

Msgr. Nathaniel C. Obiagba, First Priest Civil Lawyer in West Africa: A Tribute

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At the news of passing unto glory of Rt. Rev. Msgr. Nathaniel C. Obiagba (1935-2020), few days ago, one of his former students at All Hallows' Seminary Onitsha, penned down the following immortal words in honour of the late Monsignor:

“Lux aeterna luceat ei Domine cum sanctis tuis in aeternum. Rt. Rev. Msgr. Obiagba bestrode his chosen profession (a composite one) like a colossus, scoring a lot of firsts and leaving behind a plethora of diamond legacies (from accounts of those who should know). Death is always a loss but the passage of such a man of records at such an age [85 years old] is a cause to glorify God and thank him for the grace for exploits. Requiem aeterna dona ei Domine et lux perpetua.”

The Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha was once again, thrown into a mourning mood on September 14, 2020, Feast of the Exaltation of the Holy Cross. This time, that of its eldest and most energetic, hardworking priest civil lawyer, Rt. Rev. Msgr. Nathaniel Chidozie Obiagba. Born in the year 1935 at Achina, Anambra State in Eastern Nigeria, ordained priest on June 1, 1965 for the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha, and called to the Nigerian Bar in 1973, Rt. Rev. Msgr. Nathaniel C. Obiagba was called to the Lord of glory in Heaven on September 14, 2020 at St. Charles Borromeo Hospital, Onitsha.

Msgr. Obiagba, indeed, scored a lot of firsts with plethora of diamond legacies in many noble aspects of his chosen priestly vocation and civil legal profession. He was the first from his native town Achina, Anambra State to be ordained Catholic Priest (in 1965). He was the first Catholic priest in the whole of Anglophone West Africa to study and practice Civil Law, the first Rev. Fr. civil lawyer. Msgr. Obiagba was the first Catholic Priest to be called to the Nigerian Bar (amidst controversy in 1973).

He combined his priestly vocation and ministry with his legal profession and used both to serve creditably, the Church and society to the best of his ability. He was one of the few priests who participated at the Constituent Assembly that produced the 1979 Constitution. He was also the first priest to be appointed Ombudsman, a Federal Commissioner on Public Complaints covering old Anambra, Benue and Imo States.

Msgr. Obiagba did his seminary formation and studies for the Priesthood at the two most prestigious pioneer seminaries in Eastern Nigeria. He did his Junior Seminary studies and formation at All Hallows' Seminary Onitsha, and the Senior Seminary (philosophy and theology) at Bigard Memorial Seminary Enugu. Originally, his Ecclesiastical authorities at Onitsha sent him to read English language at the University of Nigeria Nsukka (UNN). However, on the advice of Msgr. Stephen N. Ezeanya (future Archbishop of Onitsha), then a lecturer at UNN, he changed to law after some semesters. Thus, he studied for his bachelors' degree in Civil Law at UNN, and later did his masters cum doctorate degrees at a stretch, at the University of West Virginia in USA.

The title of his doctoral thesis, which he defended in 1982, is *“Ideological Foundations of the 1979 Presidential Constitution of Nigeria.”* Luckily, some friends of his (luminaries in legal profession), during his Golden Jubilee Priestly Anniversary and 80th Birthday, decided to revise and update the doctoral dissertation to the tune of current law to mark these celebrations. Msgr. Obiagba was very happy for that gesture. The new edition has been published and is in circulation ever since.

A Catholic Priest, Called to the Bar amidst Controversy

Rev. Fr. (Prof.) Ikenga Oraegbunam of the UNIZIK, Faculty of Law, Awka, was an ex-student of Msgr. Obiagba at the All Hallows' Seminary, Onitsha. As a lawyer and professor of law, he had been working under him at the Onitsha Archdiocesan Legal Office for years until Msgr's death. Fr. Ikenga Oraegbunam, in his tribute, describes Msgr. Obiagba as "the human archives consulted on the general and real property history in the then local church which comprised the present Onitsha Archdiocese, and Awka, Nnewi and Ekwulobia Dioceses."

Furthermore, Fr. Oraegbunam, in the tribute, beautifully, narrated the story Msgr. Obiagba told them of how he (Obiagba) was called to Nigerian Bar in 1973, amidst controversy. That is, the story of what happened on the day Msgrs. Obiagba was called to the Nigerian Bar:

"When it was time for his turn, at hearing his name as Rev. Fr. Nathaniel Okpala (the family later changed her surname to Obiagba), many members of Body of Benchers whose duty it was to call qualified candidates to the Bar objected to his call because he was a Rev. Fr.! Their argument was that in common law, combining priesthood and law in one person was forbidden by the law."

However, after long debate and arguments, the Chairman of the Body of Benchers, Hon. Justice Ekundayo, posed two major questions to his colleagues:

1. He asked them, since his admission to study Bar Part II, was he not answering Rev. Fr.? The answer was in the affirmative.
2. Secondly, is there any Nigerian post-independence law prohibiting any priest from being called to the Bar? The answer was in the negative.

On the basis of the above, Justice Ekundayo then ruled that the only thing that would lead to not calling Obiagba to the Bar would be while on calling his name, he would be seen on priestly regalia instead of on lawyers' attire. "The Call to Bar ceremony that was suspended therefore resumed. Obiagba was called as he appeared in law attire and not in cassock."

Fr. Oraegbunam concludes that, "this actually set a precedent for the calling of subsequent priest candidates to the Nigerian Bar. With this, Obiagba became the 1st Catholic Priest in the Anglophone West Africa to be called to the Bar. After his call as before his call, he continued to be of legal service to the Church."

In fact, both his priestly ministry and activities in legal profession were a humble and dedicated service to the Church and society. It is hard to see any major Church building or land acquisition in most parts of South Eastern Nigeria and beyond which hasn't the legal imprint or approval of Msgr. Obiagba. A lover of Latin, for years he taught seminarians English literature at the All Hallows Seminary, Onitsha. Because of his love and proficiency in Latin, his contemporaries nicknamed him "Nathy Sunt."

One of his first assignment after his priestly ordination in 1965 was to serve as parish Vicar to Rev. Fr. Simon Okafor (future Bishop of Awka), at Ekwulobia. From there, during the Nigeria-Biafra War (1967-1970), he became the coordinator of Catholic Caritas Relief Distribution Office for the Biafran War refugees in the whole of Old Onitsha Archdiocese and beyond. He discharged this duty creditably throughout the war period.

I remembered when I was doing the Senior Seminarian inter-diocesan apostolic work at Umuahia in 1987, a priest I was posted to work in his parish, recounted to me how he and his parishioners were saved from starving to death during the war by a priest from Onitsha Archdiocese, in-charge of Caritas Office then at Ekwulobia. He said the priest is now a Monsignor in Onitsha. He didn't tell me the name of the priest. However, I learnt later, he was referring to Msgr. Obiagba.

One of the best things I cherished most during my teaching years at the All Hallows Seminary Onitsha in the early 1990s before coming to Rome, was living together at the Seminary Rectory in the company of Msgr. Obiagba and others. His jokes and jovial Latin regular quotations as well as his causal stories of historical importance were of a great delight. They used to lighten and ease our busy schedule and work at the Seminary.

He combined his work in his Law Chamber with his teaching apostolate at the seminary. Most of the priests that passed through All Hallows Seminary Onitsha, especially since 1970 till early 2000s were ex-students of his in English literature. He imparted many students into loving not only Latin, but especially, English literature and of course, Civil and Canon Laws that later, a good number were inspired by him to choose either of these professions for their further studies.

A Priest-negotiator and Patient humble-servant of the Church

Msgr. Obiagba was blessed with rare quality of patience of a good negotiator in his chosen vocation and profession. He was a self-made local 'diplomat', humble-servant and patient-negotiator in the local Church of Old Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province and vicinity.

Thus, this tribute in his honour offers us the best opportunity to recount the following story he told us one evening after super at the All Hallows' Seminary rectory, Onitsha, concerning how our Junior Seminaries in Igboland got the State Government approval letter to start taking West African School Certificate Examinations (WASCE), after the Nigeria-Biafra War. That is, after many hurdles and series of humiliation and insults from the State Education Board of the then East Central State government of Ukpabi Asika. Msgr. Obiagba recounted to us how our Junior Seminaries in Igboland were registered to join other secondary schools in the Old East Central State to do the WASCE. This was possible, of course, thanks to the doggedness and patience character of Msgr. Obiagba himself.

Following the federal government edict of General Yakubu Gowon's military junta, their hostile attitude to former Biafra enclave of South Eastern Nigeria after the war, all the Church owned schools in the then East Central State (present day Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo States), were seized and taken over by the State government under Ukpabi Asika. This came into effect immediately the war ended in 1970.

The inglorious East Central State government of Ukpabi Asika, with his then commissioner of Education, Offia Nwali, seized all the Church owned Schools in Igboland after the Nigeria-Biafra War. As a result, the government refused to allow our junior seminarians to participate in the West African School Certificate Exams (WASCE). Seminarians continued to take only the GCE London Cambridge Exams while their counterparts in the state secondary schools were taking the WASCE. This was when Msgr. E. Otteh (later, Bishop of Issele-Uku) was the Rector of All Hallows Seminary Onitsha. Msgr. Obiagba was also teaching and residing at the seminary rectory then.

I remembered how Msgr. Obiagba recounted to us at the seminary rectory one evening, how they received series of humiliation and insults at the Office of the East Central State Commissioner of Education, Offia Nwali and his Education Board, while pleading with them to allow seminarians join

their counterparts in secondary schools in taking WASCE. Several times, they travelled to Enugu from Onitsha to meet the commissioner of education and his board, but all to no avail. He said that at a point they reminded the commissioner and his board members that these seminarians are also your children. "Please allow them to take their WASCE like other children of the state!"

At the consternation of all, however, one of the board members on hearing this particular appeal from All Hallows' Seminary delegation, told the delegation that the children (seminarians), if you like could go and get drowned at River Niger, if you people (the Church) don't want the government to take-over your seminaries. That is, like it did with other secondary schools in the State!

This annoyed Msgr. Otteh, the Rector so much that they left the State Education Board meeting immediately and returned to Onitsha that day. However, as God would have it, Msgr. Obiagba decided to continue with the appeal and more visits to the State Education Board Office, Enugu, persuading the Rector Msgr. Otteh not to lose hope.

In their next meeting and visit to Enugu, Msgr. Obiagba, however, decided to bring into their contingent, Very Rev. (Mother) Sr. Domenica Odita (IHM), who was then teaching Chemistry at the seminary. He reasoned that since Sr. Odita is a native of Onitsha and the Administrator (governor) of East Central State, Ukpabi Asika, was also from Onitsha, at least they would listen to the voice of a woman, native of Onitsha.

However, in spite of this, the East Central State Education Board at Enugu refused to heed to the appeal of the seminary delegation. In any case, after several trials and visits, on this particular last day of their visit to Enugu, the State Education Board members used harder and more abusive words not just against the priests, the Rev. Sister and the seminary, but also against the Catholic Church as a body of Christ. This annoyed the seminary delegation so much, especially the priests among them that they left the meeting immediately in annoyance.

But there was one person who refused to leave, that was Rev. Sr. Odita. Even though tears filled her face for the humiliation and insults, yet she stayed back and continued pleading with the East Central State Education Board. The priests, however, were waiting outside near the car in annoyance, for the Sister to come out so that they could return to Onitsha. But the Sister delayed for more than an hour before coming out to join them.

According to Msgr. Obiagba, Sr. Odita stayed inside there, pleading with the State Education Board for so long that at a point they wanted to leave her behind to return to Onitsha. They waited outside for hours for the Sister. At last, lol and behold, Sr. Odita was coming out to meet them. And on her hands was the "almighty" approval letter from the East Central State Education Board, authorizing our junior Seminaries in the State to begin to participate in the West African School Certificate Examinations (WASCE).

That is the power of the patience of a woman, Rev. Sr. Odita had represented in this particular incident. And also the wisdom and intelligence of a priest civil lawyer who loves the Church so much, that he remembered that in such a critical moment, there is need to bring in a daughter of the Church into the bargaining table.

Prof. Simeon Moore, an ex-student of Msgr. Obiagba at All Hallows' Seminary Onitsha, offered a brief but very penetrating comment on this story. According to him, "The trio of Otteh, Obiagba and Odita bore a lot of insults and humiliation from those who, one on one would be clearly worsted by each of the trio, in an effort to plant a tree whose shade and fruits they will not personally rest under nor eat of." In his praise of Sr. Odita from the story told, Prof. Simeon Moore said that he saw in her,

in particular, as someone who “had this very deep dimension of swallowing insults and humiliation just to get an approval she would not directly benefit from. Had she not put less premium on her ego, had the trio not placed less value on their convenience and self-esteem/prestige, then maybe we would not have had the opportunity to write WASCE.”

Furthermore, he added that, “Those members of the East Central State Education Board could not think beyond the narrow confines of an edict. In blind defence of an infamous edict, they chose to insult and humiliate those who they should accord a lot of respect. How proud will any of them feel to be identified as one who played such a role? What did they stand to gain from estopping junior seminaries from participating in the WASCE?”

Msgr. Obiagba told us that the All Hallows Seminary set of Rev. Fr. (Dr.) Ignatius Obinwa was the first group to sit for WASCE exams after the permission was obtained. Those before them were taking GCE London Cambridge University Exams (as external students).

This is just an iota of silent contribution to the Church, of this great man of God and Statesman, Msgr. Nathaniel Obiagba, that we all are mourning his demise today! What a great man of God, “who gave himself entirely” for the service of the Church and society!

Are we to talk of how through his instrumentality, the legal provisions that made it easy for the Church to acquire the Papal Arena at Awada (a land under dispute between Onitsha and Obosi people), was made easy for the Church's use during the Papal visit to Onitsha in 1982? That was why it appeared that time he was like a pro-parish priest to yet to be developed Awada environs and parish. That was one of his legal acumen and tactics of resolving such cases of intricacies for the Church.

These are just few examples of silence services Msgr. Obiagba rendered to the Church in our land. The Onitsha Archdiocesan Legal Office was his brainchild. He had trained and produced many priest civil lawyers from it, and had remained part of it until his death few days ago. Those he trained are today in-charge of the Legal Office, and much more!

Furthermore, he was a founding partner and member of the prestigious Law Chamber of our late legal luminary (the senior) Barrister Ezekwuo (SAN) at Onitsha. Even after the death of late SAN (senior Ezekwuo), he continued to collaborate with his son (junior), Barrister Ezekwuo (SAN), who now heads his father’s Law Chamber at Onitsha. Msgr. Obiagba and late (senior) SAN (Ezekwuo) were like brothers in their legal profession.

Conclusion

With his wealth of experience both as a priest and lawyer, Msgr. Obiagba, no doubt, inspired and helped to train in legal profession many of our priests, religious and lay faithful who are today in-charge of Law Chambers (and Diocesan Legal Offices) in different Dioceses and parts of the country. He was an invaluable asset to Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, especially to the Bishops of the Old Eastern region. He loved his job, legal profession. No doubt, his love for his priestly vocation and law profession, all combined together, helped in sustaining him as he inspired and mentored many other Catholic priests and religious that took to the legal profession after him.

Msgr. Obiagba’s Law Offices at Onitsha and Archdiocesan Secretariat Legal Office are among the most respected in Nigeria today. As an individual, he was blessed with sense of humour and good human relation, which he utilized perfectly well in serving the Church and in winning for her (Church) many favours from civil authorities and others, whenever the need arose.

He related well with everybody, both young and old. In fact, it is not an overstatement to say that he remained young in heart until he breathed last. Moreover, in spite of his old age and health challenges associated with it, his brain and power of reasoning remained alert and active until death came calling.

Msgr. Nathaniel Obiagba was a good priest and man of strong faith. He loved the Church, was always ready to work with whoever was his Archbishop at Onitsha, and with any Bishop, priest or Religious Superior for that matter who sought his legal help and advice. He never for once spoke ill of his ecclesiastical authorities, priests or religious. But he was a very disciplined and principled man.

As humans, no one can claim to be without some faults, here and there in the course of our earthly existence. This is why the Church recommends highly that the faithful on earth should pray always for the happy repose of our departed loved ones. We recommend Msgr. Obiagba to the eternal mercy of God as we thank God himself for blessing our land and local Church with such a rare gift to humanity.

May God reward this faithful priest and servant of His, Rt. Rev. Msgr. Nathaniel Obiagba with the gift of heavenly bliss! Amen!

Adieu, Msgr. Nathaniel Obiagba. May the Holy Angels welcome you into the throne of God in Heaven! Amen!

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