

# The Role of the Church in Promoting Human Rights in Nigeria

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This article discusses the role of the Church in promoting human rights in Nigeria. This is anchored on the fact that the Church must live according to what it proclaims to the world especially against an avalanche of serious abuse of human rights in Nigeria. Cases abound how innocent citizens die in the hands of terrorist groups or communal clashes. This implies that it must live by the standards of the Gospel of Christ, striving vigorously to make the Christian values of love, honesty, truth, forgiveness, justice, self-sacrifice, solidarity and compassion guide the dealings with members with others in their private and public lives. It must be a Church that upholds the dignity and rights of human person and denounces what is essentially inhuman. Using descriptive and analytical methods, the paper underscores that the Church especially the canonists must courageously fight against forces of evil and iniquity engaging all stakeholders to a continuous dialogue that enhances mutual understanding and cooperation. In this way, all stakeholders will respect and uphold the sanctity of human rights in Nigeria and beyond.

*Keywords:* Church, Human Rights, Justice, Human Person, Dignity

## Introduction

One of the perennial concerns of human beings is the need for a better society, where people can truly enjoy the common good within the rule of law as the order of the day. Unfortunately, the Nigerian society is embroiled in endemic fracas and violent conflicts, leading to grave violation of human rights. Accordingly, human rights issues have become a household phenomenon which anybody can ignore at his/her own peril. The subject matter of human rights has been discussed and debated upon at the national level as well as at the international level. In his celebrated autobiography, *Long Walk to Freedom*, Nelson Mandela (2022) summarizes the very thing that constitutes the goal of human rights: "I am not free, if I am taking away someone else's freedom, just as surely as I am not free when my freedom is taken from me. The oppressed and the oppressor alike are robbed of their humanity". The United Nations has in its Charter declared that everyone has the right to life, liberty, and security of persons (Sieghart, 1991). Each and every person regardless of age, sex, religion, colour, and national background, has a dignity and worth that is unconditional and inalienable; that human life itself from conception to natural death is sacred; that human rights are innate and transcend any constitutional order; and that the fundamental unity of the human race demands that everyone be committed to building a community which is free from injustice and which strives to promote and protect the common good. But has it been the case in Nigeria?

There is a serious abuse of human rights in Nigeria. Cases of how innocent citizens die in the hands of terrorist groups or communal clashes abound. Human life has become a commodity easily wasted or

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slaughtered like chickens. The violation of human rights in Nigeria is becoming rampant and the church must respond to this growing phenomenon. The Second Vatican Council (1987, No. 3) rightly avers that, “the focal point of the total presentation will be the person; whole and entire, body and soul, heart and conscience, mind and will”. Admittedly, for the message of Christ to find roots in Nigeria, the church has to identify itself with the poor, the distressed and marginalized peoples in Nigeria whose fundamental human rights are daily trampled upon and discriminated against because of race, sex, religion, or opinion. *Gaudium et Spes* boldly asserts:

The joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the people of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted, are the joys and hopes, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in their hearts. For theirs is a community of people united in Christ and guided by the Holy Spirit in their pilgrimage towards the Father’s kingdom, bearers of a message of salvation for all humanity. That is why they cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history. (Second Vatican Council, 1987, No. 1)

In the light of this, the writer sets out to critically analyse the role of the church in promoting human rights in Nigeria. To achieve this noble objective, we shall develop a few lines of thought on the conceptual understanding of human rights. They will constitute a guide to unravel the dignity of human person as the basis for human rights. We hope to call attention on notable areas of human rights abuse in Nigeria. These will now usher our study into the role of the church, especially the Nigerian canonists, in promoting human rights in Nigeria. After all, the church is not an isolated entity encapsulated in herself.

### **Conceptual Framework: Human Rights**

Human rights are the rights individuals have within the jurisdiction where they have rightly and validly performed their duties and obligations. The awareness and interest must be protected by all stakeholders. To protect the interest of any person is tantamount to respecting that interest. It is pertinent, however, to note that there are different types of rights as there are various types of duties. There are legal rights, moral rights, social rights, and religious rights. In the midst of classifications of rights, rights to service suit this discourse. It means that the faithful have rights to the service of religion ably represented by the agents of evangelization. Put simply, the people of God have a right to be integrally formed by the religious programmes and bodies in which the various formation domains are well harnessed to effectuate citizenship.

Human rights remain the fundamental claim of human beings. Every human being has the right to life. Thus the rights are inalienable and inviolable since they are rights which every individual has by virtue of being human. Human rights call for no debate or deliberation of any sort. They are regarded as fundamental human rights because they are values, interest which the state commands everybody to respect in relation to our neighbour. Those who violate them have done something legally wrong. From a political point of view, Osita C. Eze states (1990, p. 5) that: “Human rights represent demand or claim which individuals or groups make on society some of which are protected by law and have become part of life while others are remain aspirations”. Human rights are inalienable, sacred, and inviolable. In any situation, a man/woman finds himself, in all circumstances surrounding him/her the urge and authority to express his/her rights cannot be repressed. Corroborating this understanding, M. Alfred (1994, p. 11) notes that human rights are “...fundamental, inalienable, non-negotiable, certain, guaranteed, and basic...”

In the American Declaration of Independence in 1776, we have the following statement, “We hold these truths to be self-evident; that all men are created equally; that they are endowed by their creator with certain

inalienable rights; that among are life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness” (Ellacuria, 1982, pp. 52-65). Human beings have these rights irrespective of their social status, merits, religious belief, class membership, etc, and these rights exist prior to the establishment of states. On December 10, 1948, the United Nations promulgated the Universal Declaration of Human Rights. This declaration contains the civil and political liberties (Articles 1-21) as well as social, cultural, and economic rights (Articles 22-28). The civil and political rights include the rights to life and self-determination, freedom from torture and inhuman treatment, freedom from forced labour and slavery, the right to privacy, freedom of thought, conscience, and choice of religion, freedom of opinion and expression, the right to marry and own a family, the right to nationality and equality before the law. The economic, social, and cultural rights include among others, the right to work, the right to organize, form, and join trade unions, the right to property, the right to education, etc. All these are elements of human rights. Though the principles and elements of human rights remain the same, the application is arbitrary.

It is legally deducible that the human rights thesis advocates for social justice, social order, social equilibrium in order to enhance a cemented sociological interaction. A declaration of some basic principles for the promotion of human rights thus states, “...the abolishment of man’s inhumanity to man, elimination of racial discrimination, segregation and disrespect for human dignity...advocates a state of racial equality and the upholdment of human dignity...” (Eze, 1990, p. 4). The violation of any of these rights leads to vexation, relegation of the human person, repression of the human dignity, etc. Thus, a violation of any *medicum* of human rights in social injustice which triggers the social injustice alarms to bring about a state of social equilibrium.

### **The Dignity of the Human Person as the Basis for Human Rights**

Human rights are claims or entitlements of an individual simply because he/she is part of the human species. According to the United States Conference of Catholic Bishops (2016), “The Catholic Church proclaims that human life is sacred and that the dignity of the human person is the foundation of a moral vision for society”. This belief that the human person is precious, sacred, and sacrosanct is because one is created in the image and likeness of God (Gen 1:26). As the *imago Dei* (image of God), the human person should not be destroyed because he/she is a replica of God. God is alive within the human person. Anything beyond this understanding will be a desecrating attitude of the world. As a being created in the image and likeness of God, one’s destiny is supra-oriented, that is above material considerations. In the words of Onyema Anozie (2009, p. 125): “The human person must be clearly re-defined in relation to its divine origin. The person is created in God’s image and destined for a life beyond”. As a being made up of body and soul, he/she seeks for meaningful existence in the divine abode. Richard Onwuanibe rightly opined that:

It was after the creation of the heavens and earth, the plants and animals that God created man in His image (Gen 1:26; 2:7), and gave him the injunction of creativity: “Be fruitful, multiply, fill the earth and conquer it.” (1995, p. 63)

The element of the spiritual imprint and creativity which he/she bears makes a daily demand on how to take care of this life even in the vagaries of technological advancement.

In fact, the dignity of the human person stems from the source of his/her existence, God. The soul which is the principle of life in the human person does not come from human beings even though the fusion of sperm cells and egg that produce a zygote is their contribution. This unique dignity which is little less than a god, with glory and beauty and being made the lord of every other creature as the Psalmist says (see Psalm 8:5-6) has a

divine origin. Every person ought to be respected and honoured. No stage of life should be played with. It is taken for granted that one can play with something one is in control of. At best, man is only a custodian; God is the owner of life. Being a custodian does not presuppose the license to desecrate, uproot, upturn, or terminate life or degrade ecology. The encyclical letter of Pope Francis, *Laudato Si'* (2015), among other things, laments on the danger on which the earth we live has been misused, abused, violated, and despoiled. Generally, our planet, earth, is replete with environmental crises. One notices an increasingly disrupted equation about shrinking forests, expanding deserts, rising seas-levels, deteriorating rangelands, deforestation, and disappearing species, each of which stifles human life (Anagwo, 2016, p. 10).

The dignity of the human person as the basis for human rights challenges any form of human manipulation which does not aim at preserving life but terminating it such as through abortion or in-vitro-fertilization where many sperm cells are damaged or wasted in the process of artificial insemination. Since life has many developmental stages, at no stage is one at liberty to subject it to unhealthy experimentation. The human person is not an object for trial and error but a subject. As subject every respect, honour and care should be accorded to it even in the formative stage as foetus. This dignity has always been recognised by notable persons in the history of the world. The renowned writer, William Shakespeare (2022) once described man as the paragon of animals. It was the fruit of deep meditation on the enormous import on the creative genius of the human person. Everything about humankind shows that it was created with perfection as the end-in-view. The human mechanism works at such level that it is clear that God took extra care to create humankind; hence, dominion of other creatures and command to conquer them (see Gen 1:28).

From the biblical foundation, in the Old Testament (OT), both in the Law (Deut 24: 8-22; Exod 21:16; Lev 13-14) and the Prophets (Amos 8:4-14), the idea is enunciated. In the New Testament, the dictum is captured thus: "...whatever you wish that men do to you, do so to them", and it is often referred as the Golden Rule (Matt 7:12; Luke 6:31). Ultimately, God is holy and the scripture enjoins human persons: "Be perfect (holy) because your heavenly Father is perfect (holy)" (Matt 5:48). In the understanding of the Church, it is both sacred and sanctifying. It is sacred because it has its source in God, in Christ through the spirit. The priestly and sacramental characters make them acts of Christ; thus, rendering them infinitely pleasing and acceptable to the father. Hence, the human rights discourse throughout its eventful history has remained largely under the obligation of emancipating the dignity of the human person.

Islam, as a religion too, subscribes to this basic conviction. Nonetheless, it is often exaggerated to the extreme of denying human rights' in the name of God. For instance, the imposition of Islamic Law as the Will of Allah for all, or the restriction of the freedom of others because of prayers, etc. Accordingly, both Muslims and Christians have to enter into dialogue to comprehend each other's views on the basic concept of human rights.

Evidently, the dignity of the human person as the basis of human rights is also found in the traditional African heritage. Granted that the human rights as a concept were coined by philosophers of the Enlightenment and came to light during the American and French revolutions which expanded into new thinking and legislation to protect people's rights. The African understanding is as old as the writings about Africa. According to E. A. Ruch and K. C. Anyanwu (1981, p. 137) such rights "are human precisely because they are rooted in a conviction of man's essential place and role in the order of the universe". Ruch and Anyanwu's ideas are in agreement with Placid Temple's notion that, "among the non-civilized people one finds an unaltered awareness of human nature of rights" (1961, p. 83).

Historically, some scholars claim that human right, which is a child of the western civilization, came from *Magna Charta*, some from French Revolution; others yet from the Gospel. *Magna Charta* was signed in 1215 but the divine right of Kings was still preached and pleaded in the court of England. The French Revolution with its Declaration of the Rights of Man and its slogan of *Liberte, Egalite et Fraternite* was succeeded by Napoleon and his wars and imperial dynasties. Human Rights are the rights of a human being, and a human being is a being in the society. We often insist on them as being inherent in the human person and deriving from his personhood. Human rights remain the fundamental claim of human beings. Every human being has the right to life. Thus the rights are inalienable and inviolable since they are rights which every individual has by virtue of being human. Human rights call for no debate or deliberation of any sort. They are regarded as fundamental human rights because they are values, interest which the state commands everybody to respect in relation to our neighbour. Those who violate them have done something legally wrong. From a political point of view, Osita C. Eze states that “Human rights represent demand or claim which individuals or groups make on society some of which are protected by law and have become part of life while others are remain aspirations” (1990, p. 5). Human rights are inalienable, sacred, and inviolable. In any situation, a man/woman finds himself, in all circumstances surrounding him/her the urge and authority to express his/her rights cannot be repressed. Having established the dignity of human person as the basis of human rights, we shall cast these rights within the context of the Nigerian experience.

### **Notable Areas of Abuse of Human Rights in Nigeria**

The state of human rights in the Nigerian society is less than a desirable if not pitiable. Permit me to begin this aspect of this paper by quoting Chinua Achebe (2022), “Being a Nigeria is abysmally frustrating and incredibly exciting”. Let us now turn to some notable areas of abuse of human rights in Nigeria which people have died in the course of their defence, and many today are languishing in jail for daring the Nigeria governments in speech and writing over human rights abuses. In recent times, a former Head of State, Yakubu Gowon added his voice to the discourse on the Department of State Service (DSS) who raided on some Nigerian judges. According to Gowon, the raid could pose a threat to Nigeria’s democracy. To be expected in a state where leaders, political elites, and bureaucrats are insensitive to issues of welfare of the masses is the abuse and violation of the human rights of the people. Human rights abuse and violation are a common phenomenon in Nigeria and occur in a member of ways. Human rights abuse and violation of occur in Nigeria when government consciously and systematically takes over the environmental resources of the various minority ethnic groups and through this way systematically worsen the already bad conditions in which Nigerians find themselves.

Human rights of minority ethnic groups in Nigeria are abused when multinational corporations in collaboration with the Nigerian state systematically pollute the environment and place the people at risk and consciously do nothing to ameliorate or improve the conditions of living of those persons whose environment have been polluted; human rights violation occurs when there are selective application of laws or different standards for different people of Nigeria in matters of compensation for wrongs, access to information about risks and unequal protection of citizens from exposure to hazardous industrial wastes or sites and lastly human rights abuse occurs when minority ethnic groups in Nigeria, knowingly and deliberately, indulge in acts and behaviours that constitute human right abuse against nature and humanity out of hopelessness, frustration, and insensitivity of the Nigerian state to come to their assistance (Anagwo, Aminigo, & Nwaokugha, 2020, p. 12).

A worrisome trend and a cause for concern is that in the face of all of these, not much is being done by the church to sensitize and provide the faithful with the right information on what the church state can do and how the human rights can become norms that they can explore for their continuous existence. Hence, it cannot be gainsaid that the dignity of the human person is being devalued everyday in Nigeria. This lack of respect for human rights is being experienced daily in the different ways both in the worship centres, public and private domains. In the worship centres, there is an instance where a pastor in South Africa asked his congregants to drink gasoline for healing.<sup>1</sup> Another instance holds that a pastor asked his female members to touch his genitals to get healed of infertility.<sup>2</sup> In April 29th 2019, a Zambian pastor gave “jik”/bleach to his church members in the name of casting demons out of them leading to the death of 27 persons while 18 persons were in critical conditions.<sup>3</sup> In the public sector, one hears how Nigerian are being molested in the public offices by their superiors, in the markets, along the streets and roads of Nigeria by the security men and women who are expected to maintain law and order. In the private places, children are being molested by their parents and guardians who are expected to take proper care of them. In the religious sector, we hear how the so-called “men and women of God” use religion to extort money from their followers in the name of deliverance and sometimes to abuse them sexually.

Admittedly, violations of human rights still exist in many parts of Nigeria. Human Rights Watch (HRW), an international non-governmental organization, reported the 2016’s events in Nigeria in her 2017 World Report. Part of the human rights challenges it reported with regard to Nigeria is that

Most of the 2.5 million Internally Displaced Persons (IDPs) lack basic rights to food, shelter, education, healthcare, protection from harm, as well as the right to freedom of movement. Displaced women and girls suffer rape and sexual exploitation perpetrated by fellow IDPs, members of vigilante groups, policemen, and soldiers. (HRW 2017 Report on Nigeria, 2017, p. 10)

As for the conduct of security forces across Nigeria, it states: “Across the country, allegations of abuses including arbitrary arrests and detention, torture, forced disappearance, and extrajudicial killings continue to trail security operations” (HRW 2017 Report on Nigeria, 2017).

However, one should not overlook some negative and dangerous tendencies in some traditional initiation rites. For instance, female circumcision can cause death or permanent health problems. This practice can lead to potentially fatal complications such as haemorrhage, infection, shock, and the inability to pass urine because of pain. The amputation of the clitoris and other sensitive tissues reduce a woman’s ability to experience sexual pleasure. In the words of Samuel W. Kunhiyop, “...all forms of circumcision inhibit or terminate sexual feelings during intercourse and can result in infection to the wound, chronic pelvic infections, chronic urinary infections, haemorrhage and shock” (2008, p. 296). In fact, this practice is detrimental to women’s health and well-being. It is an abuse, violence against women and violation of human rights and dignity.

### **The Task Before the Church and Especially the Nigerian Canonists**

The foregoing discourse is the scenario in which the church is called to carry out the task of evangelization and pastoral care, and in which the canonist is called to carry out his divine assignment, of assistance to the hierarchy in the legislation of laws. Canon law is defined as the collection of the laws of the church

<sup>1</sup> <https://mzansilive.co.a/Polokwane-pastor-sprays-doom-cast-demons-members/> accessed on 18th March, 2022.

<sup>2</sup> <https://mzansilive.co.a/ecg-pastor-asks-female-congregants> accessed on 18th March, 2022.

<sup>3</sup> <https://sadnews.org/2019/04/29/casting-out-demons-with-jik-27-dead-18-critical/> accessed on 18th March, 2022.

promulgated by the Supreme Pontiff, who is the Supreme Legislator in the church, to guide and regulate the life of the church and its members and gear them towards eternal salvation. Thus, in the promulgation of laws of the church, Nigerian canonists are confronted with a socio-cultural matrix or *locus* Nigerians are not only distressed, but even traumatized because their human rights are violated. The historical experience of those to whom the Christian faith is being breached in Nigeria, and who must find meaning for their religious preoccupation is one of poverty, disease, oppression, widespread abuse of human rights, structural injustice, dictatorship, large-scale corruption, unemployment, ignorance, violence, death, and insecurity.

The Nigerian canonists are confronted with the task of defending or explaining the hope that is in them (1 Pet 3:15) in the midst of a people held under siege by an abusive, exploitative, fraudulent, callous, and greedy elite. Canon law in our land should be much more than rhetoric. It should be a dynamic engagement in the process of seeing, judging, and acting, armed with the gospel of Jesus Christ. Nigerians need a canon law that challenges the *status quo* and those who are satisfied with it. We need a canon law for the oppressed and marginalized, and for those who struggle for justice. We need a canon law for the emancipation, liberation, and empowerment of the citizens, so that they can worship God in spirit and truth (John 4:24). What should be most important for Nigerian canon law is not its scientific profundity, but its service to the people. As the trustees for much of the practical operation of the church, they need good theological knowledge of the mysteries, a realistic perception of the practical strength of the people, a creative talent to articulate the necessary norms, and a capacity to form prudential judgement in interpreting and the implementing the laws that advocate human dignity, freedom of conscience, self-determination, and the common good as necessary conditions of human flourishing.

### Conclusion

In the light of the above discourse, there is need to understand that in the modern world today, the standards of human rights have become the most effective criterion to judge individuals, institutions, and social relationships. Admittedly, the criterion of human rights is the only proven effective means of defending human dignity and people's freedom. Human rights standards have acquired international recognition because of the influence they have garnered since the end of the Second World War. The wrong seed of vices such as maltreatment, siphoning of public funds, discrimination, abuse of human rights, detention without trial, bribery, clashes between Fulani herdsmen and farmers, etc., will be checkmated with human rights education that teaches and promotes proper value orientation and good relationship. However, our corporate inaction, especially from the church, is fuelling human rights abuse which threatens the peaceful coexistence of the nation. The subject of human rights abuse is one that requires an urgent step to avert the current trend of national underdevelopment. The role of the church must be reinforced in this direction. To uphold and defend human rights standard, the church in Nigeria must continue to identify itself with the poor, the oppressed, and marginalized. Church leaders must continue to assert their prophetic roles in the modern society. They must preach the word within the life-situation of the people in order to infuse the Christian values into them. The church in Nigeria should intensify efforts towards helping those whose lives have been dehumanized by the institutionalized, unjust, and oppressive structures of society.

Through the services of canon lawyers, who assist, as experts, to formulate the principles and interpretation of the ecclesiastical laws, for instance, the church too needs to put into practice the values of human rights encapsulated in norms, tolerance, love, respect for other persons. She should try to harmonize

theory with practice by first of all preaching justice to itself through improving the social conditions of her workers (for a detailed study, see Bangura, 2021), especially the catechists, cooks, stewards, drivers, gardeners, etc., who spend their whole lives and time in the service of the church. Elsewhere, the writer argues that,

Work is necessarily tied to result which serves as remuneration for work. Work and remuneration are intertwined. They are two sides of the same coin. It is therefore grossly unfair for men and women to work without the enjoyment of the fruit of their work. (Enemali, 2012, p. 113)

Accordingly, the church will be able to preach with confidence and defend the rights of others and justify her identity or role as the voice and conscience of the society. In this way, her members will develop and practicalize the ideas about fairness and equity-based pedagogies especially with reference to human rights. Providing the victims of sexual abuse, traumatized, distressed, and marginalized in the Church at this level with experiences on issues that border on human rights can deepen the foundations for the pastoral care of the people. Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* sums up the role of the church for contemporary times in very clear and precise terms:

The Church's pastors... have the right to offer opinions on all that affects people's lives, since the task of evangelization implies and demands the integral promotion of each human being. It is no longer possible to claim that religion should be restricted to the private sphere and that it exists only to prepare souls for heaven... Consequently, no one can demand that religion be relegated to inner sanctum of personal life, without influence on societal and national life, without concern for the soundness of civil institutions, without a right to offer an opinion on events affecting society. (Francis, 2022)

Accordingly, the paper has highlighted the key concerns of all promoters of human rights struggle. On account of the glaring examples of widespread human suffering and human rights abuse, the church must continue to engage all stakeholders to a continuous dialogue that enhances mutual understanding and cooperation. In this way, all stakeholders will respect and uphold the sanctify of human rights in Nigeria and beyond.

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