Catholic Church, Human Sexuality, and Academic Freedom in Nigeria

...........religions of control which denied the personal, inner spiritual path and the elemental power of human sexuality (Bamfort, 1992:168)

Pius Oyeniran Abioje, Ph. D,
Department of Religions,
University of Ilorin,
Ilorin, Kwara State.
GSM +234-8039170809
E-mail – poabioje@yahoo.com

Abstract

This study concerns the issue of how churches (with particular reference to the Catholic Church) relate to academic freedom vis-à-vis the subject of human sexuality in Nigerian context. I summarise the teaching of the Catholic Church on human sexuality, and some academic reactions to the Church’s position thereon. I trace how the objection of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria to the proposed sexuality education in the country was informed by the traditional teaching of the Catholic Church. Some pieces of vital information were gathered from newspaper reports and interviews, and from library sources. The study discovers that the principle of Roma locuta causa finita (Rome has spoken no more debate) is still very much in vogue in the Church, and that the Church still enjoins and enforces, albeit now in a subtle way, absolute obedience and docility. Some scholars express certainty that the Church still sanctions somehow members who voice divergent (or “heretical”) views on dogmas and doctrines. There is also the observation that many Westerners, and some Catholic priests and nuns around the world, reject Catholic sexual morality because of what they consider to be lack of conformity with reality, concerning hic et nunc sexual situations. In conclusion, I side with the idea that if the official position of the Catholic Church, which is perceived to be largely conservative, is accepted hook, line and sinker, cases of unwanted pregnancy, procured abortion, sexually transmitted diseases (STDs) including HIV and ADIS, will increase drastically in Nigeria, with particular reference to the Church’s total objection to use of condoms. I recommend that the ideals of academic freedom should be promoted dispassionately and objectively, as much as possible, if Christian and ecclesiastical theologians are to contribute to human progress in arts and science.
Introduction

In 2002, a big debate started raging in Nigeria over whether sexuality education should be imparted to young people as from upper primary school upward. Several experts whose opinions are presented later in this essay were interviewed by journalists. Some religious leaders (Christians and Muslims mostly) also gave their personal or corporate views on the subject. The conference of the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria held a meeting (September 12 to 16, 2005) at which a strong objection was raised against sexuality education (The New Chronicler, October 2005:5).

Library consultation revealed that some other churches have the same or similar objections as the Catholic Church. While some reference to the former will be made, the latter constitutes the focus of this study. As Assimeng (1989:112) notes, “The Catholic Church is often believed to be the most conservative force in terms of attitudes towards population question.” The word “population” can be substituted with “sexuality”, based on Assimeng’s context of discussion. As he notes further in the same paragraph, “Pope John Paul II re-echoed the traditional Catholic teaching on birth control during his 1985 visit to Kenya for the Catholic Eucharistic Congress.” Of course birth control is a basic issue in the subject of human sexuality.

The relevance of the foregoing to the theme of academic freedom is that ecclesiastically oriented theologians are usually pre-conditioned in their research and academic report. Only the radically inclined ones may be exempted.

The issue is the fact that once a church (mostly any church) has formulated and formalized its doctrines as articles of faith, no member is expected to say (or do) anything to the contrary. That tends to impinge on the academic freedom of church-rooted academicians to research and report as faithfully as possible, the facts on ground, without any pre-determined results. Ecclesiastical teachings are usually regarded as dogmas, with the implication that they are rigid and closed against questioning and contradiction. As McBrien (1994:20) notes, “Doctrines that are promulgated with the highest solemnity, that is, as definitive rules of faith, are called dogmas (literally, ‘what is right).” He notes further that while “all dogmas are doctrines, not all doctrines are dogmas.” Probably “not all doctrines are dogmas”, but it is not obvious that a Catholic scholar can speak against any doctrine of the Church with impunity, one way or another. Sheed (1974:27) notes that:

As Wilfrid Ward saw it, after the century of actual warfare following the Reformation, the Church saw herself under siege and adapted her life to the siege condition. In a siege the one virtue is discipline, and the one consideration is the defense of the walls....so the great defensive doctrines – the Visible Church and its marks, Supremacy, infallibility, apologetics generally – had the first call on the Church’s energy. At all costs the walls must stand. The real life of the Church based on Trinity, Incarnation, Redemption, the life to come, could not receive the degree
of attention which would have been normal. The one essential (sic) was that the great doctrines should be stated correctly and not denied.

Among the scientists who were affected by the Catholic censorship was Galileo Galilei who confirmed the Copernican discovery that it was the earth and not the sun that was rotating round the universe (Schreck 1987:83f). But, the setting ablaze of John Hus, the “Rector of Prague University”, who was burnt into ashes in the worst form of censorship (i.e. the Inquisition) constituted the most devastating blow on academic freedom. Renwick and Harman (2002:101) note that:

[Hus] was thrown into prison and barbarously treated. The emperor gave an order for his release but was terrified into cancelling it by the pope and cardinals. After seven months of cruel suffering Hus was put through a mockery of a trial. His defence was drowned with shouts of ‘Recant, Recant!’ He declared he would retract nothing unless it was contrary to God’s Word. In 1415, after the most shameful degradation by the Council, he was burnt at their request outside Constance by the civil authorities.

The pertinent question is whether things are still the same with the Catholic hierarchy, or the Church is living in a new era of civilization? A cursory look may not suffice. Hans Kung, an experienced Catholic theologian, told Cabestrero (1981:109) in an interview that:

The congregation of the faith does not face its positive task of propagating the faith, but is living again in the times of the Inquisition. The Inquisition has become more discreet, more timorous, sower, more wary, more regulated, but it still operates by inquisition and with methods that have nothing to do with Christianity.

The case of Hus (above) happened in 1451, and Hans Kung spoke on his experience and understanding of the Catholic Church in 1981. The implication seems to be that as long as the Church is run by human beings, some human traits cannot but trail it, and among such traits is the tendency to stifle freedom of expression, which affects academic freedom negatively.

Apparently, hardly any institution would want to be contradicted or proven wrong. Yet humility and conscious acknowledgement of the seemingly prevalent view that only God is omniscient may help sustenance of freedom of expression and academic freedom within private institutions and society in general. With specific reference to religious or spiritual knowledge, Anselm’s definition of theology is acclaimed by both the Church and many theologians of note, but the definition often lacks pragmatic adherence. As McBrien (1994:45) notes, Anselm defines theology as “faith seeking understanding” (*Fides quaerens intellectum*), while the dictum of *Roma locuta causa finita* (i.e. the Catholic Magisterium – the teaching authority that is based in Rome – has spoken, no more debate) enjoys much greater adherence within the Church and among many pro-ecclesia scholars. If faith were allowed to seek
understanding, there would have been hardly any hard feeling and intolerance against freedom of expression that is necessary for promotion of academic freedom.

No wonder the Church places a lot of premium on obedience. The Catechism of the Catholic Church (1994, no 915, p. 244) describes obedience as a virtue “that characterizes the life consecrated to God.” The epitome of this ideal as it expresses itself in the constitution of the Jesuits, is presented by Renwick and Harman (2002:148) thus:

The *Spiritual Exercises*, a book binding on every member, laid down: ‘that we may be entirely of the same mind with the Church, if she have (sic) defined anything black which may appear to our minds to be white, we ought to believe it to be as she has pronounced it?

In the judgement of Renwick and Harman, the acceptance of that pledge “put men into spiritual slavery.” Be that as it may, there seems to be no doubt that the Church cherishes docility as a virtue, and that tends to make freedom of expression and academic freedom impossible, except for “rebels” with lion hearts, who may not mind opting-out or being sanctioned. One would like to examine how the Church (with particular reference to the Catholic Church) constitutes obstacle to academic freedom, and how not to be deterred by it. Some scholarly observations lie ahead, toward practical steps against obstacles to academic freedom in Christian theology.

**Catholic Teaching on Human Sexuality**

The explanation is apt that like most human cum divine institutions, the Church loves and cherishes absolute obedience, as opposed to objection, contradiction, independent opinion, and critical analysis which characterize academic freedom. Yet, the world seems to be much more complex than totalitarian systems would have wanted it to be. As Viladesau (1984:5) notes, the actual world is complex, and very many human beings seem to have peculiarities which may not fit into a monolithic principle in certain respects. Some examples will suffice in relation to the Catholic teaching on human sexuality.

Basically, the Church regards any form of sexual act outside of marriage to be a grave sin. It also considers the use of any artificial or manufactured contraceptive as equally gravely sinful. In the first instance, *The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (1994: nos 2390 and 2399) notes systematically that:

1. The sexual act must take place exclusively within marriage. Outside of marriage it always constitutes a grave sin and excludes one from sacramental communion.
2. The regulation of births represents one of the aspects of responsible fatherhood and motherhood. Legitimate intentions on the part of the spouses do not justify recourse to morally unacceptable means (for example, direct sterilization or contraception).
\textit{The Catechism} in numbers 2357 – 2359 addresses the issue of homosexuality. Surprisingly, number 2358 holds that there are homosexuals who “do not choose their homosexual condition”, and so should not be discriminated against. In the number that follows, however, homosexuals are asked to remain chaste, by involving themselves only in disinterested friendship, and “they can and should gradually and resolutely approach Christian perfection.” Experienced homosexuals and those who are familiar with their conditions would be in a good position to react to the Church’s position on the exercise of their sexual orientation.

The real focus here is the Church’s view of sexual act outside marriage as a grave sin, and the objection the Church raises against the use of contraceptives, while at the same time insisting that “human life must be respected and protected absolutely from the moment of conception” (number 2270 in \textit{The Catechism}). The Church emphasizes further that “A person who procures a completed abortion incurs excommunication \textit{latae sententiae}, ‘by the very commission of the offense’.” (Number 2272 of \textit{The Catechism}). These represent a summary of the Catholic teaching on human sexuality. In my view, that forms the background to the reaction of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) to the nation’s consideration of sexuality education in the curriculum of upper primary and secondary schools.

Literature review indicates that many intellectuals have studied and reflected on most of the salient positions of the Catholic Church on the subject of human sexuality. Some scholars disagree that sex should or can be limited to within marriage. Bamfort (1992:39) notes, for instance, that:

\begin{quote}
Spontaneous sexual arousal, just like the ecstatic frenzy of the Shaman, throws off the shackles of any outside force, and, in the case of woman, submits the male energy to the mysteries of female power. Instead of seeing the sexual act as one of union on every level, rational man somehow came to shroud it in guilt and fear….Instead of seeing sex as a sacred act, our society has debased its vital energies by insisting on it solely as a means of producing offspring, rather than understanding sexuality as a physical expression of our spiritual being.
\end{quote}

The expressions “rational man” and “our society” substitute “Western Christian Church” which, according to Bamfort (p. 19) opposes sex to spirit, and limits its function to procreation only. There are some other scholars also who do not think that sex should (or can) be limited to within marriage. Ranke-Heinemann (1990:78) notes that many Westerners have rejected the Catholic sexual morality because of its lack of conformity with reality. She notes how St. Augustine of Hippo whose writings influence the Church’s sexual doctrines “dramatizes the fear of sexual pleasure, equating pleasure with perdition in such a way, that anyone who tries to follow his train of thought will have the sense of being trapped in a nightmare.” Likewise a Catholic priest, Greeley (1978:34f) wonders “whether if marriage is indeed a process, need sexual intimacy wait until the formalities of a wedding – especially when a couple is clearly
and decisively committed to one another?” Indeed, I always thought that such waiting may endanger the couple in an age of HIV and AIDS, if one of the two or both are unable to endure.

Critical observations are also raised on the doctrinal position of the Catholic Church on birth control, abortion, and use of contraceptives. Hardon (1977:371) notes how “neither the Jewish Talmud nor the Moslem Koran and Hadith forbid polygamy, contraception, or abortion.” On page 452, he quotes Joseph Fletcher, the author of “Situation Ethics”, as stating that a person may support abortion “simply on the ground that no unwanted unintended baby should ever be born.” In the view of Greeley (1978:16):

All species practice forms of population control when disease and violent death fail to keep the population within psychologically tolerable limits. The killing of foetuses and babies, appalling as it may seem to contemporary Catholics, has been the response of humankind to population pressures throughout its history, a response which apparently troubled very few consciences. These facts are noted not to defend abortion, not to suggest that Catholics abandon their opposition to it; but simply so that the issue may be seen in the proper historical perspective.

What beats the imagination of this writer is that the Catholic Church objects to abortion and contraception (even the use of condoms) at the same time. Ranke-Heinemann (1991:287) notes that:

In 1853 for the first time Rome delivered a response about the use of condoms. The question was: ‘May a woman passively surrender to this sort of intercourse?’ The answer: No. Thus if there was danger of death she might submit to coitus interruptus, but evidently not to sex with a condom. On June 3, 1916, Rome declared that in the latter case the wife must resist her husband, as she would a rapist.’

There seems to be no doubt that use of condom is much propagated by many civil authorities and Non Governmental Organisations (NGOs) toward reduction of HIV and AIDS, and other sexually transmitted diseases (STDs). Granfield (1980:25) quotes some complainants as stating that the Vatican is alien to “the daily lives of Christians that it is unable to recognize the urgency and the complexity of the problems they face.” One would think that Borrowdale (1991:127) presents an up-to-date view on human sexuality when she notes that:

Christian thinking about sexual ethics still concentrates much more on who has the right to do what to whom, than on the content of a relationship. One way of combating sexual violence is to expand our thinking about sexual ethics. Marie Fortune has suggested that we ought to speak of an ethic based on mutual consent rather than coercion. Sexual activity with children will always be wrong accordingly to this criterion, for children can never give free, informed consent. Adult-child sexual contact is unacceptable because it is nonconsensual and exploitative, not because it is sexual…The guiding principle must be, ‘Thou shalt not sexually manipulate, take advantage of, or abuse another person at any time.’
Theses reflections, as well as the preceding observations of some scholars imply the level of academic freedom which the writers have permitted themselves. Of course, they capture reality as it affects an indeterminate but imaginably substantial percentage of world population.

The ecclesiastical belief is that use of contraceptives should be discouraged to avoid sexual permissiveness (Ranke-Heinemann, p. 296). That seems reasonable, but it does not seem to do justice to all men and women in every circumstance. It does not seem obvious that every human being is capable of prolonged sexual abstinence or able to support pregnancy and family life, psychologically, physically, and financially as not to indulge in extra-marital sex.

**Sexuality Education Debate in Nigeria**

The impression seems to be rife that sexuality talk is a taboo which cuts across nations and ethnic groups. In the view of this writer, the taboo jinx was broken in Nigeria, to a great extent, in 2002 when the debate on sexuality education became hot. The Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) was among the interest groups that opposed the proposal that sexuality education be imparted as from upper primary school, Clark (1976:112) notes that:

> In the sixteenth century the churches, Catholic and Protestant alike, believed that it was their duty to prevent or to punish wrong beliefs in matters of faith and moral, and therefore they did not allow complete freedom of opinion.

Experience indicates that old habits die hard, and that even in our scientific age, “the churches” still strive to dominate human life not only in ecclesia communities, but also at societal levels. With specific reference to Africa, “New People Editorial Staff” (1996:62) – a Kenyan-based Catholic group – notes how the Church cherishes “passive obedience”, with the explanation that:

> Due to the African tradition of respect for the elders and superiors combined with the authoritarian attitude of the Roman curia, a good number of African bishops have developed an attitude of passive obedience. The slightest divergence from any thought, opinion, or suggestion coming from Rome is perceived as heretical. Unanimity has become a must and is too often a straitjacket. A unanimous and enthusiastic attitude must be put forward to Rome, even to the extent of sacrificing the truth.

That seems inevitable where an institution is bent on protecting its totalitarian influence on its members.

Basically, the fear of HIV and AIDS had motivated some Nigerians to propose sexuality education in schools, to prevent ignorance and its dire consequences relating to sexuality problems: unwanted pregnancy, abortion, HIV and AIDS, and other devastating fatal sexually transmitted diseases. But the CBCN at the end of a meeting at the Bishop Kelly Pastoral Centre, Benin City, September 12 to 16, 2005, called on “Catholic parents, youth organisations and other persons of good will” to reject the
sexuality education curriculum proposed by the Federal Government of Nigeria. In the words of the Bishops (2005:5):

We are concerned at the recent move by the Federal Government of Nigeria to introduce at the junior and senior secondary school levels, a curriculum for sex education which is harmful to the ethical and moral development of the young. The curriculum does not take into full consideration African culture and tradition. We wish to point out that sexuality education is to be preferred to mere sex education and that such education cannot be dissociated from moral principles. Sexuality education means sex within the context of genuine human love, the family, and respect for life.

The statement or declaration is here viewed and analysed critically. In the first instance, the curriculum uses the “Sexuality education” expression which the Bishops said they preferred, and not the “sex education” that they condemned. As if in answer to the Bishops (though he granted the interview much earlier, as far back as 2002) Ebele Maduewesi, the Executive Secretary of the National Education and Development Council (2002:4) noted about the curriculum that:

The name says sexuality education not sex education, because there is something called human sexuality. It is part of human attribute and it is the responsibility of education to attend to that. It is just like hunger for food, call to nature, and so on....so, the sexuality education curriculum is really an attempt to treat the issue of human sexuality and then focus on how to manage it.

It would thus seem that the real issue is not terminology, expression, or definition. After all, there are some other scholars who use “sex education” and “sexuality education” interchangeably. Lateju (2006:1), for instance, quotes William R. Finger, as stating that “sex education helps persons develop self-esteem, hope and purpose for life and respect for others.” The quotation continues that sex education equips people “with the following skills, which will help them to resist sexual temptation, namely: negotiation, values clarification, refusal, interpersonal communication, decision making, and goal setting skills.” Likewise, Owoyele (2006:1) entitles her essay as: “The Youth and Christian Sex Education: Challenges in A Permissive Society”. Thus, academically speaking, a word or phrase assumes the meaning given to it by the writer who defines it, and no one may impose “meaning” on another scholar.

In sum, when the expressions “sexuality education” and “sex education” are used, one only needs to pay attention to what they mean within contexts, rather than a reader coming with a fixed meaning in mind. One would think that is part of what is called academic freedom, as demonstrated above. The Catholic Church is not likely to object to what William Finger is quoted as calling “sex education” (above), for instance. There seems to be no doubt then that the intention of the Bishops was to impose on Nigeria as a nation the Catholic teaching on human sexuality. Assimeng (1989:112) already indicates how that is true in respect of Africa as a continent. He notes that:
Pope John Paul II re-echoed the traditional Catholic teaching on birth control during his August 1985 visit to Kenya for the Catholic Eucharistic Congress. Catholics officially treat abortion as murder. And as the Bishops of the Ghana hierarchy informed the faithful in a Pastoral letter that was read in Catholic churches in the country on December 23, 1973: ‘if the illicit deprivation of another person’s life is morally reprehensible, to take the life of a guiltless, unprotected person is unpardonable’.

The issue of abortion is, of course, one of the subjects listed in the proposed sexuality education curriculum in Nigeria. In the ensuing debate, an Islamic scholar, Sanusi Gumbi (2002:3), noted that the sexuality education proposal was acceptable in Islam except where abuse was concerned. With specific reference to abortion, Gumbi’s view on the same page was that:

Abortion in Islam is Haram (forbidden). However, there is the permissible abortion where a married woman is concerned, where it is discovered that if a child would become a nuisance to people if it was born with some deformity or something of that nature. How, questions were thrown to scholars where it was agreed that abortion is Haram, except in a case where the foetus has not yet matured to become a living being.

This position is certainly unacceptable to the Catholic Church for which it is murder to kill or waste a spermatozoon. Beyond that, the Church objects to abortion (except when the mother and child are in grave danger – Ranke-Heinemann, 1990:300), and at the same time rejects use of condom. The current Pope, Benedict XVI, is quoted as saying that “condoms were not the answer in the continent’s fight against HIV” (Compass, Wednesday, March 18, 2009;14). The same paper on the same page reports how the Pope’s statement was protested by some (Catholic) “priests and nuns working with those living with HIV/AIDS.” The protesters were reported as questioning the Church’s opposition to condoms amid the pandemic ravaging Africa. That means that the official position is not acceptable to some or many otherwise faithful Catholics in clerical and lay states in the Church.

Three Baptist theologians wrote a book on “Christian Sexuality” and recommended the ABC formula for preventing unwanted pregnancy and STDs, with particular reference to HIV/AIDS. For A, they rightly put “abstinence”, for B, rightly they put “be faithful to one faithful, uninfected partner”; but instead of the usual “condom” for C, they put “commitment to biblical, godly, holy, Christian conduct.” One of the authors told me that they were persuaded by their consultants (not to say censors) that to put “condom” as the originator of the formula did, would make their position unchristian. The implication is that it is not possible for a good Christian to go astray sexually, or that a good Christian commitment will work better in place of condom, even if the person goes astray. But, what one reads on some pages of Nigerian newspapers suggest that many highly placed Christians, including pastors, priests, bishops,
evangelists, overseers, and so on, do go astray. For instance, a woman who committed suicide on 18th October, 2005, left this note:

I am infected with HIV/AIDS and have given the dreaded disease to about 22 men and two pastors of their church. I do not want to continue sending innocent people to their untimely death, neither do I want to wait to die so miserably a death of AIDS carrier, because I have no child to look after me. So I have decided to take away my life. It is voluntary, so police should not prosecute anyone. (Eze, 2005:7).

Apart from indicating that religious leaders are not insulated from extra-marital sex and its hazards, the suicide note implies also that there are Nigerian women who live on prostitution. Beyond that, prostitution has become an item for export. Here is a fairly full report of the situation:

Over 20,000 Nigerian girls, mostly from Edo State, are engaged in commercial sex work in Europe, the Executive Secretary National Agency for the Prohibition of Traffic in Persons and other Related Matters (NAPTIP), Mrs. Carol Ndaguba, has disclosed….1,000 corpses of Nigerians litter the Sahara desert annually on this suicide mission to Europe… Mrs. Ndaguba noted that socio-cultural and religious practices facilitate cross border human trafficking, adding that no major religious group in Nigeria was excluded as individuals from Christian, Islamic and Traditional religions had been victims…. Speaking on the occasion, the Provost, College of Medical Science, University of Benin, Professor Friday Okonofua, said: ‘In the past, human trafficking and prostitution were rare events in Nigerian Universities. However, as the national economy declined and the number of students enrolled in the universities increase, we have begun witnessing the stark realities of prostitution in our nation’s tertiary institution.’ (Olisah, 2006:3).

As a corollary, gory captions, such as “Nigerians procure 610,000 abortions yearly”, are inevitable. Neither should it be a surprise that abortion is prevalent in a country where mass poverty is the order of the day. The holy books and every civilized culture can be said to value sex within marriage. It is also appreciated that children are better born and raised within marriage, but poverty that is based on unemployment, retrenchment, business liquidation and miserable wages stand on the way of many persons who are matured to marry, leading to extramarital sex and mass prostitution. But, how can condom encourage sexual activity when it is said to reduce sexual pleasure, while its real value is in protecting against STD and unwanted pregnancies for those who can discipline themselves to use condoms. One would think that not to encourage use of condom amounts to insensitivity in a country where HIV/AIDS are said to be ravaging the populace. Of course, the problem is that the Catholic Church is advocating total abstinence, without due consideration for those who may not be able to abstain. Thus, in spite of the Church’s old-age abstinence propaganda, Agaptus Anaele (2006:3) reports that:
Believing expert counsel that condoms offer the best protection against the invasion of HIV, Nigerians in the last two years (2004 and 2005) used up about 310 million teats of Gold Circle condoms. The figure is without prejudice to other brands that were sold within the same period. Investigation by Sunday Sun revealed that in 2004, about 150,009,232 condoms were sold by SFH, while 159,331,336 pieces were sold in 2005. On the average, 14,216,939 were sold monthly in 2005.

Total objection to condom means also that if a wife is infected with HIV, the husband must abstain, irrespective of the level of his age and sexual agility. In many cases, that may lead to dire consequences, if the man cannot shun sex. Ditto for sexually active married men who may have to be away from home for some months or years. The wives must be praying that they will not return with HIV. Many widowers and widows may also be listed along with bachelors and all those who can not do without extramarital sex. The Yoruba poet-singer, Ogundare Foyanmu, in one of his orations observed that: *Ona lo po l’apoju ni o je ki pansaga o rile gbe, ko to ya ile apon, ki o to ya ile eni to l’obinrin* (i.e. Promiscuity cannot stay at home because it has too many persons to visit, bachelors and even numerous married persons need her service). In other words, promiscuity is prevalent in Yorubaland, as in many societies, generally speaking.

The foregoing does not imply that every thing in the sexuality education curriculum is acceptable. But, there is a difference between pointing out what is not acceptable and rejecting, as the Catholic Bishops Conference was advocating the entire curriculum. This study has tried to explain that certain concepts and items in the curriculum that have been viewed prejudicially should be reviewed. The President of the Northern States Old Students’ Association, Hamidu Ladan Zuru, notes how the Association organized a workshop to which “all shades of opinion from Islamic and Christian clerics and the ordinary man” were invited. He said the workshop, like the Supreme Council for Sharia, “condemned certain aspects” of the curriculum, because it “contains a lot of vulgar abstracts of sex”. Explaining further, he notes that:

> It is better to be silent on certain aspects of the curriculum, because there are things you would want to discourage such as homosexuality and masturbation etc. Try to play down on them. Even public figures do these things. The Islamic scholars have to come out and preach against those things. These things are forbidden by God, even Christians are aware that such things are bad. Constant preaching against these things is needed.

Zuru, as it stands, corrects the wrong impression that Muslims in the country have totally rejected the curriculum. Yet, the opinion expressed that such things as homosexuality and masturbation should not be mentioned to the pupils of upper primary and secondary schools runs counter to the stand of this study. One would rather subscribe to the view that not to mention those words is to allow the young ones to learn from the wrong places: on television, on video, on Internet, from their peers, and from older persons.
who may take advantage of their ignorance to violate their innocence. Zuru’s sincerity is, however, commendable, for admitting that “public figures do these things”.

It is also worthy of note that even though the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria called for a rejection of the curriculum, that decision appeared to represent a collective stand, based on the official universal position of the Church. But, on individual basis, Peter Jatau (a Catholic Archbishop) who was the Chairman of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) in the 19 Northern States was quoted as saying that:

Sexuality education is a sensitive issue. It is a matter that should be properly handled because sexuality education for young people, boys and girls, say between the ages of seven and thirteen, needs to be handled by adults who know the sensitivity of youths, whose real motive is to educate young people, men and women so that they do not get into trouble.

One would think that the Archbishop is faultless in that answer. And there was no indication throughout the interview that he would ever call for a total rejection of the curriculum, even though he raised some critical and controversial points. Of course, as Zuru was quoted as saying earlier, the curriculum contains some “vulgar abstracts of sex”, though what constitutes that vulgarity may differ in the perception of individuals and groups. This study is highly positive about the curriculum, but one would consider as vulgar, for instance, such details under the puberty sub-theme which tries to dispel a popular myth that “boys with large penis are better lovers” and so on. One would thing that such details are vulgar, but, it is possible that in the experience of the formulators of the curriculum, some women are psychologically disturbed if the penis of husband is small in size. In the same vein, some other details which may appear objectionable may be necessary, such as the information that abortion may be safe when done by a trained medical professional. The rationale for this information lies in the fact of the prevalent deaths from abortions performed by quacks or through self medication. Although Joseph Idowu Fearon (the Anglican Bishop of Kaduna) notes that his Church does not support abortion, he is of the opinion that the sexuality education curriculum should be embraced because, as he observed:

The way things are going today in the world one cannot run away from the impact of globalization. Our children have access to CNN, BBC world service and the Arab channels. No matter how you control your children they are exposed to these things… if we hold on to the old ways you and I were brought up by our parents, these children, because of globalization will see these things elsewhere and instead of being properly taught they would be taught the wrong things and we would regret it.

Fearon concludes that it was highly beneficial if the school could complement the sexuality education imparted by parents and the Church. That coincides with the belief of this study. From the Islamic perspective, there were also scholars, such as Sanusi Gumbi, who held that “sexuality education is
acceptable in Islam”. Like the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria, however, Hussein Abdulkareem, a Professor in the Department of Biochemistry, Lagos State University College of Medicine, insisted that “we should all reject this curriculum”. Yet, he admitted that he had not even seen the content of the curriculum, let alone contemplate on it. In his own words:

Although I haven’t seen the details of the said curriculum, from my experience as a scientist, a biochemist, sexuality education is a scientific subject. And every scientific subject must have the practical aspect. It is not desirable to teach sexuality education at the tertiary level let alone at the primary school level. What I am saying is that if you teach seven-year-old children sexuality education, you will have to teach them the practical aspect of it.

In contrast with AbdulKareem, Gumbi, in his quoted interview (above), indicated forbidden areas, such as practical demonstration of sex in classroom. Of course, if AbdulKareem thought of the HIV/AIDS cases, he might change his opinion that it is too early to teach seven-year-old children sexuality education, and concentrate on what and how to impart sexuality education to them. One can summarize the outcome of a series of interview conducted by Adaeze Amos. Four of the individuals and their responses go thus:

1. Dr Ezeibe Ezeribe, a general practitioner:
   
   It has also been proved by so many medical experts that in previous generations, puberty of girl-child usually started with breast development at age 10 or 11 and lasted through age 16 or 17. But, today, puberty in female children typically starts around age nine. It is not unusual to see a girl at eight or even seven with breast buds.

2. Dr. Oluwatomosun Ikhide, a medical doctor:

   When sexuality education commences early enough in a girl’s life by her mother, she will hardly become a victim of rape because she will be taught how to sit properly and the importance of not putting on scanty dresses.

3. Princess Olufemi Kayode, of Media Concern for Women and Children:

   A four-year-old can say vagina, it is not a taboo to be told the name. Sophie was wrong to have shied away from telling her five-year-old the name of the part of her body until her teacher had to do that. A child knows where the nose is, where the ears are, and she should know the names of all the parts of her body.

4. Lorita Ofoereh, a psychologist:

   Zero age to nine years are the formative stages of a child. Children learn even as early as three years. So, efforts must be made by every mother to give a child sexuality education as early as possible.
Then the school, together with religious and moral organizations, and other positive influences can build on the home-training. Listening to the voices of sound experts could contribute immensely to human understanding of life in general, if such experts have taken the necessary time to study and reflect on the issues critically, rather than artificially or prejudicially, which could be gravely misleading.

The relevance of academic freedom is obvious here. It is necessary to break the spinal cord of any indoctrination that may cause intellectual comatose. Stiebert (2003:26) relates an encounter he had with a “young woman, a first year student” in University of Botswana who said to him:

“My pastor says it is wrong to use condoms: it says so in the book of Judges in the story of Sodom”. I assured her fervently that there is no mention of condoms in Judges or anywhere else in the Bible but she remained skeptical.

The denomination of the lady is not mentioned, but the title of “pastor” indicates that she was not likely to be a Catholic, since the usual Catholic category is “priest”.


If our religious leaders and institutions are giving us policies and traditions that hinder our fight against HIV/AIDS, we should be free to criticize these policies as oppressive and ungodly. Are we free to act independently, according to the gospel of Christ?

The answer to the rhetorical question, of course, goes without saying. Jesus was never known to be intimidated by any human authority, to the extent that he was unable to say what He deemed necessary for human salvation. As a corollary one would recommend that religious scholars should exercise their God-given freedom of expression upon which the principle of academic freedom is based.

The issue of freedom of expression is central also to the contemporary clamour for human rights. Upon that object is predicated the struggle for academic freedom. The opinion of several theologians is that the Catholic Church apparently like many other churches tries to obstruct freedom of expression and academic freedom. Cabestrero (1981:84) quotes Jose Maria Gonzalez Ruiz (a Catholic theological) as saying that “there ought to be a great freedom of theological opinion”, and “no one should be allowed formally to condemn one’s opponent, except by counter-posing the opponent’s ideas, and that is all.” Ruiz is a frontline Catholic theologian who can be classified as a moderate radical thinker.

Along the same line, Cabestrero (p. 116f) quotes another Catholic theologian, Hans Kung, as noting that “we talk about democracy in society and we don’t have democracy in the church.” Broadly and pragmatically speaking, that implies little or no room for academic freedom. With particular reference to sexually related matters, Kung is quoted as saying (p. 116).
When we have overpopulation in many, many countries, specifically in Catholic countries, this problem cannot be faced positively by the church. Why not? Because the teaching of the church does not accept birth control. And why doesn’t it accept birth control? Because we are maintaining a continuity, an authority and an infallibility in the teaching of the church that are purely literalist, that are not based on the scriptures and that today are being pushed aside.

As the leader of a conservative organization, each succeeding pope is, to a large extent, tied to the teaching of his predecessors, and so could not proffer realistic solutions to current problems, with particular reference to human sexuality. Granfield (1980:25) notes the conviction in many quarters that “the papacy is out of touch with the real needs of the Christian community”. He wonders whether Rome is able to “appreciate the agony of parents faced with the decision over birth control”, and “the plight of divorced Catholics who desire remarriage and acceptance by the Church”. No wonder many people are said to have abandoned the church in the Western world, even though many other people are still in it “faithfully” or “unfaithfully”. But the real concern here is that humanity has too much to lose if scholars trade-off academic freedom on the altar of faithfulness to ecclesiastical authority, in Nigeria and elsewhere in the world.

Conclusion

This study has examined the position of the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria on the sexuality education curriculum debate in the country, in relation to academic freedom. It was discovered that the principle of Roma locuta causa finita is still very much in vogue in the Catholic Church, and that the Church still enjoins and enforces, albeit in a subtle manner, absolute obedience and docility. Some scholars are quoted who note also that many Westerners have rejected the Catholic sexual morality because of what they consider to be lack of conformity with reality. Many Nigerians including some Christian clerics are also quoted as supporting the sexuality education curriculum which was rejected by the country’s Catholic Bishops’ Conference. The recommendation of this writer is that those who reject the curriculum should “get real” and reconsider the circumstances that brought about the debate, with particular reference to HIV and AIDS; and that the principle of academic freedom should not be compromised on the altar of being faithful to an ecclesiastical authority.
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