REVISITING MISSIONARY EDUCATION – STRATEGIES TO ADVANCE QUALITY EDUCATION AND HUMAN FLOURISHING by Antoinette Opara, SHCJ

The convener of this conference, Rev. Jaiye Edu of the African Centre for Religion and Society, the Moderator of this discussion forum, distinguished Panelists, Ladies and Gentlemen. This Conference on Revisiting Missionary Education Strategies to Advance Quality Education and Human Flourishing has given us a conversation platform on a crucial aspect of our development and sustenance as a people. It is my pleasure to be with you.

Within the time allotted me, I would like to address the following:

- Human Flourishing and Education.
- Missionary Education Legacy: The Nigerian Perspective
- Strategies for Improving Access and Quality of Education.

HUMAN FLOURISHING

Philosophers engage in meaningful debates over the expression – Human Flourishing. Aristotle teaches that life has a purpose and that the function of life is to attain that purpose. According to him, the meaning of life is earthly happiness or flourishing that can be achieved via reason and the acquisition of virtue\(^1\). Wikipedia describes human flourishing as "people experiencing positive emotions, positive psychological functioning and positive social functioning, most of the time," and living "within an optimal range of human functioning\(^2\). Flourishing relates to self-esteem, happiness, and contentment, which one achieves by the self. This is where Education comes in. Education empowers the individual to liberally pursue and accomplish those goals that will improve self-esteem, happiness, and contentment. When the individual gets to this state, s/he is flourishing. In this state, the individual is indirectly dependent on any patron, government or nation for their existence and contentment. The state of
non-dependence on the government or patron must be scary for leaders and governments to contemplate.

Currently, African nations are politically independent. Can we describe the Continent as flourishing yet? The early missionaries, with a mind to evangelize, created opportunities for the Education of the converts. Their effort was a game-changer for innumerable individuals and families in Africa because many people received education and got employment opportunities that improved everything. It was the fulfilment of the proverbial saying by Maimonides, ‘give a man fish and feed him for a day; teach a man to fish and feed him for a lifetime’. Several years after the advent of Missionary education, the Continent is still grappling with one of the basic needs of human existence – Education. The African political leaders and their sponsors play their game, and often, the reality is that policymakers do not match rhetoric with action. Their strategies ensure that the Education that will provide the goal of human flourishing should not be guaranteed. Could governments be excluding children on purpose?

If you were a student of Education before 1897, you would have learnt that Education is preparation for life. After 1897, John Dewey changed the narrative by saying: **Education is not** preparation for life; Education is life itself.

What you believe determines the purpose of Education for you. If you are among the key players, you will undoubtedly impact the Education policies and decisions in this sector from your belief system. How do our policymakers view Education? As a tool of human emancipation? If Education is life itself, who does not want African children to live?

Quality education embodies that educational experience that prepares you sufficiently for life within a particular context. In Africa today, given the challenges of insecurity, poverty, unequal opportunities created by western economies, no schooling can prepare you amply. However, African children, when given the minutest chance, excel in all spheres of life. Testimonies abound.
The educational zeal of the missionaries laid the foundation for today's accomplishments. But the triumphs are few and far between. African children are disproportionately out of school, and many receive an education that could be more dangerous than ignorance. Leadership, where one out of every five children is out of school, is leadership that sacrifices its people³. Without Education, one would still have a life, but is it the person's preferred and justified quality of life at this age and time in human history?

Most governments in Africa have faced the challenge of access and quality in Education. Conferences have proffered solutions; that have been tested and discarded. We continue to ask: why are so many African children out of school? Who does not value education – the leaders or the people? Or instead, should the question be – is it a universal desire to have all children educated irrespective of their Continent?

The websites of UNESCO and UNICEF are rife with statistics on the struggles and failures of the Continent vis-a-vis the Education of its children. For example, 1/5 of children between the ages of 6 and 11 and 1/3 between the ages of 12 and 14 are excluded from school worldwide, but these are mainly from Africa. According to UIS data, almost 60% of youth between the ages of 15 and 17 are not in school⁴. In 2019, UNESCO posted a report postulating that about 258 million children, adolescents and youths are out of school⁵. The image is dreary and pathetic, especially in sub-Saharan Africa. These figures are not just numbers. They are the faces of African children that have been denied one of their inalienable rights.

But there is some good news. The Global Catholic Education Report of 2021 indicates that 62 million children are enrolled globally in catholic pre-primary, primary, and secondary schools. This report demonstrates that catholic schools are mainly present in low-income countries. In these countries, 1 in 7 children is in catholic schools⁶. Therefore, the Church still contributes and significantly towards the achievement of SDG4.
Nigeria, a hugely populated West African nation, shares in the African Continent’s educational struggles. Although the educated youths are high-flyers worldwide, the multifaceted challenge has thwarted every effort to check its devastating impact on improved living standards and human flourishing. UNICEF reports that about 10.5 million Nigerian children aged 5-14 years are not in school 7. Africans must remember Diogenes statement that 'the foundation of every state is the education of its youth'. And it is worsening due to the security challenges that have resulted in the unabated kidnapping of school children.

World population review indicated that Nigeria has a population of 210,737,572 people. The Census Bureau of the USA projects that by 2047, Nigeria will be the third most populous country with 379 million people 8. The rapid growth rate must impact policymaking. Here, we are yet to see workable plans, strategies, and adequate budgetary allocations to tackle the education needs of such an emerging populace.

In Lagos State, a city of 3,600km² with a population of about 20,000,000 people 9. There are eighteen catholic secondary schools with a population of about 17,000 students and several other mission schools. Though the figure seems minute compared to the almost 700,000 students and 323 secondary schools in the state, the positive impact is evident as most higher institutions in and outside Nigeria compete to register graduates from these mission schools into their first-degree programmes.

**MISSIONARY EDUCATION LEGACY**

Although colonization heralded the missionary activities in Africa, I believe that the mandate of our Lord Jesus Christ – to make disciples of all nations – is the starting point of missionary education. The Christian faithful understood the critical nature of Jesus’s injunction. This colossal task was not possible through human strategies alone but by divine confirmation. Through colonization, God provided the vehicle. Although evangelism was the focus, Education was an addendum. They established schools like Kings College Lagos in 1909, CMS Grammar school Lagos in 1859, Methodist Boys and Methodist Girls high school Lagos in 1878, and the Baptist Academy Lagos in 1885.
that early. Holy Child Sisters came to Nigeria in 1930 and began their educational ministry. Then Education was for a purpose – as a tool to produce the workforce and evangelize. These educational efforts enabled the human capital development which the Country needed at the time.

Missionary Education has an underlining ethos that includes the self-actualization of the individual, which results in human flourishing. The missionaries used the tool of Education to evangelize the continent, and living standards rapidly improved. Towards the end of colonialism, they trained the would-be evangelizers and rapidly covered grounds even in the hinterlands. 'After the Nigerian Civil War in 1970, the federal government took over schools founded by religious groups because Education was thought to be an enormous government venture and no longer a private enterprise'\textsuperscript{10}. Today, the task of providing Education has become genuinely or exaggerated, excruciating for the government.

One can describe the legacy of missionary education as follows:

1. **ACCESS TO EDUCATION**: Most churches and outstations had primary schools. This made it possible for everyone who could come to the Church also to attend school. The schools were not specially designed. They were made from local building materials and so were easy and cheap to construct and still functional. Some church buildings were also used as schools. The first primary school in my community (St Mary's Primary School, Umuopara) served as the station church on Sundays and as a school during the week. This way, one building served a dual purpose for the people.

2. **SUBSIDY SCHOOLS**: The colonial government helped to promote Education. The government would subsidize schooling by providing educational materials for the missionaries to manage the schools. So, the Church would employ people, and the government paid their salaries. Many children and adults could attend schools which were free too. 'Nigerian leaders benefitted from
missionaries' free education, which became the bedrock for Nigerian nationalism and independence.

3. **PURPOSEFUL TRAINING OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS AS EDUCATORS**: Priests, Sisters, Catechists and the most brilliant were trained to be teachers. The nature of preparation for a catechist made it possible for the person to work in the school as a teacher. A ready example is Blessed Iwene Tansi, who became a catechist and teacher in his alma mater at the age of 16. This purposeful Education ensured that personnel were available for Church and the schools.

4. **HOLISTIC MISSION**: Missionary Education, especially in Africa, combined the spiritual, moral, and psychological development of the individual with the academic. In other words, the gospel, healthcare, social transformation, and Education came as one package. This way, the missionaries could ‘superintend the schools, clinics and churches in the area’

5. **PARENT/FAMILIES ENGAGEMENTS**: Missionary schools tend to become extended families where parents and other family members become part of the community. The missionaries were involved with families. They knew their students' siblings, and until today, family engagements are still apparent in the educational institutions enabling formation at that level. The missionaries also focused on discipline for the holistic development of individuals. The Church never lacked the resources for such formation. In recent times the catholic schools draw from Encyclicals on *Laudato Si* and *Fratelli Tutti*. Mission organizations like OIEC and initiatives like CEGRI (Catholic Education Global
Research Initiative) and the recent Global Compact on Education are ready sources.

6. **LEARNING OUTCOMES**: The missionary schools produced great personalities for Africa. In Nigeria, consider that the great Nnamdi Azikiwe attended Holy Trinity School Onitsha around 1914. Chief Obafemi Awolowo attended St Saviour's School Ikenne around 1919. So many examples abound. Holy Child College, Lagos, has an array of outstanding alumni. The first female Permanent Secretary in Nigeria is from Holy Child College – the late Mrs Yetunde Emanuel. From 2012 – 2017, we have recorded seven alumni First Class graduates and 26 alumni graduating with Second Class Upper Division from universities worldwide.

Before I delve into the final part of this presentation, I will state that something needs to change about Missionary education and even Catholic Education. Albert Einstein and B. F. Skinner are famous for saying that education remains long after you left school. In Africa, quality education by the missionaries produced first-class brains who have surprised the world by their degree of innovations, and the majority of these graduates have migrated to the western world. Most of those who stay back in Africa, in terms of character and attitudes when in leadership, does not portray the missionary education values they received. If the products of missionary education imbibed our Christian principles more, Africa would be much more prosperous, and our people will flourish. What's my point? We must reach the heart and not just the thinking ability.

**STRATEGIES FOR EXPANSION OF ACCESS & QUALITY OF EDUCATION**

Every informed stakeholder in Education agrees that *'quality and accessibility of education in Africa must be resolved before the situation can improve'*. Indeed, quality and access to Education are two peas in a pod. I think too that the Church must be at the forefront of this project for these reasons.
1. The Church, as scripture says, the Church is people ...called forth out of darkness into God's marvellous light' 1Peter 2:9. We have the light, and we are the light. Allan Bloom did say that Education is the movement from darkness into light.

2. The Declaration on Christian Education, promulgated by Pope Paul VI more than fifty years ago, directed that "All people of whatever race, condition or age, in virtue of their dignity as human persons, have an inalienable right to education" 13.

3. During the colonial era, many people perceived the churches to be aligned with the colonial government. Therefore now is the time to prove to our people that we stand with them in the struggle for the Education of the masses.

4. Most importantly, the Church must again take advantage of Education and evangelize our people in the religion of tolerance, solidarity, and Christian principles. Otherwise, the world will fill them with antagonism, suspicion, and anti-Christian ideas 14. Was it not Nelson Mandela that said that 'education is the most powerful weapon you can use to change the world'?

Permit me to say that Policymakers understand the cycle of Education – life improvement- more Education- human flourishing. This is a scary situation for them. The more people have been educated, the more their chances of accessing knowledge, rights especially to further education and privileges. Leadership is one of those privileges that the poor who become well educated may access, and the elites do not consider this imperative.

**IMPROVED ACCESS**

1. **Every Parish to a school**: Many church facilities are left unused during the day when the congregation is at work or home. The building of church facilities can be reengineered to accommodate schools in the future. Every parish can establish a small school to cater for its population. We will reach more children through this. The Church must go to the remote places if we have not lost the vision to 'make disciples of all nations and take our Education to all peoples. Education will reach
all African children if the Church continues with the divine plan. Today it is easier than before because communication and travelling have improved tremendously.

1. **Free Online Schools:** We must tinker with establishing free online schools – primary to secondary and eventually universities. Imagine the situation where we have one free online school in each Diocese in Africa! In addition, Religious Congregations could establish one of such too in each Country where they minister. Suppose the Church is genuinely alarmed about the non-access to Education of the African child. In that case, we cannot leave the sole responsibility to the onsite schools and colleges, constrained by space, finance, human resources, time and legislation. We must move into the uncharted waters of free online schools. The impact is evident. For countries with more resources, the government could fund such free schools, and this time they are onsite free schools.

2. **Mission Schools Graduates Scheme:** Each year, Mission schools graduate brilliant minds, first-class students, mainly from the wealthy upper class. How do they give back to the Church and Society? Often, nothing! We can borrow a leaf from the Nigerian National Youth Service Corps scheme and establish a Mission Schools Graduates scheme. Every graduate from a Mission Secondary school or University in Africa will compulsorily serve for a year in any mission school, onsite or online. Those who do not wish to do so can redeem themselves by providing learning materials for the students who attend the accessible schools.

3. **Volunteer Teaching Scheme:** Voluntary services are a great source of fulfilment for a Christian. We may be surprised that a voluntary teaching scheme for the free schools will attract many Christian professionals for the free online and onsite schools. The University of the People (an online University) charges Enrolment and Assessment fees only, and the idea has taken University education to a different level.
4. **Every existing school two Cohorts:** Most school facilities are unused half of the year, especially during the holidays. Can we think of two learning cohorts in one school? It will practically double the student population and provide jobs for twice the staff. The planners of school scheme and schedules must see how this can be implemented.

**IMPROVED QUALITY of EDUCATION**

Education is an expensive venture, more so with quality education. With limited funding, how can the Church in African provide quality education for most children from low-income settings?

1. **Partnership with the government (Subsidy schools):** Government must partner with the Church by providing the facilities and resources for quality education, and the Church plays a supervisory and managerial role. The government has the capability, and the Church has the human resources and skills. Therefore, this partnership will synergize resources for quality schools with free access. If government provides the funding, mission schools will no longer be expensive. Government must only provide funding and not interfere with the management of the schools. In most places in the world, the government funds schools. The former Governor of Anambra State, His Excellency Dr Peter Obi, partnered with the Christian churches during his tenure, and quality education became accessible for all children in the State.

2. **Lobbying policymakers:** While we do what is possible as a church to provide quality education for our schools, we must also lobby the government and policymakers to increase the budget for the education sector yearly. Education is the prerogative of the government. Although budget increment does not translate to better action for Education, Christian politicians should be held accountable for their action or inaction concerning the welfare of young
people. This budget matter is crucial. John Maxwell once said that budget is telling your money where to go instead of wondering where it went.

3. **Sponsorship from the wealthy for the poor**: Every child from a wealthy home admitted to our schools should sponsor another child who cannot afford the fees. This will provide quality education for both the poor and the rich and ensure an equal population of the poor and rich in the institutions. We must start using the rich's wealth, privileges, and opportunities to cater to the poor. The new education narrative should include serious questioning of educational content and assumptions, facts about peoples, their rights, and privileges. Children from privileged backgrounds should answer the questions generated in the minds of the poor by the activities or inactions of their forebears. Education that will empower them to rebel against injustice and the victimization of the vulnerable, providing the strength of character to stand for Truth always must be availed them.

4. **One School for another**: In the early days of the Foundation of the Society of the Holy Child Jesus (SHCJ), Venerable Cornelia Connelly, the Founder of the SHCJ, found that establishing one school for another was a great idea. To provide quality education for the factory workers in the early 1800s in England, she established schools for the wealthy and used the proceeds to give the same quality of schools to the working-class girls. The Church could borrow a leaf from her.

These approaches are pragmatic and attainable. I would like to conclude with this: Emulating the great Martin Luther King Jr, I have a dream! I, too, dream that someday all African children would have access to quality education that they justly deserve.

Thank you!

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