigerian Journal of Theology*, 13 (June 1999), 46-62, here 47.
- ²⁴Ekechi, *Missionary Enterprise*, 184.
- ²⁵*Ibid.*
- ²⁶Ozigbo, *Igbo Catholicism*, 10.
- ²⁷Ayandele, E. A. *The Missionary Impact on Modern Nigeria 1842-1914: A Political and Social Analysis*. (Ibadan: Longman, 1991) 286.