The Church and Politics in Nigeria: 
A Theological Appraisal 

Francis Anekwe Oborji

“The Church in its socio-historical aspect is always and already acting as an important political actor. The unusual habit of presuming "a priori" neutrality and "political innocence" is something that is not a critical absence, or is deliberately, aimed at revealing existing political alliances or positions. ... The Church exists and acts politically before it explicitly takes a particular political position and before considering the criteria used for its current political position. ... Precisely in this sense, the Church avoids falling to the level of purely political religion” –(Johann Baptist Metz, a German theologian and acclaimed father of modern Catholic political theology, in his book “Faith in History and Society.” In German: Glaube in Geschichte und Gesellschaft (1977).

The present article is a follow-up to our previous one, entitled, “Is the Church Political or Apolitical in Nigeria?” In that article, we offered our contribution towards digesting the recent directive of the Catholic Bishops’ Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) on the non-participation of the Church, bishops and priests in partisan politics.

Again, as we noted in the earlier article, the CBCN directive regarding the non-participation of the clergy in partisan politics is not only timely but also in order, judging from the fact that Nigeria is preparing for general elections in 2019. So, there is need to guard against abuse of ecclesiastical norms on this matter, which is contained also in Canon 287 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, and in a way, in the Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC, nos. 1878-1942). The Vatican II Decree on Ministry and Life of Priests Presbyterorum Ordinis (PO: no. 3), has also a general teaching on the topic.

In the light of all this, in the present article, our aim is to make a theological appraisal of the presence of the Church in politics with particular reference to Nigeria, to show the nature and significance of that political presence and role, which the Church has in the society in which it lives and operates. As we noted in the previous article, the Church has a political presence and role in the society, which it does conveniently, without however, compromising its neutrality as well as the primary eschatological dimension of its mission in history and the world.

But, precisely for that mission entrusted to it by the Risen Christ, the Church cannot remain politically neutral or disinterested in a society in which it lives and operates, without however, betraying its raison d’être. Since it operates, lives, and ministers within the political climate in the country, the Church should be every inch interested in whatever is going on in the political life of the society and be an important player in its own way as a Church. This is the missionary challenge of the Church in Nigeria’s political landscape today.

The Church has the missionary vocation as demanded by the Gospel of Jesus Christ, the veritable long tradition and experience of the Church throughout history, to be politically and socially present in the society in which it lives and evangelizes. In this way, the Church accompanies the society and citizens in their historical journey as a bearer of the Good News of Jesus Christ that saves. It functions and serves as the leaven of the society, not only on spiritual matters but also in the areas of socio-cultural, political, economic and moral life of the people and society. The Church does this, principally through its teaching authority, moral and religious guide of the society or state.
Thus, our task in the present article is to analyze theologically and sociologically, the constituents of the Church’s political significance, engagement and mission in society and human history. We shall base our analysis on the contributions of some important theologians and authors on the topic, and conclude with some insights from Pope Francis’ apostolic exhortation, *Evangelii gaudium* (2013).

**The Theological Perspective**

Let us begin with Thomas Aquinas’ *‘Summa theologiae.’* In his *Summa theologiae*, Aquinas recognizes the political presence and role of the Church in the society. The *Summa theologiae* of Aquinas articulates the theological knowledge as doctrinal, and practical moral science in the social realm of the society. According to Aquinas, if the Sacred Doctrine is a Practical Science, it seems that sacred doctrine is a practical science with its social implications for the Church and Christians in the society.

The Church, therefore, cannot ignore its political engagement with the society. For the Church to neglect its social and political missionary dimension to the society is for the Church itself to deny its reason of existence in human history and the world. It is like the Church, making itself a slave to abstract theological or even metaphysical treatise, neglecting instead, its meeting-point with praxis and reality – the people’s concrete situation. For the Church to neglect the socio-political dimension of its mission is like asking it to play-down the story of the incarnation of Jesus Christ in human flesh and history. Which would amount to the consequence of denying the society the opportunity of encountering the Risen Christ for its socio-political transformation through Gospel proclamation.

Aquinas bases his arguments on the philosophy of Aristotle. According to Aristotle, "the end of practical science is the operation." Now, sacred doctrine is ordained precisely to the operation, because as St. James teaches (1, 22): "Be of those who practice the word, and not just listeners." So ‘sacred doctrine’ is a practical science.

Again, Aquinas divided the sacred doctrine into ancient law and new law. According to him, since law belongs to moral science, which is a practical science, so sacred doctrine is a practical science. For Aquinas, every practical science deals with man-operable realities, such as the morality of human actions and the building of society. Now, sacred doctrine mainly deals with God, of which man is rather an invoice [that factor]: it is not a practical science, but rather a speculative science. However, even though sacred doctrine, while being one, extends, at the same time, to the objects of various philosophical sciences due to the formal reason, or the special aspect to which it relates, that is to say, as they can be known by divine light. For this reason, though there is a distinction between philosophical sciences and speculative, but *sacred doctrine as it understands itself, has two aspects, this is because God with the same science knows himself and his works.*

However, Aquinas adds that sacred doctrine is more speculative than practical, since it deals more with divine things than with human acts, which it only deals with because through it man is ordained to the perfect knowledge of God, in which is eternal bliss. With that, Aquinas reasons, the objections raised about the nature of the relationship between doctrine and politics, are solved. We should not forget that Aquinas’ *Summa theologiae* was preceded by Augustine’s “*City of God.*” Augustine’s *City of God*, later received its concretization in the groundwork of social transformation of medieval and modern Europe by St. Benedict the Abbot, and his Monks of Monte Casino. This is a typical example of how the Church accompanies, and socio-politically, transforms the society in which it lives and operates. It is also an indictment to all those who
underestimate the role of Monks or rather Contemplatives in the social transformation of the society and the Church itself.

**Bernard Lonergan** (1904-1984), Canadian Jesuit, philosopher and theologian, devoted his entire existence to the search and definition of an *Organon*. That is, a universal method of investigation that was able to combine the various disciplines of knowledge and praxis, in order to overcome the radical fragmentation that invests today's knowledge in general, and in particular systematic reflection from its practical or socio-political implications. Lonergan is probably the most significant thinker of the twentieth century both for the breadth of the fields investigated and for the achievements in the field of theology and philosophy (especially in the field of knowledge theory and methodologies of the various fields of knowledge), and of the general theory of economics and politics.

As for theology and politics, Lonergan in his Magnus opus, “*Method in Theology*”, appears "persuaded that 20th century theology, elaborated largely in the context of science, history, anthropology and pre-modern philosophy, is no longer able to adequately perform its mediation function between supernatural realities and human cultures". However, this conviction does not intend to assert and indeed exclude a renewal of theology through its uncritical flattening of the "often ambiguous and incoherent results of so-called cultural revolutions: the scientific-technological revolution, historical-hermeneutic and anthropological-philosophical".

In "*Method in Theology,*" Lonergan applies all this to theological knowledge. There is still tension on unity in human knowledge and methods of knowing: How to make a dialogue between different specialists? On what basis can a biblical and a student of fundamental theology, an archaeologist of the Holy Land and a pastoral expert, in short, a theologian and political scientist, meet?

Moreover, if we add to these differences the divisions between schools of thought, Christian confessions, between different religions and cultures, the case becomes more challenging and complicated. Thus, Lonergan proposes a universal method for theological research in the meeting of theology itself and social sciences for the transformation of human society and politics. The basis of this method is a description of the fundamental operations of consciousness. What do we do when we think and investigate the real; that is, the socio-cultural and political reality? Karl Rahner once said, “In our times, reality is struggle for a chance to speak.”

Lonergan’s “*Method in Theology*”, whose work falls in the immediate post-conciliar Vatican II, marks the author's greatest effort to open the way to the reflection of the future, to what the German theologian Johann Baptist Metz would call, “Faith in History and Society”, to depict new opening into the emerging theological reflection on Church and politics.

**Johann Baptist Metz**, thought to be the father of modern political theology for his essay on “*Theology of the World*”(1969), was a student of Karl Rahner, who also directed his doctoral dissertation. This theology of Metz also influences the theology of liberation under way in Latin America and South Africa. But the affirmation of the political character of the Christian message is already going on in his book, “*The Secular City*”: "In the age of secular city, politics replaces metaphysics as the language of theology."

For Metz, “the mission of the Church has political dimensions and implications. Political theology places in eschatology the key to reading the Christian faith lived in the contemporary world.” In fact, for Metz, in the face of the growing awareness of man's domination over the world, man's domination of man is growing, the proclamation of the kingdom made by the Church must be a critical announcement of the future for the future. Man, thus becomes a political principle of freedom (Metz 1969). Even J. Moltmann, in his “*Theology of Hope*” (1969), states that the Church has a political relationship with society in order to prepare the kingdom of God.

In “*Faith in History and Society*”, Metz discusses the “pathetical and dangerous memory” of Jesus Christ alongside the presence of the Church in society: To inquire of the presence of the Church in society means to ask of the contemporary situation, the current situation of theology and the Church in general. It is not difficult to meet those who say that, in this case, it is a simple matter of the application of a specific practice, which in fact has nothing to do in substance with both the theological truth and the essence of the Church. Thus, Metz takes a distance from this approach of talking about the presence of the Church in society.

For him, we are living in an era when post-idealist ideology criticizes, and sociology of knowledge defines and determines every idea and concept, including the idea and concept of the Absolute, in terms of social interest and socio-historical context. A theology that wants to take a critical responsibility for the Christian faith in this sense, cannot in its heart, ignore this relationship: "social" and "practice." Its theory cannot afford or induce someone to abstract from the problems of the public sphere, the law, the freedom - in fact, the political context.

Thus, Metz asserts, “in this respect, it can and must be a *political theology*. According to him, this is also true of the question of how one specifically wants to take into account, the political issue in defining the relationship between the Church and state, as well as its consequences for the eschaton.

In this regard, for Metz, it is important to note that the Church in its socio-historical aspect, is always and already acting as an important political actor. This means that the Church exists and acts politically before it explicitly takes a particular political position and before considering the criteria used for its current political position.

The unusual habit of presuming "a priori" neutrality and "political innocence" is something that is not a critical absence, or is deliberately aimed at revealing existing political alliances or positions. According to Metz, it is very essential to develop a critical-political hermeneutic of the relationship between the Church and politics to help the Church itself to avoid being identified uncritically and without any control over particular political ideologies. Precisely in this sense, the Church avoids falling to the level of purely political religion.

The Church also does not ally with any political party or promote any particular ideology or even candidates for political elections. In this sense, the Church is a careful institution, conscious always of its political presence and role in the society. This is a delicate identity and mission, but one that is necessary, principally, because of the origin, mission and role of the Church in history and society, which transcends any political authority, ideology and alliance of the present order.

For Metz, however, the Church must see itself as a public witness and bearer of a *pernicious memory* of freedom in the "systems" of the emancipator of our society. Metz’s thesis is based on memory as a fundamental way with which the Christian faith is expressed, and on the central and specific meaning of freedom in this faith.

It is in the faith that Christians update and prolong the memory of *passions, mortis, et resurrectionis Iesu Christi*. “In faith, Christians faithfully remember the will of His love (Christ), in which God's dominion between men and women appears precisely in the fact that the dominion that humans exert on the other begins to fall down, and that Jesus declared Himself to be on the part of those invisible men and women, denied and oppressed by the society. And in doing this, the Church announces to them the reign of God that again invokes the power of the Risen Christ who is now in our aid as a free power and unconditional love.”
Thus, for Metz, this memory is not one that dispels one from the risks of the future. It is not contrary to hope. But it is the one that holds a particular antecedent of the future as a future for those hopeless, that is, the wretched and oppressed of the earth.

In this sense, Metz argues, it is a “dangerous and liberative memory” that puts the present into question and points to the question and the critical question. That is why it does not remind one of a future openly open, but precisely this future, and why it drives believers to be in the continuous state of transformation to take this future into consideration.

In the theology of Metz, the specific memory of this type goes beyond the magic of the conscience rule. It is based on history as something more than a mirror on which we design our current interests. It mobilizes tradition as a dangerous tradition and therefore as a liberating power in the face of the certainty of Jesus, who said to the people, "My time has not yet come, but your time is always here" (John 7: 6). Thus, Metz says that the Church is a public memory of Jesus’ freedom in this world: this means that the Church remembers being a debtor of freedom:

- It recalls the eschatological history of God's freedom, which has been given by the Cross and the Resurrection of Jesus, and which can not be dissolved either in the idea of maturity (Mündigkeit) in the history of the Enlightenment and in the apotheosis of the revolutionary liberation stories.
- This memory (memory) has not dispelled us from responsibility for the history of freedom, but it introduces us into it (responsibility for freedom) (1Corinthians 3:21-23).
  "So no one puts his glory on men, for everything is yours: Paul, Apollo, Cephas, the world, life, death, present, the future: everything is yours! But you are of Christ, and Christ is of God "(1Corinthians 3:21-23).
- In this sense, it is an emancipator to remember (memory) that frees us from any divinization or absolutization of cosmic and political powers.
- The Church can and must depend, take its critical force to remember this "providential Provost", when it is confronted with any totalitarian control system and or when it compares with any ideology.

To conclude the discussion on Metz, it is important to note that his political theology has known some criticisms, including the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith (CDF). For the critics of Metz, his political theology has a poor vision of ecclesiology; the sacramental aspect of the Church is lacking, the body of Christ and the instrument of the Spirit. The concept of faith is widespread. It confuses and identifies human history and socio-political reality with the history of salvation, and does not clearly discuss the supernatural dimension of salvation.

Be it as it may, Metz analysis of the role of the Church in politics as well as the emancipatory role of the Christian faith and hope is defining political theology in a way the author never envisaged.

**Insights from Pope Francis’ “Evangelii gaudium”**

Let us conclude with Pope Francis’ discourse on the topic of the relationship between the Church and society in the apostolic letter *Evangelii gaudium* (EG). In the first place, Pope Francis discusses the relationship between reality and the idea. In this regard, Pope Francis says, "There is also a bipolar tension between the idea and reality. Reality is simply, ‘the idea elaborated’. There must be a constant dialogue between the two, avoiding that the idea ends up separating itself from reality. It is dangerous to live in the realm of the single word, the image, the sophistry.

From here, it is assumed that a third principle must be postulated: reality is superior to the idea. This implies avoiding various forms of concealment of reality: angular purisms, totalitarianism,
declarative nominalism, more formal and realistic projects, anti-historical fundamentalism, ethics without goodness, intellectuals without wisdom" (EG 231).

According to Pope Francis, the concept of conceptual elaborations is about seizing, understanding and directing reality. The idea behind reality is idealism and ineffectual nominalism, which at best classifies or defines, but does not involve. What is involved is the reality illuminated by reasoning. We must move from formal nominalism to harmonious objectivity. Otherwise, the truth is manipulated as well as the gymnastics with the cosmetics (EG 232).

Again, for Pope Francis, "reality is superior to the idea." This criterion is related to the incarnation of the Word and putting it into practice: "In this you can recognize the Spirit of God: every spirit that recognizes Jesus Christ who has come into the flesh is from God" (1John 4:2).

The criterion of reality, of a Word already incarnate and always trying to incarnate, is essential to evangelization. It brings us, on the one hand, to enhancing the history of the Church as a salvation story, to make memories of our saints who have inculturated the Gospel in the lives of our peoples. And to gather the rich tradition of the Church's twentieth century without pretending to elaborate a thought disconnected from this treasure, as if we were to invent the gospel.

On the other hand, this criterion pushes us to put into practice the Word, to carry out works of righteousness and charity in which this Word is fruitful. Not to practice, does not lead the Word to reality, it means building on the sand, staying in the pure idea and degenerating into intimate and Gnosticisms that do not give fruit, and which make sterile its dynamism (EG 233).

Subsequently, Pope Francis discusses the relationship between "global" and "local". Under the heading, "Everything is superior to the part" (EG 234), the Pope says, "Even between globalization and localization is a tension. You have to pay attention to the global dimension so as not to fall into a daily pang. At the same time, it is not advisable to lose sight of what is local, which makes us walk with our feet on the ground.

The two (global and local), united things, prevent one from falling into one of these two extremes: the one that citizens live in an abstract and globalizing universality, camouflaged passengers of the tail car, admiring the artificial fires of the world, that of others, with open mouth and applause programmed. The other, to become a folkloric museum of hermit localists, condemned to repeat the same things, unable to let themselves be interrogated by what is different and to appreciate the beauty that God spreads out of their bounds (EG 234).

Therefore, for Pope Francis, everything is more than the part, and it's even more than their simple sum. So, you do not have to be too obsessed with limited and special issues. We must always widen our eyes to recognize a greater good that will bring benefits to all of us. But it is necessary to do so without evading, without uprooting. It is necessary to sink the roots in fertile land and in the history of your place, which is a gift from God. You work in the small, with what is near, but with a wider perspective.

Likewise, a person who maintains his identity, when he is cordially, integrated into a community, does not nullify but always receives new stimuli for his own development. It is not the global sphere that annuls, nor the isolated partiality that makes it sterile. (EG 235). The model is not the sphere, which is not superior to the parts, where each point is equidistant from the center and there are no differences between one point and another.

The pattern is the polyhedron, reflecting the confluence of all the partiality that keeps their originality in it. Both pastoral action and political action seek to bring in the best of each one in this polyhedron. Here the poor are included, with their culture, their projects and their own potentialities. Even people who can be criticized for their mistakes have something to do that should not be lost. It is the union of peoples, who, in the universal order, observe their peculiarities.
“It is the totality of people in a society seeking a common good that truly incorporates all” (EG 236).

Again, Pope Francis says that this principle also speaks to us Christians. The principle also speaks of "the totality or integrity of the gospel that the Church transmits to us and sends us to preach. Its full wealth incorporates academics and workers, entrepreneurs and artists, all of them. The 'popular mystic' welcomes in its own way the whole gospel and embodies it in expressions of prayer, fraternity, struggles for justice, freedom and celebration. Good News is the joy of a Father who does not want any of his little ones to be lost. Thus, the joy in the Good Shepherd bursts with the lost sheep and brings it back to his fold. The Gospel is a yeast that ferment all the masses and city shining on top of the mountain illuminating all peoples. The Gospel possesses a criterion of totality that is intrinsic to it. It does not cease to be Good News until it is announced to all, until it is fruitful and rejuvenating all man's dimensions, and until all men and women are united in the king's canteen. “Everything is superior to the part.” (EG 237).

Pope Francis has preceded the above discussion in the Evangelii gaudium, with the theme of "time and space" (EG 222ff). For the Pope, ‘time is superior to space.” In other words, time is larger than space. And here we recognize the fact that there is a bipolar tension between the fullness and limit. Fullness provokes the will to possess everything and the limit is the wall that stands ahead. "Time", viewed in the broad sense, refers to fullness as an expression of the horizon that opens before it, and time is the expression of the limit that is lived in a circumscribed space. Citizens live between the current situation and the light of the time, the largest horizon, of utopia that opens us to the future as the ultimate cause it attracts. From here emerges a first principle for progressing in the construction of a people: time is greater than space (EG 222).

According to Pope Francis, this principle allows us to work long-term without the obsession of immediate results. It helps to withstand difficult and adverse situations, or the changes of plans that the dynamism of reality imposes. It is an invitation to take the tension between fullness and bounds, giving priority to time:

"One of the sins sometimes encountered in socio-political activity is to privilege power spaces instead of time and processes. To give priority to space leads to becoming crazy to solve everything in the present moment, to try to take possession of all the power spaces and self-assertion. It means crystallizing the processes and pretending to stop them. To give priority to time means being concerned about initiating processes rather than possessing spaces. Time governs spaces, illumines them and makes them links in a constantly expanding chain, with no possibility of return. What we need, then, is to give priority to actions which generate new processes in society and engage other persons and groups who can develop them to the point where they bear fruit in significant historical events. Without anxiety, but with clear convictions and tenacity" (EG 223).

Finally, Pope Francis says that this principle also speaks to us Christians in a special way. The principle speaks of "the totality or integrity of the gospel that the Church transmits to us and sends us to preach. Its full wealth incorporates academics and workers, entrepreneurs and artists, all of them. The 'popular mystic' welcomes in its own way the whole gospel and embodies it in expressions of prayer, fraternity, struggles for justice, liberation and celebration. Good News is the joy of a Father who does not want any of his little ones to be lost. The Gospel possesses a criterion of totality that is intrinsic to him: it does not cease to be Good News until it is announced to all, until it is fruitful and rejuvenating all man's dimensions, and until all men are united in the king's canteen. Everything is superior to the part. "(EG 237).
**Conclusion**

What is the significance of the theological appraisal of the relationship between Church and politics we have discussed in this article?

In the first place, there is one major fact that emerges from the writings of the authors studied above: The mission of the Church to the society stems from its being the bearer of the Truth that saves. To shrink and hide from bearing witness to this Truth in political issues and governance of the society, is for the Church to deny its *raison d’être*.

Secondly, one major area of political presence of the Church in the society is in the area of teaching and moral reawakening of the conscience of those in political leadership of the state, and the citizens themselves. In this way, the Church reminds all of the necessity to abide by the rule of good governance, justice and fair play as well as respect of the fundamental human rights of all citizens irrespective of differences in ethnicity, culture, religion or philosophical persuasions. This is one area the Church in Nigeria has the greatest challenge in the present dispensation.

In fact, it is for this reason that neither the Church as an institution nor its bishops, priests and religious should get involved in partisan politics, as we argued in our previous article. Because as religious leaders, bishops, priests and religious are the society’s moral authority. Therefore, they should, at any time, be prepared to speak truth to those in corridors of power without fear or favor. Partisan politics weakens the moral authority of the Church and priests. As a moral institution and role model of the society, the Church and its priests should be overboard partisan politics or political manipulations.

This implies that as religious leaders and moral authority of the society, the Church and its priests cannot be involved in partisan politics. Neither should they use the pulpit in their churches for political campaigns or promoting of any candidate for political elections. They should as well not lend to political parties and politicians the ecclesiastical structures: buildings, premises or places of worship for promoting electioneering campaigns. To do so is for the priests to compromise their priestly ministry as impeccable religious and moral authority of the community in which they work as pastors, teachers or chaplains.

Inducement into partisan politics in any form at all to priests, is a temptation to compromise their authenticity of being bearers of the Truth that saves in the society. Such inducement, certainly, is not inspired by the Holy Spirit. It is simply, the work of the evil one!

Thus, these are some of the reasons why priests and religious, in their role as immediate collaborators of the bishops, are not allowed by the Canon Law of the Church to participate in partisan politics but rather to remain and function as the leaven of the society in all facets of human endeavor and societal leadership or organization. (cf. Code of Canon Law (1983), n.287).

But none of these considerations cancels the fact that the Church is a significant political presence in the society. As the most revered religious and moral authority of the society, the Church remains the most privileged institution to speak truth to political powers and other institutions of the state. On this lies the significance of the Church’s mission and political presence in the society.

*Francis Anekwe Oborji, a Roman Catholic priest, is Professor Ordinarius of contextual theology at the Pontifical Urbaniana University, Rome.*