

WAVE OF PENTECOSTALISM AND NEO-PENTECOSTALISM IN NIGERIAN CHURCH: IMPLICATIONS/LESSONS FOR THE EDUCATION OF RELIGIOUS LEADERS

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Abstract

The Church everywhere and at all times, must of necessity constantly seek to find ways and means of making the Gospel message more relevant and credible. The Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals in Nigeria appear to be proclaiming a message that seems attractive even if incredible to our people. A question that naturally suggests itself here is: What is the secret behind their seeming success and what lesson/lessons can the Clergy, Religious and Seminarians learn from them? It should be acknowledged that the Catholic Church does not reject anything that is true and sacred, even within non-Christian religions. In fact, Catholics are required to acknowledge, protect, and encourage all the positive aspects, both spiritual and moral, as well as socio-cultural values, that they encounter in their communities. Nevertheless, it is the wish of the study to discuss wave of Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism in Nigerian Church, drawing their implications/lessons for the Clergy, Religious and Seminarians and how it could stimulate renewal in the Church for a greater pastoral efficacy.

Keywords: Pentecostalism, neo-pentecostalism, Nigerian church, positive and negative elements, implications

General Introduction

Neo-Pentecostalism and Pentecostalism have, historically and theologically, a definite genealogical link.¹ Pentecostalism is an evangelical Christian movement that places the greatest emphasis on personally experiencing God and accepting Jesus Christ as one's personal Lord and Savior. This is achieved through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, which is believed to be a similar experience to what the Apostles of Jesus had on the Day of Pentecost, as described in the Acts of the Apostles.² As a result, Pentecostals embrace the spiritual significance of Pentecost and strive to relive the experience by being filled with the Holy Spirit. They give significant importance to God the Holy Spirit and members of the movement often display the spiritual gifts bestowed by the Spirit, particularly the ability to speak in tongues, also known as glossolalia.

Neo-Pentecostalism, also known as the "Charismatic Renewal" or "Charismatic Movement," is a branch of Christianity focused on a renewed experience of God through the Holy Spirit's baptism.³ It emphasizes a direct and personal connection with God, placing significant importance on spiritual encounters. Neo-Pentecostals highlight the transformative power of the Holy Spirit, which is evident through charismatic gifts mentioned by St. Paul in his epistles. It is worth mentioning that Neo-Pentecostalism includes both charismatic movements and neo-charismatic churches.⁴

Likewise, both Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism give significant importance to the individual's direct encounter with God through the Holy Spirit's baptism. This concept draws a parallel to the experience of the Apostles on the Day of Pentecost, as described in Acts 2:1-47. These belief systems also share the conviction that

Christians today should anticipate and actively pursue the same extraordinary and miraculous gifts of the Holy Spirit as witnessed in the immediate aftermath of Pentecost.⁵

In contrast, Pentecostals primarily focus on the specific encounter of being baptized in the Holy Spirit and speaking in tongues (glossolalia), whereas Neo-Pentecostals have expanded this emphasis to encompass additional charismatic abilities such as prophecies, healings, miracles, or other observable expressions.⁶

Background of the Wave of Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism in Nigerian Church

Obviously, the circumstance (Sitz im Leben) behind the wave of Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism in Nigerian Church is search for solution to different problems besetting our people; ranging from Physical, Psychological, Social, Political, Financial and Spiritual. A Great Philosopher by name Arthur Schopenhauer will call such instinct among Nigerians “the will-to-live”. For him, it is the ‘will-to-live’ that pushes man to search deeper and deeper for solution and sustenance. This could be in form of striving, struggling and competition. All these efforts gear towards alleviating his or her conditions.

Before the advent of Christianity, the Nigerians and in particular the Igbos believed so much in finding out the causes behind their predicaments. This conception is in tandem with the principle of Causality that states “every effect has a cause”.⁷ For them, nothing happens for nothing (ihe adighi eme na nkiti). Thus, in the face of any strange occurrence, real or imagined, they inquire to find the cause. If deaths occur in a family, there must be a supernatural cause. If an accident occurs, a tree-branch breaks off and kills somebody, for instance, there must be a preternatural reason. So, there is always a recourse to a medium which could be in form of divination (igba afa) in order to find out the cause. Such mentality is the reason behind the wave of Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism in Nigeria. Instead of a Christian nowadays going out to consult one native doctor or another in order to obtain solutions to his or her problems, there is always a resort to ‘Great Men of God’ whom they believe possess some charismatic gifts like healing, prophecies, miracles et cetera. Such inclination among our people has led to the emergence of Pentecostal Churches; Neo-Pentecostal Churches; Healing Ministries in the Catholic Church and Neo-African Traditional Religion (different from Core African Traditional Religion) in Nigeria.

Positive Elements Within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism

With particular reference to Evangelization and Ministry of Healing in the Church, the following are positive elements that are evident in Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism

Emphasis on Born Again (Rebirth):

Typically, Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals are associated with the following inquiries: "Have you acknowledged Jesus as your personal Lord and Savior?" and "Have you experienced a spiritual rebirth?" The term "born again" signifies a profound transformation comparable to being born anew. According to William Barclay, being born again implies undergoing a change so profound that it can only be described as a process of being reborn and recreated spiritually. This change occurs when we develop a deep affection for Jesus and invite him into our hearts. As a result,

we receive forgiveness for our past actions and are empowered by the Holy Spirit for the future. We can then genuinely embrace God's will, become part of His kingdom, and be recognized as His children. Through this process, we gain access to eternal life, which represents the essence of God's own life.⁸

Furthermore, the concept “born again” is strongly rooted in the response of Jesus to Nicodemus: “Very truly, I tell you, no one can enter the kingdom of God, without being born of water and Spirit, what is born of the flesh is flesh and what is born of the Spirit is spirit” (Jn. 3:5-6). Here, Jesus was talking of a spiritual experience necessary for the salvation of humans. In effect, Jesus implies that for one to be worthy of the Kingdom of God, one must be exposed to the new experience that is transforming and touches the inner life. Such experience permeates the whole person and furnishes the individual with a new orientation.

From the above analysis, it is obvious that the idea of conversion, being ‘born again’ among the Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals is positive in the sense that “Christians need to be challenged to a personal conversion to Jesus and his Church”.⁹ They need to hone their faith in Jesus to the point where it is their ‘own faith’ and not that of their Parents, Guardians and Godparents who had influence on them when they were growing up and in whose faith they have been baptised when they were still infants.

Stress on Extraordinary Form of Healing:

There is a common proverbial adage that says, ‘Health is wealth’. This is based on the fact that health is one of the most cherished goods on earth. People are ever ready to pay anything within their means either to maintain or restore it. Hence, they strive to ensure good health through proper style of life, balanced dieting, ample physical exercises, sufficient rest and recreation. Modern science and technological advancement have also helped to a great extent in combating diseases and procuring good health. But, in spite of all the efforts and achievements, sickness remains an extinguishable aspect of this life. Thus, healing must remain a genuine concern of humanity.

In the tradition of Christianity, there are three forms of Healing Activity: Traditional Form of Healing, Extraordinary Form of Healing and Sacramental Form of Healing. Highlighting on these forms of healing, the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria in the document ‘Guidelines for the Healing Ministry in the Catholic Church in Nigeria’ affirms that: “there have been three forms of healing activity in the tradition of Christianity; namely, the traditional form through the gifts and services of healing, the extraordinary form through miraculous cures, and the sacramental form through prayer and anointing of the sick”.¹⁰ During the course of history in Christianity, the extraordinary form of healing was downplayed. Catholic Church for instance associated this form of healing (extraordinary form) with certain places of apparition of Jesus or his mother Mary and persons with exceptional holiness like the Saints and the Mystics.

With the wave of Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism, Christians now recognize and acknowledge the fact that God can heal beyond the Sacramental form as seen in the Scriptures and healing by direct Divine intervention can happen at any time and anywhere through the use of prayer of healing by the Clergy. So, the emphasis of

Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals on extraordinary form of healing (Divine Healing) is positive and should also be welcomed.

Negative Elements Inherent in Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism

There are many negative elements within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism. But, I will limit my discussion to only two with particular reference to evangelization and ministry of healing.

Prosperity Gospel:

Prosperity Gospel, also known as the Health and Wealth Gospel or the Gospel of Success, is a derivative of Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism. It promotes the belief that followers are entitled to experience both physical and material prosperity, which they can attain by expressing positive faith declarations, making financial contributions through seed sowing, and faithfully fulfilling their financial obligations such as tithes and offerings.¹¹ Thus, it portrays financial blessings as a visible manifestations of God's will for humanity which is possible through individual acts of charity and poverty on the other hand as a curse and opposite of the will of God.

Proponents of prosperity gospel believe that the aim of Christ's coming on earth is to restore to humanity what have been stolen by the evil ones and through the passion, death and resurrection of Christ, all the material needs of man have been actualised. To buttress this point, Sampson Nwaomah asserts: "Since Christ came to reclaim humanity's legal right to wealth, health, and success, which had been surrendered to Satan at the inception of sin, the redeemed now take their place in Christ and through faith actualize these legal rights in their lives."¹² The next question will be: what could be the background behind prosperity gospel?

The prosperity gospel may have its roots in the Jewish understanding of blessings and curses. According to Jewish beliefs, God's blessings were seen as material prosperity, while curses were associated with hardships and physical afflictions. This concept was articulated by Moses in Leviticus 26 and Deuteronomy 28-30. Consequently, the Jewish perspective held that those who experienced prosperity were considered pious, spiritual, and righteous, whereas those who suffered were seen as sinners.

When examining Jesus' teachings about the kingdom of God and God's blessings, we can understand why His message was challenging for the Jewish audience. It must have been shocking for people to hear Jesus proclaim an entirely different understanding of God's blessing and cursing, contrary to their own beliefs. In Luke 6:20, Jesus directed His attention to His disciples and declared, "Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God. Blessed are you who hunger now, for you shall be satisfied. Blessed are you who weep now, for you shall laugh..." This statement contradicted the Jewish perspective entirely. Jesus referred to as "blessed" those who were considered accursed by the Jews. The poor, hungry, and sorrowful were regarded as blessed by Jesus, while the rich, well-fed, and happy were seen as accursed.

Naturally, the Jews found Jesus' teachings perplexing. His description of those whom He considered "blessed" seemed to defy logic and common understanding. However, Jesus' intention was to challenge their world-view. By calling attention to the adversity faced by those He referred to as "blessed," Jesus aimed to instil a sense of

discontent with the present world and redirect their focus towards the promised blessings of the kingdom of God.

Judging the above ideology critically, it is clear that prosperity gospel threatens the foundation upon which Christianity is based which is the suffering, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ. The following impacts could be felt in the Christendom as a resultant effect of Prosperity gospel by the prosperity preachers. It promotes conceit, dissension, dehumanization and deception. It also downplays the power of hard work and expertise as the source of success and blessings.¹³

Attitude of Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals to Healing:

Another element within Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism is attitude of Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals to Healing. Undeniably, healing remains a vital aspect of human life. Thus, the Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals are known for their penchant for healing over the years. They are convinced that ministry of healing remains part and parcel of ministry of Jesus Christ, and that the Sacred Ministers have been empowered by Jesus Christ to continue His ministry of healing on earth. This is anchored on their perception of health as the greatest value and most cherished asset in life.

Moreover, their attitude towards healing remains negative in the sense that they tend to focus more on physical and material healing to the detriment of other aspects. For them, God has wrought not only our salvation through his passion, death and resurrection but also has healed our infirmities and sicknesses. Such conception of theirs are hinged on this famous biblical quote: “He took our infirmities and bore our diseases and by his wounds we are healed” (cf. Is. 53:4; Mt. 8:17). This is contrary to Christian idea of healing which is holistic in nature. Hence, Christian healing is not just about restoration of physical health, but restoration of wholeness to both individuals and the human society, and the offer of hope which transcends the mundane-salvation.¹⁴ So, attention should be given more to spiritual aspect of healing which relates directly to the essence of our existence on earth-to be with Christ on the Last day. To achieve this vision, one needs to care more for the soul than the body.

Furthermore, some Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals go to the extent of saying that sickness and suffering are not their portions. They are of the opinion that sickness and suffering should never befall a believer. In that way, they tend to dismiss the place of cross in the life of every Christian. If sickness and suffering were the portion of Jesus Christ whom we as Christians are following his footsteps, there is need for Christians to change their attitudes and face sickness and suffering personally and socially. If Christians respond to sickness and suffering with faith, moral courage and love rather than with unbelief, bitterness and cynicism, they will see that sickness and suffering can be redemptive and ennobling- by God’s grace and power. So, when we suffer or fall sick, it pays not to relapse into anger, self-pity, scepticism or even nihilism rather we should allow our sickness and suffering to lead us closer to God. For “our sufferings bring acceptance, acceptance brings hope and our hope will not deceive us, for the spirit has been poured into our hearts” (cf. Rom. 5:3-5).

Implications/Lessons

Courses on Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism:

One of the popular terms popularized by the Second Vatican Council is “aggiornamento”. It connotes renewal and adaptation. While Renewal links theology to the past in order to reclaim the apostolic spirit as much as possible, Adaptation on the other hand links it to the present in effort to apply the unchangeable substance of our faith to the actual situation of man. In this present time, it is clear that one of the contemporary issues plaguing the Nigerian Church is wave of Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism. It is a phenomenon that has come to stay and is not going anywhere. The onus lies on the Church authorities to decipher solutions to the predicament. One of the ways to achieve this tedious task is the need for seminarians to offer Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism as one of the courses in Theology. Such courses will first of all expose the seminarians to the tenets and the background behind Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism. Secondly, the courses will enable the seminarians to discern properly between the positive and negative elements inherent in Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism with a target of adopting the former for the betterment of their priestly ministry in the future. Lastly, the courses may help to obviate the excesses that some Catholic priests are exhibiting nowadays in the name of healing ministry. Some of such practices may well pass for superstition, magic or fetishism. I believe this was what prompted the Catholic Bishops to issue their Guidelines for the Healing Ministry in the Catholic Church in Nigeria back then in 1997. Those Guidelines should be a required reading for the courses on Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism.

Formation on How to Deal with Cases of Demonic Activity and other Phenomena:

There is always an argument and a feeling among some seminarians that Seminary Formation as well as Catholic Theology seem to be indifferent to some of the phenomena eating up the faith of our people. For them, the Seminary Formation offers little or nothing with respect to some of the contemporary problems they are going to meet in the ministry as future priests. To juxtapose this fact, Vatican II Council emphasized on the need for inculturation which means “the creative and dynamic relationship between the Christian message and a culture or cultures”¹⁵ In other words, inculturation entails, allowing the Gospel message to be incarnated in every culture. In the light of the thought of Vatican II Fathers, it appears that the Gospel message is yet to be incarnated in Africa especially in Nigeria. This could be attributed to the mistake made by the missionaries who derogated the African Traditional Religion with the concept ‘Paganism’. Instead of using the cultural elements present in our culture for proper evangelization, they went to the extent of labelling our religion and culture as something evil and devilish in nature. In this way, Christianity seems to be foreign to our culture and also such attitude of the missionaries created an ideological chasm between Nigerians and their culture.

Besides, if one tries to deny or dismiss the fact that the Gospel message is yet to take flesh in our culture, then why are people leaving the Catholic Church in search of one solution or the other? Worst still, some even go to the extent of combining African Traditional Religion with Christianity which could be termed syncretism. In as much as the essence of religion is not actually to solve human problems, why shouldn't religion meet peoples' needs and answer their problems? What good would a religion be if it does not meet the human needs?

As a nursery bed, seminary needs to form seminarians to deal with cases of demonic activity and other phenomena ravaging the faith of our people and which has made

some to quit the Catholic Church. I think that the following could be of vital aid to the seminary authorities in conjunction with Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) as regards the formation of seminarians in line with the mind of Christ and his Church:

To start with, seminarians should be convinced that the devil is real and that he has power over people and the material universe but the power of God supersedes that of the devil.¹⁶ So, attention should be focused more on God and not on demonology.

Secondly, seminarians should be taught the difference between Diabolical Possession and Diabolical Obsession and the remedies for each of them. Seminarians should understand that, as priests in the future, they will be able to deal with cases needing deliverance through prayer and sacrifice and exorcism through canonical norms stipulated for it. On no account should claims of demonic possession (attack) or obsession be dismissed lightly.¹⁷

Lastly, there is need for African Theology. African Theology is a “discourse on God and what is related to God in accordance with the African needs and mentality”.¹⁸ Such study will expose seminarians to both the positive and negative elements inherent in our culture and the needs to use the former for proper evangelization and preaching of the gospel at its grass-root. It will also go to the point of addressing some of the contemporary problems occurring in our land and the possible solutions to them. All these will eventually become vital and veritable tools in the hands of the seminarians in their future priestly ministry.

Evangelization and Proclamation of the Word:

The connection between evangelization and proclamation of the Word is inseparable, like two sides of the same coin. Pope Paul VI emphasized this in his document *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, stating that genuine evangelization cannot exist without proclaiming the name, teaching, life, promises, kingdom, and mystery of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God.¹⁹ Therefore, evangelization and proclamation remain vital, interconnected, and indispensable aspects of the priestly ministry. One valuable lesson that the clergy and religious could learn from Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals is their approach to evangelization and proclamation methods.

On the area of evangelization, it seems that the Catholics are very competent at keeping the fish that they already have in the pond but very poor at catching new ones. The Catholic Priests and Religious do extremely well when it comes to ministering to the faithful in the parishes and institutions. But when it comes to going after new fish or sheep to bring them in, they come out second best. The Pentecostals and Neo-Pentecostals beat them down in this aspect. The question remains: what are the positive strategies that they employ, that are working so well for them? Coming to the angle of Proclamation of the Word, one of the reasons that are often advanced for people leaving the Catholic Church for the Pentecostal and Neo-

Pentecostal churches is that “they are not being sufficiently fed with the word of God in the Catholic Church”.²⁰ The reason is that more and more discerning Catholics who are never going to leave the Catholic Church are complaining about the quality of preaching by many of our priests. Where content is not lacking, delivery is often the

problem or vice versa. Some priests spend more of their homily time singing choruses than actually preaching. They fail to understand the essence and goal of preaching.

Ministry of Healing:

It constitutes one of the aspects of the ministry of Jesus Christ while on earth. Apart from nature miracles of Jesus, there is another category of Jesus' miracles which is healing miracles of Jesus. It portrays Jesus' power over diseases or physical illness on those affected by such. These are occasions where Jesus heal the sick, cure the lame and drive away diseases and infirmities from people. It can be said that they are God's work of grace where Jesus demonstrated His powers over sicknesses, diseases and infirmities of different kinds. Here, sicknesses that seemingly outweigh human solutions were cured by Jesus using his supernatural powers. It is a divine work of mercy where Jesus drove away sicknesses from people who believe in Him.

However, the ministry of healing did not end with Christ. Since he intended his Church to last till the end of time (*eschaton*), he bestowed on the apostles and their legitimate successors the full power to continue this work of healing. So, priests and religious need to believe in themselves that they can heal. That is, they can pray for people with or without the sacraments for them to get well. This power of healing has been bestowed upon them on the day of their ordination. The practice of some priests or religious arrogating the title of healers to themselves should be discouraged. Priests and Religious should desist from referring those who come to them for healing to some self-appointed specialist healer priests. It is a sign of incompetence on the part of priests and religious who refer their parishioners to some priests.

Furthermore, the priests and religious should understand that Christian healing is not just about restoration of physical health, but restoration of wholeness to individuals and society. Just like Christ, who cared not only the physical well-being of people but also their spiritual growth, priests and religious should imitate their master.

Finally, there is a clarion call for priests and religious to go back to the drawing board, back to the master and his method of healing: healing without charge, healing to be unnoticed and healing with the motif of bringing joy to the people.²¹

Conclusion

From the elucidation above, it is apparent that Pentecostalism and Neo-Pentecostalism are phenomena that have come to stay, even in the Catholic Church. They are not going anywhere. It is left for the Clergy, Religious and Seminarians to discern properly the positive and negative elements inherent in them with a view of adopting the former in their pastoral ministry.

The Catholic Church *ab initio* is charismatic in nature. In as much as charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit have been abused and merchandised by some men of God and even some priests, Religious and Seminarians, but then, abuse can never negate the use. So, there is need for Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) to look into how those charismatic gifts of the Holy Spirit possessed by some Priests, Religious, Seminarians and Lay people could be harnessed for the renewal and building up of the Church as stated in *Lumen Gentium*, No. 12. Even though Christ did not build his Church on the foundation of charisms, He, while on earth not only preached the word but also worked miracles, healed the sick, raised the dead and fed the hungry. So, the

ministry of Christ is holistic in nature. He catered not only for the spiritual needs of man and woman but also their material problems.

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