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Evangelization and Development

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EVANGELIZATION AND DEVELOPMENT

INTRODUCTION

The Catholic Church has been instrumental in the education of the Nigerian citizenry. Many of the citizens now occupying top positions in the country received their education in Catholic schools. The education apostolate is part of the divine mandate, “Go therefore and teach all nations!” (Matthew 28:19).

The education apostolate, as an evangelization strategy, is the bedrock for any development. Oke, in Aboyade and Abumere, quotes the definition of education given by the Director-General of UNESCO. “Education is not only instilling knowledge, but awakening the enormous creative potential that lies within each of us, enabling all of us to develop to our fullest potential, and better contribute to the societies in which we live.”¹ Irish Spiritan, Fr. Tony Byrne, presents the definition of Development by Pope Paul VI as “The promotion of the good of people, every person and the whole person.”²

We can define evangelization as making the good news of Jesus Christ known. In other words, it is the proclamation of the good news as commanded by Christ who said, “Go, then, to all peoples everywhere, and make them my disciples: baptize them in the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, and teach them to obey everything I have commanded you. And I will be with you always, to the end of the age” (Matthew 28:19-20).

In this article, I intend to give an account of how my passion for the youth apostolate began and then explain the theoretical framework that provides me with the needed energy for this challenging apostolate.

MY VOCATION STORY

My vocation story began when I was a child. My father took me on his shoulders to watch a religious film in a Catholic primary school. On seeing the priest, a Holy Ghost Father with a cincture tied round his waist, I told my father “I would like to be like that man.” The desire I had, and the prayer I said, without knowing what the priesthood was all about, prompted me to start primary school at a very young age. Initially, pastoral life in a parish attracted me: the lay people were always seeking the

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attention of the priest. Pious religious societies and confraternities gathered regularly at the church premises for one function or the other, and the priest was always visible as the immaculate cassock distinguished him from all around him. As a child, such a life attracted me and I never thought of being a teacher. I thought that the role of a priest was only to say Mass in a parish church and administer the sacraments.

My aversion for the education apostolate heightened when as a seminarian, confreres who were serving the congregation in formation houses were always complaining of the sacrifices involved. At the same time, the parish priest had all his needs and wants met by the people he served. The priest-formator was most often unable to meet his basic needs and was almost like a beggar – supplying in parishes to get stipends to help ends meet.

My appreciation for the education apostolate started during my prefecting experience in The Gambia in 1994. While there, I resided at St. Peter's Parish, Lamin, where Fr. Reginald Gillooly, CSSp, an Irish Spiritan, was pastor, and I taught at St. Therese's Middle School, Kanifing. The students were drawn to me just as I was drawn to them. We organized educational, social, and spiritual programs, some of which appeared both in print and on the broadcast media. These programs made a deep impact on the lives of the students. They appreciated my teaching and after my pastoral year, as they escorted me to the airport on my way back to Nigeria to continue with my seminary training, we were shedding tears. That contact and positive impact on the youth gave me a taste for the youth apostolate.

After my seminary studies, I, along with eleven out of twenty-four deacons meant for ordination that year, were put on probation. While the eleven were ordained in December of 1999, I was ordained in July the following year. Meanwhile, I did my probation at Our Lady, Queen of Africa Parish, Bolgatanga in the Navronngo-Bolgatanga Diocese of Ghana. The probation year gave me another opportunity to work with the youth as a youth chaplain. In Ghana, I replicated the youth programs I started in The Gambia taking cognizance of their spiritual, educational, and social needs. The programs made a great impact on the youth. The then bishop of the Diocese, Most Rev. Lucas Abadamloora, of blessed memory, in appreciation for my dedication and commitment, appealed to my religious superior for my return to the diocese following ordination. So it was that

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after my ordination on July 15, 2000, I reported to the Spiritans in Ghana. Among other tasks, I was appointed editor of the Diocesan publication, The Diocesan Link, in which I promoted the youth apostolate. At this time more than ever, I was really engaged in their joys and sorrows. One of the challenges facing youth which struck me most, was the lack of opportunity to attend school as their parents or guardians did not have the funds. The challenge made me to start a “Needy Child Educational Fund” that could assist such children. I also started a youth center to provide employable skills for them. Youth work became my passion, and I was fully committed to it.

After three years in Ghana, I was transferred to Nigeria. Interestingly, fifteen years later, in 2019, I had the opportunity to return to Ghana for the wedding of one of the youth members I inspired while working there. During that visit, I travelled to Bolgatanga and the parish that gave me a sound foundation in the education apostolate. There I found that the youth center I had built while working at the parish was turned into a secondary school with a classroom block named after me. I was overjoyed. In an interaction with the students, I asked why a classroom block should be named after me, a foreigner. One young boy raised his hand and said, “It is because you impacted the youth positively while you worked here.” This positive compliment spurred me on to commit myself even more to the youth apostolate, especially in the education sector.

HOLY SPIRIT PARISH, SANKERA

On my return to Nigeria in 2004, I took up residence at Holy Spirit Parish, Sankera. The parishioners asked the Spiritans to start a secondary school for them. They had no quality secondary school in the area with the result that many opportunities were passing by their children. One such possibility was the inability of any of the youth of the parish to apply to the major seminary for priestly training in the Catholic Church. The parishioners knew Spiritans were good at running schools. They knew this from the expatriate Spiritans who had built and administered schools in Benue state – Mt. St. Michael’s Secondary School, Aliade; St. Gabriel’s Secondary School, Makurdi, and St. Andrew’s Secondary School, Adikpo – with excellent reputations for providing a quality education.

After prayerful reflection and consultation with my reli-

gious superior, I took up the challenge. I had earlier on obtained permission to start a project called, “Spiritans in Integral Development” (SIID) with the motto Called to Build a Better World. I felt that a better world needed educated citizens. Thus, the education apostolate received prominence in the strategic plan of SIID.

A major obstacle that confronted this project was finance. I had no money in the pocket for the project. God supported me right from the start with the search for a piece of land in the area to build the school. All the local landowners demanded money that I did not have.

Fortunately, a member of a protestant church provided the piece of land, as he did not want such an opportunity to pass the community by for lack of a site. After taking possession of the site, the next challenge was to find the resources for construction work to commence. Without a fund-raising base, I put things in the hands in God. God came to my help. While in the UK for a holiday that year, my host family took me to a convent to celebrate Mass. Following the Mass, the sisters asked me to tell them something about what I was doing in Nigeria. After narrating about the school project, one of the sisters told me that if it was God’s will for me to carry out the project, he would provide the needed means.

While still in the UK, I got a booklet on Blessed Daniel Brottier written by Gerald Fitzgerald, C.S.Sp. entitled, *Blessed Daniel Brottier, C.S.Sp., Friend of the Youth*. The booklet narrated how Blessed Daniel Brottier depended on God’s providence to finance his project with the children of Auteuil. Fitzgerald tells us about what Brottier accomplished within the years he worked with the children.

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Over the 13 years of his administration (at Auteuil), he built permanent accommodation for his children, well-equipped workshops, dining and recreation rooms. He opened new houses through France. He set up an Association of the “Orphans of France” whose members of the farming community took into their homes hundreds of orphans and taught them farming skills in the happy family atmosphere of a Christian home. He also established 10 other houses throughout the country as annexes to Auteuil. The Little Flower continued to be his Treasurer! In all his years at Auteuil each day – he received a 1000- franc note in his mail or in the church-box

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or by the hand of an anonymous donor. It was an ongoing miraculous approval of his apostolic charity. These gifts have never ceased to multiply at Auteuil over the years. But more important still are the miracles of grace and physical cures obtained through prayer in the chapel.

I found myself in a similar situation as that of Blessed Daniel Brottier, and I instantly adopted him as one of my patron saints and composed a prayer to that effect. Every day I ask for his help. I named the make shift apartment I built at the school with local bricks in 2005 in his honor.

In my fund raising efforts, I pleaded with friends to donate a bag of cement, nails, or any building material useful for the work. I removed trees on the premises of the school. Because I was doing things such as the removal of trees, and I had no source of income, some confreres thought I had gone mad and asked the religious superior to take me out of the environment. In a jovial way, I would always tell those who said I was mad for starting a project without money in the pocket that “only mad people can change the world.” At a ceremony to introduce the school to the host community, a member of the community was shocked to find out that I was the priest behind the construction of the school project. He said he thought I was a laborer as he saw me doing manual work at the site.

After the completion of the walls for the classroom block, I did not have the slightest idea of where I would get money for the roof. Again, divine providence intervened. A colleague I met in Bangkok, Thailand during a world congress of Catholic Journalists in October 2004 introduced me to a German foundation that provided the money needed for the roofing of the classroom block. The school opened on September 18, 2006, with 30 pioneer students, from which 25 graduated in 2012.

I chose the motto, “Faith, Knowledge and Service” for the school, to inspire students who pass through the institution to make their contribution to the development of society. Our faith tells us that God has created us in his own image and likeness and has mandated us to conquer the world and rule it. If we are to achieve the purpose for which God has created us, then we need to pray. It is through prayer that

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the spiritual dimension of our lives receives adequate attention at Holy Ghost College, Sankera. We have communal and personal prayer consisting of daily and Sunday Masses, benediction, the daily recitation of the rosary, and regular spiritual retreats.

To be impactful, we need knowledge, as the Prophet Hosea said, “My people perish for lack of knowledge” (Hosea 4:1). Apart from classwork, we provide the children with many opportunities to learn. For instance, we have a Readers’ Club meeting on a weekly basis. Attendance and participation at the club is a must for all the students of the college and during the meeting six papers are presented – one from each class. The paper presenter asks the audience five questions and the audience also asks the presenter five questions. Members of the Press Club broadcast news at the school assembly twice a week – this is to help them develop an enquiring mind and an ability to communicate. In addition to the Press Club, media education teaches the students how to be discerning consumers as well as producers of the media. We organize retreats periodically during which we always remind the students of the reason for going to school.

We host “Hard Talk” sessions each term, just before the students go on holiday. During these sessions, we evaluate our stay together to encourage ourselves and make amends where we had gone wrong in the course of the term. The knowledge gained is to enable us to serve just as Christ served. He came into the world not to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Matthew 20:28). Living and acting as one community, the Spiritan confreres on the compound join with the students to do manual labor, especially when a new building project is to be undertaken. We clear construction sites, dig foundations, fetch water, etc. along with the students.

THE CHALLENGES

The work of evangelization in a rural area faces many challenges. Finances are very difficult to come by as people do not normally support projects in rural areas, and the priests live frugal lives in order to serve the youth. Because of the poverty in the society, the payment of school fees is often a problem. In line with the charism of our founders, we try to support those with financial challenges. For instance, a child who begins their education at Holy Ghost College and loses their source of support receives a scholarship to stay and complete their secondary school

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education. Some time ago, I went to a nearby parish for Sunday Mass. I spotted one of my students who had not returned to school after the holidays. When I asked him after Mass why he did not go back to school, he told me that he had lost his father and there was no one to pay his school fees. I asked him to pack his things and come back to school. For the next three years, he did not pay a cent.

Today, that student, along with six other past students, is a seminarian for the Catholic Diocese of Katsina-Ala. Five other past students have joined congregations and societies. One of them, studying with the Jesuits, came to visit the school to share his experience with the students. He advised them to study hard and inculcate in themselves the discipline given at the school. According to him, he attended an interview at the Postulancy of the Society of Jesus and was accepted by them. Although he was coming directly from a secondary school, he was told that he had the qualities needed for admission. Another past student, studying with St. Patrick's Missionaries in South Africa, told me, "The society admitted me and told me, people formed by the Spiritans are dedicated to anything they want to do and we don't have problems with them."

Apart from the seminarians studying for the Catholic priesthood, our past students are doing very well in other areas of life as well. One graduated from Veritas University, Abuja (established by the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria in 2007), with first class honors. Another also graduated with first class honors from a federal government university. Yet another was called to the Nigerian Bar last year and one will be called to it this year. Most of our 210 graduates are excelling in their various fields of endeavor. A similar success story applies to the pupils who graduate from the Nursery and Primary School Section and attend other secondary schools.

In 2018, we started a nursery primary school at the premises of the Spiritan Youth Resource Centre at Chonku, Jalingo Diocese, Taraba State, to take care of the educational needs of the children of that community. Unfortunately, in 2019, due to inter-tribal tensions between the Jukun and the Tiv people of Southern Taraba State, the school had to suspend operation.

We await the cessation of hostilities so that we can return to the training of the children of the rural community.

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WHAT PUSHES ME TO DO WHAT I DO?

Development work is not an easy task at any time, as resources are always scarce. The people who are the beneficiaries do not have the financial means to support the work. It falls to the development worker to seek out the necessary resources. This is not an easy task! So one needs an anchor or some principles to sustain him in this challenging work. My Christian faith and the charisms of my founders are the motivational tonics that keep me going. The missionary mandate of Christ, adopted by the Spiritan Congregation, is my principal source of strength.

The Spirit of the Lord is on me, for he has anointed me, to bring the good news to the afflicted. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives, sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to proclaim a year of favor from the Lord (Luke 4:18-19).³

The Second Vatican Council called on missionaries to work towards raising human dignity and promoting human development.

Christians ought to interest themselves, and collaborate with others, in the right ordering of social and economic affairs. They should apply themselves with special care to the education of children and young people through various types of schools, and these are not to be considered solely as an outstanding means for forming and developing a Christian youth, but as a service of great value to men, especially in the developing countries, one that is ordered to raising human dignity and promoting more human conditions.⁴

Justice and peace are a pre-requisite condition for development in the world. Without peace, it is difficult for development to take place.

Working for justice and peace, even in challenging circumstances, gives one a deep satisfaction. Spiritan, John Kilcrann, C.S.Sp., advanced reasons why the Spiritan should embrace the justice and peace apostolate.

The official document of the 1971 Synod of Bishops gave an authoritative stamp of approval to the principle of the centrality of JPIC to mission. Specifically, it commented that

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“action on behalf of justice and participation in the transformation of the world fully appear to us as a constitutive dimension of the preaching of the Gospel, or, in other words, of the Church’s mission for the redemption of the human race and its liberation from every oppressive situation.”⁵

Education has a great potential of liberating the human person and equipping them to work with the aim of transforming his environment. Spiritan, Fr. Bede Ukwuije, C.S.Sp., provides a historical basis in the Spiritan tradition for involvement in education.

The education apostolate has always been part of the Spiritan charism. In 18th century France, the founder of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit, Claude Francis Poulart des Places, committed himself to the education of the youth.

He consecrated himself to poor students who were ready to study. This was enshrined in the Rules of his Seminary. “In this house we shall only admit students whose poverty, conduct and aptitude for study are known to us.” He insisted on high standards of academic attainment.

. . . In 19th century France, Francis Mary Paul Libermann, who founded the Society of the Holy Heart of Mary in 1841 and became the 11th Superior General of the Congregation of the Holy Spirit after the merger of the two in 1848, highly recommended to his missionaries going to Africa to educate the people to become teachers, farmers and craftsmen. For him, the survival of the newly founded local church must be guaranteed by marrying evangelization with ‘civilization’ through the school apostolate. Some objected that the missionary is not a schoolmaster,

Libermann replied: “I understand that it would cost the missionary very much to act as teacher. Nevertheless, it is urgent to take this step in order to consolidate their efforts....In my opinion, to abandon the schools is to destroy the future of missions” Libermann understood the work of education to be holistic. He wanted his missionaries to work for the development of persons in all aspects of life.⁶

Fighting poverty means that we invest in human capacity, we enable people to be the people that God wishes them to be.

CONCLUSION

My vocation to the Spiritan Missionary Life occurred in a social context. Initially I did not have a taste for the education apostolate, but realizing the potential of education for human development, I have embraced it and it is gratifying for one to realize that my little efforts are changing lives positively. I would like to conclude with a quotation from a speech given by Archbishop Diarmuid Martin on social care in a changing Ireland in 2006.

Poverty is the inability for people to realize their God-given potential. Fighting poverty means that we invest in human capacity, we enable people to be the people that God wishes them to be. We rejoice that they can be so, equal in dignity to us. It means that we personally feel hurt when there are others in the world who are unable to have the same opportunity to fully realize themselves as we are. Our relationship is one based on love and respect for the other, in their inherent dignity and freedom.vii

*Fr. Kuha Indyer, C.S.Sp.
Nigerian North-East.*

ABBREVIATION

SRL *Spiritan Rule of Life* 2013. Rome Generalate, 2013.

ENDNOTES

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3. Quoted at the beginning of Chapter 1, *Our Spiritan Vocation*. SRL.
4. Vatican II: *Ad Gentes, The Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity* (1965). 12. Flannery A. Vatican Council II: *The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2007.
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