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# THE LEGACIES OF CYPRIAN'S LEADERSHIP POLICIES FOR NIGERIAN CHRISTIANITY

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## I. Introduction

Leadership remains the glaring need of the contemporary church in Nigeria. It is true that there is no vacuum in the hierarchy of the church across all denominations, yet, the spiritual impact of such leaders in the world of politics, business and other endeavors seems not effective enough to give this generation the necessary direction.

There are many definitions of the concept of leadership. In his own submission, Robert Greenleaf says leadership is the act of showing the way for others, stating the goal and thereby giving certainty and purpose to others who may have difficulty in achieving it for themselves.<sup>1</sup> S. Kpena sees leadership as the process of directing the behavior of another person or persons towards the accomplishment of some objectives.<sup>2</sup> Another author described leadership as the process of guiding, directing and commanding others to achieve a desired goal or vision. A leader knows where the group is going and takes others along. According to Anthony D'souza, leadership is the ability to get others to work enthusiastically and competently toward accepted objectives.<sup>3</sup> The most precise and appealing among these definitions was given by Oswald Sanders and recently advanced by John C. Maxwell that leadership is influence.<sup>4</sup> It is the

province, and exerted a tremendous influence on the church far beyond the confines of his native Carthage.<sup>7</sup>

Born around 200 AD into a wealthy Roman family, Cyprian was born in or near Carthage (modern day Tunisia and Algeria). From all historical evidences, he enjoyed the best education available and became a very successful and wealthy barrister. He had a career in the higher echelons of the civil service that appeared to be opened to him. It appeared that Cyprian was quite familiar with all constitutional laws and political ideas; and by the time he became a Christian, he transferred his great experience to the sphere of his ecclesiastical activity in favour of the Church.<sup>8</sup>

No one can really ascertain how Cyprian was converted. However, it is generally believed that he became a Christian in 246 AD and was baptized the same year by a presbyter named Caecilianus or Caecilius who won him for the Lord and the church. As already mentioned above, owing to his personal and spiritual relationship with this presbyter he had to adopt his name.

Following his conversion, history has it that he dispensed most of his wealth and property and gave the proceeds to the poor of Carthage and he seemed to have abandoned his occupation and social position, and gave himself to a life of celibacy, poverty and Bible study.<sup>9</sup>

### **III. His Meteoric Rise to Episcopacy**

He was ordained a deacon not too long after his baptism; and soon afterward, he was made a presbyter as a result of his progress in the Christian life. Sometime between July 248 and April 249, he was elected the Bishop of Carthage, after the death of the incumbent, Donatus of Carthage. Cyprian was a popular choice among the poor who remembered his patronage as demonstrating good equestrian style. Harry Boer says that an assembly of Bishops installed him in office.<sup>10</sup>

His meteoric rise to a position of such immense dignity and authority caused misgiving and doubt even among many older and senior members of the clergy in Carthage. Novatus, a senior presbyter and other clergy like Deacon Felcissimus were opposed to Cyprian's election.

From the above information, it is obvious that leadership crisis in the church today has its root in the historical events of the early church. It seems those who elected Cyprian into the Episcopal office failed to be guided by Paul's admonition to the church that a bishop must not be a young convert (see I Tim 3v6). Although this paper is not ruling out God's grace, or favour in the choice of people to ecclesiastical offices, yet, the fact remains that experience should also be given a place of prominence in order not to offend people. It is



ability to influence people towards some specific goals and direction. Maxwell buttresses his favourite saying: "He who thinketh he leadeth and hath no one following him is only taking a walk".

If Greenleaf and Sanders' definitions are anything to go by, Cyprian leadership style seems to have bequeathed both positive and negative legacies to Christianity globally and Africa in particular. From the negative dimension, rather than identifying with the Carthagenean Christians during persecution that erupted shortly after his consecration as Bishop, Cyprian decided to go into exile; therefore he failed to show good example to the church. Hence, Henry and Richard Blackaby wrote:

Our world craves good leaders. It would seem that effective leadership has become the panacea for every challenge society faces. Whether it's in politics, religion, business, education, or law, the universally expressed need is for leaders who will rise to meet the challenges that seem to overwhelm many of today's organizations.<sup>5</sup>

However, Cyprian's positive legacies stemmed from the influence he wielded on the church after his fourteen months' stay in exile. His ability to hold his Diocese together despite the schism caused by the Donatist church and his view on ecclesiology among others are worthy of note. Yet, it must be mentioned that from whatever angle one is studying Cyprian, he epitomized some ideals that church leaders imbibe today.

This paper, therefore, asserts that many Christian leaders rose to the position of authority not because they were qualified or adequately prepared for the task of leadership, but due to certain human or divine factors. Retrospectively, the paper intends to bring to the fore the historical antecedents of leadership challenges of St. Cyprian, an African father of the early church, with a view to assessing the legacies he bequeathed to the contemporary church.

## **II. Background of Cyprian**

Cyprian or Thascius Caecilius Cyprianus<sup>6</sup> (Latin), Bishop of Carthage from AD 248 to 258, was the second great Carthaginian Christian leader. He was an important early Christian writer. His original name was Thascius but he took the additional name Caecilius in memory of the presbyter to whom he owed his conversion, just as Samuel Ajayi added Crowther in memory of the clergy that converted and baptized him. He was one of a group of able and devoted Christian leaders in North Africa during the third century. He ranked alongside Tertullian and Augustine as a pillar of strength in the Roman

province, and exerted a tremendous influence on the church far beyond the confines of his native Carthage.<sup>7</sup>

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unfortunate that some promotions or preferment done in some churches nowadays are based on sentiments rather than merits which of course later backfire and put the church of God in a mess.<sup>11</sup>

#### **IV. Leadership Challenges Faced by Cyprian**

Emperor Decius, who had reigned for two brief years (249-251), issued an edict requiring all his subjects to obtain a certificate (*libellus*) to prove they had sacrificed to the gods. Cyprian, realizing the threat, abandoned his duty post, went into self exile from where he administered his diocese through secret correspondence; whereas other Church leaders chose to stay on and suffer for their faith in Christ. It was at this time that the Bishops at Rome, Antioch, and Jerusalem were martyred.<sup>12</sup>

Cyprian's decision to physically abdicate his office in the face of persecution puts doubt on his preparedness for episcopacy and genuineness of his call, because North Africa, the region where Cyprian came from, was characterized by resilience and willingness to die in the face of persecution.<sup>13</sup> Therefore, Cyprian reacted contrary to leadership norm and ethics of his days which emphasized resilience. Though his abandonment was not total, he did not lead by example, and this resulted in schism because some of his followers lost confidence in him and appointed a leader for themselves.<sup>14</sup>

Many religious leaders in Nigeria exhibit similar tendency of abandoning their subjects during difficult times. The quest for affluence and comfort of office always makes them to keep mute instead of being proactive through practical and concrete means in denouncing oppressive structures of government that create unnecessary hardships for Nigerians. The silence of our religious leaders during the protests that greeted the recent hike in fuel price in January 2012 left many Nigerians in doubt whether the leaders still recognize their roles as vanguards of justice. To many Nigerian Christians, the failure (or lateness) of the church to challenge the capitalist system that creates human misery exposes ecclesiastical hypocrisy. This view is well articulated by James Cone who stated that

....the theological without a critical sociological component makes the church a non-historical, spiritual community whose existence has no effect on our social and political environment.<sup>15</sup>

Therefore it is high time that our religious leaders rose up as true shepherds who fight for the survival of the sheep rather than the hirelings who run away and expose the sheep to danger.



## V. Cyprian's Policy of Autonomy

Reacting to Bishop Stephen's position on the primacy of the bishop of Rome (given the traditional belief that he was the occupier of Peter's throne), Cyprian maintained that each single bishop possessed in his own diocese the powers and functions of the whole Rome. The subsequent assertion made by Cyprian to buttress his stand on the issue of autonomy has become a historic fallacy when he said that "the church was established upon the bishops, they could be judged by no-one except God; to criticize the bishop was rebellion".<sup>16</sup> This statement ran contrary to the conviction of the reformers. While Wycliffe, the grandfather of reformation, challenged the infallibility of the Popes and Bishops but maintained that the only Head of the church is Christ; Martin Luther posited that the church was established on the priesthood of all believers.<sup>17</sup>

## VI. Teaching on Sacraments

Both Jews and Gentiles were familiar with the idea of priests and sacrifices but Cyprian was the first to relate Christianity with these older ones in this way. The earlier doctrine of the priesthood of all believers began to be abandoned and slipped into the background, almost into oblivion. In Cyprian is found the germ of the division of the Sacrament into two: (a) the Eucharist – the sacrifice of thanksgiving; (b) the mass – a new development whereby the bishop became a sacrificing priest and the bloodless but real sacrifice that he offers is the passion of our Lord.

Cyprian was the first Church Father to interpret the Eucharist as a sacrificial rite. Prior to his time, it had been celebrated only as a memorial of Christ's death. But he came up with the teaching that "the priest at Eucharist imitates what Christ did" in order to offer a true and complete service to God. He argues:

If Jesus our Lord and God Himself... commanded this to be done in remembrance of Him, then assuredly the priest acts truly in Christ's room when he imitates what Christ did, and he offers them a true and complete sacrifice to God the Father, if he so begins to offer as he sees Christ Himself has offered.<sup>18</sup>

Besides the fact that this view lacks clear biblical backing based on the premise that Jesus never asked the Church to celebrate the Eucharist in "imitation" of Him but in "remembrance" of Him, this sacrificial trend in the Eucharist has become one of the instruments of disunity in Christendom. While

the Roman Catholic Church still upholds the teaching till today, most Protestant and Post-Reformation churches are largely opposed to it. The result is that even though the former belongs to some ecumenical groups like the Christian Association of Nigeria, it fails to recognize the Eucharist from other churches hence it does not participate in it.

The second problem concerned baptismal controversy. A difficulty had arisen over admission into the church of people like those who had been baptized in some heretical or schismatic bodies that emerged from the schism that arose during his self exile. The usual practice in the past had been to accept their baptisms and not to re-baptise them. But Cyprian strongly opposed the custom and took the stand that heretical and schismatic baptisms were sacramental acts performed outside the one true church hence they remained *ipso facto* null and void.<sup>19</sup>

Critically examined, Cyprian should have differentiated between the heretical and schismatic groups because they did not often share the same opinions on doctrinal issues. It is generally believed that the heretics grossly distort the gospel message, but the schismatic uphold the teachings of the church. They only separated themselves from the mother church when they felt dissatisfied with some issues.

In Nigeria today, schism is mostly responsible for proliferation of churches. Therefore it would be wrong for some churches to begin to canvass for re-admission of "returnees" through second baptism, except the tripartite principle was not enforced at their initial baptism. The nature or mode of baptism they received earlier is immaterial, provided it was done in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Luther gave credence to this argument against the position of the Anabaptists (re-baptizers) when he said that the status of the administrator of the sacrament does not in anyway affect its efficacy.<sup>20</sup>

## VII. His View on Ecclesiology

For Cyprian, the church may be spread abroad throughout the world, yet she remains one "even as the sun has many rays, yet one light". It follows from Cyprian's view that to separate from the church was the worst of sins. This feeling was at the root of Cyprian's intransigent attitude to heretics and schismatic. He argued that the church is the only absolute and the only voice of God's mercy and the grace of God is limited to her. He asserted: "No man can have God as his father who has not the church as his mother".<sup>21</sup> "Outside the Catholic church", Cyprian maintained, "there is no salvation". Thus, schism became a deadly sin. Cyprian thus enhanced the authoritarian, hierarchical, institutional aspect of the church because the church is an institution established for the salvation of the world.



This Cyprian's view on the catholicity and indispensability of the church<sup>22</sup> is very germane because the believers in Christ Jesus, even though separated by borders, yet remain one in the faith they share in their savior. In addition, God has founded the church to be the vehicle of salvation for those who believe.

### **VIII. Conclusion and Recommendation**

From the discussion so far, Cyprian seemed to have had turbulent periods in Episcopacy which were not unconnected with his rise to leadership as well as his leadership policies. It is therefore reiterated here that for leadership not to be bereft of credibility, experience in church ministry should always be taken into consideration.

Secondly, the policy of giving undue recognition by the church's authority to clergy who are well connected in the society by appointing them to position of leadership should be looked into. This becomes necessary in order not to make further caricature of the ministry. People must be tested and proven worthy in spiritual matters. If not, by the time they assume the position of authority, they may have the tendency of transferring their secular opinions or convictions to the church. This is true of Cyprian's policy of autonomy by which he emphasized that each bishop was independent of the other, and that each diocese should operate devoid of any external interference. As much as this policy looks laudable, the history behind it shows that it emanated from Cyprian's closeness to the Roman government, and it was employed to check Bishop Stephen of Rome who tried to interfere in the schism that Cyprian himself created in Africa during the persecution.

Till date, this policy still subsists making it impossible for people outside a diocese to wade in even in time of crisis. The concept of autonomy has the tendency of making some church leaders to rule their dioceses excessively rather than lead according to the mind of Christ. No wonder Archbishop Nwakiti described autonomy as a 'monster' that the devil has used to tear the Church apart.<sup>23</sup>

In conclusion, the present leaders of the church would bequeath enduring positive legacies to posterity when they allow experience, fairness and merit to count in selecting or appointing people to positions of authority today.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Robert Greenleaf, *Servant Leadership*, New York: Paulist Press, 1977. 15. Print

<sup>2</sup>S. Kpena, *How to be a wise leader*, Kenya: Pauline Publishers, 2000. 13. Print

<sup>3</sup>Anthony D' Souza, *Leadership*, Nairobi: Pauline Publishers, 1997. 56. Print

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<sup>6</sup>G.A. Ositelu, *The African Fathers of the Early Church*, Ibadan: Sefers Books Ltd., 2002. 49. Print

<sup>7</sup>G.A. Ositelu 2002. 62.

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<sup>10</sup>Harry R. Boer, *A Short History of the Early Church*, Ibadan: Daystar Press, 1976. 87. Print

<sup>11</sup>S.M. Mepaiyeda, *Church Reformation: A Historical Reflection*, Ibadan: A flame publishing House, 2013. 171. Print

<sup>12</sup>G.A. Ositelu, *The African Fathers of the Early Church*, 56.

<sup>13</sup>G.A. Ositelu, *The Expansion of Christianity in West Africa Up to 1914*, Ibadan: Hope Publications, 2010. 2-3 Print.

<sup>14</sup>G.A. Ositelu, *The Expansion of Christianity in West Africa Up to 1914*.

<sup>15</sup>James H. Cone in Itumeleng Mosala & Buti Tlhagale, eds, *Hammering Swords into Ploughshares*, Johannesburg: Skotaville Publishers, 1986. 145. Print



<sup>16</sup>G.A. Ositelu, *The African Fathers of the Early Church*, Ibadan: Sefers Books Ltd., 2002. 56. Print

<sup>17</sup>Hoblein, Sale of Indulgences. Retrieved 15/2/2015 from [en.wikipedia.org/wiki/indulgence](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/indulgence).

<sup>18</sup>S.A. Fatokun, *History and Doctrine of the Early Church*.

<sup>19</sup>G.A. Ositelu, *The African Fathers of the Early Church*.

<sup>20</sup>Jonathan Hill, *The History of Christianity*, Oxford: Lion Hudson Plc, 2007. 255. Print

<sup>21</sup>G.A. Ositelu, *The African Fathers of the Early Church*, Ibadan: Sefers Books Ltd, 2002. 57. Print

<sup>22</sup>The word *Catholicity* means the universality of the Church. The Church of God cuts across all regions of the world.

<sup>23</sup>Herbert Haruna (no date), *Christian Ministry in Today's Church and Society*, Abuja: Memo Ventures. 62. Print