

RESTRICTED

A PAPER PRESENTED

BY

COLONEL (VERY REV FR) JC AGBEDO  
COMMANDANT NIGERIAN ARMY CHAPLAINCY (RC)  
TRAINING SCHOOL

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**THE ROLE OF THE NIGERIAN MILITARY ROMAN CATHOLIC CHAPLAINCY SERVICES, DURING PEACE AND CRISIS CONDITIONS.**

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In Nigeria, the Army, Navy and the Air Force make up the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria, all with its own service chief, and at the highest echelon is the Chief of Defense Staff who is the highest-ranking military officer in Nigeria. The three Service Chiefs operate under the Chief of Defence Staff. And in the same order, the Nigerian military Chaplaincy is organized. We have the Army Chaplaincy, the Navy Chaplaincy and the Air Force Chaplaincy, all with their Director. For the time being, the most senior among the three Chaplaincy Directors, is appointed the Coordinator of the three Services by the Conference of Nigerian Bishops. The three branches of our military chaplaincy perform almost the same functions in their own different wings. The military Chaplaincy Services (RC) has been in existence for decades, and is as old as the Nigerian Armed Forces itself. The primary objective of establishing Chaplaincy services in our military is for the clergy to attend to the daily spiritual needs of officers and men in the military barracks, and as well their family members. Catholic Chaplains usually are ordained priests seconded to the military service by their local bishops. And in the recent time, the Nigerian Army Chaplaincy Services have encouraged young Catholic soldiers who have the zeal and interest of going to the seminary to becoming priests in the army to go to the Major Seminary for their priestly formation which usually last for 8 – 10 years. In the above situation, scholarship plan is granted to such soldier(s) for his(their) training expenses, and when ordained, he gets commissioned into the officer

cadre. So, in the interim, the Nigerian Army Chaplaincy Services (RC) uses two methods to get ordained priests into the Chaplaincy Services of the Army. However, the number of young soldiers who express interest to go to the Major Seminary to become priests are very minimal compared to the civilian priests coming into the Chaplaincy from their dioceses. Fortunately, I was one of those who went to the Major Seminary as a young and already enlisted soldier, and became the 2<sup>nd</sup> soldier in the Nigeria to be ordained a Catholic priest. The military apostolate is an interesting one, and has its challenging demands, most especially during crisis periods. In the light of the above therefore, this paper seeks to highlight the role of the Catholic Military Chaplains in the Armed Forces of the Federal Republic of Nigeria both in peace and crisis period, and also what our chaplains do to keep fit.

### **In Peace Time Operations**

During peace time, our Chaplains are engaged in regular priestly duties ranging from daily Masses, celebration of other sacraments of the Church, Eucharistic adorations, Bible studies, Retreats, Hospital visitations, counseling services, etc.

### **Celebration of Daily Mass**

The normal daily Masses are celebrated to keep the soldiers and their family always warm in faith. The masses we celebrate is a beautiful time to preach moral into our officers, soldiers and their family members. It is a period of giving them spiritual food and drawing them closer to God through the message we preach, giving them a great hope in the love of Christ our Savior. The celebration of Mass is the highest spiritual exercise which brings almost all Catholic members in the barracks together, especially

those who serve or working within the barracks. The Mass celebration also serve as a means of bringing together all Catholic members within the barracks community, thereby opening a wider door for good interactions and developing the spirit of good neighborhood.

### **Celebration of other Sacraments**

In peace time, we run our barracks Churches as a regular Catholic parish celebrating all the sacraments of the Church routinely. For instance, my church has the population of about 2400 worshippers, and we celebrate the sacrament of baptism once every month, and in each month, we baptize nothing less than 7 children.

Routinely we celebrate the sacrament of reconciliation once a week, but may attend to individuals just as the need arises. In every Saturday morning when I sit to hear confession, we have nothing less than 70 people waiting to confess their sins. It could be tiring when it is one priest Chaplain attending to such number, but in most cases, we endure it. However, it's interesting to see people prepared and willing to reconcile withier God.

We celebrate every other sacrament of the church just as the need arises, and always encourage officers and soldiers, and family members as well to make use of the privilege of church celebration of the sacraments to grow stronger in their faith and in God.

Other prominent work we embark on in our barracks apostolate include conducting of periodic retreats for worshippers, and creating more time for counseling services for those passing through emotional crisis. We also maintain a routine hospital visitation to

pray and counsel service personnel or their family members who are sick or may need counseling service. This singular act has yielded a lot of fruits as it rejuvenates their mind whenever we visit them on their sick bed. The above daily duties keep our chaplains busy every day in the barracks, as their services must be demanded on daily basis. However, the joy derived in being an instrument in the hand of God to bring succor to those in pain or suffering while discharging our duties can be consoling. And one important thing we can learn while carrying out our regular chaplain duties is that the pride we derive from being a military chaplains flows from our sincere spirit to do our work very well with love, bearing in mind that it's our own contribution for the growth and security of our country. Invariably, our job as military chaplains could be fulfilling when we give the whole of our love doing it.

### **In Crisis Time Operation**

In crisis time we perform almost every function as in peace time, but in an informal way, there is no formal setting for the celebrations of sacraments. Any of the sacraments could be celebrated any time and anywhere just to serve the spiritual needs of the officers and men in the battlefield. A good example could be the celebration of the mass, while in the jungle, there can never be a formal or regular church or an altar where mass could be celebrated; any carton or ammunition box could be used as an altar while mass is being celebrated, this I believe is a common experience for all military chaplains. While in Liberia and Sierra Leone for ECOMOG Peace keeping operations, I have celebrated masses using cartons and empty boxes as altar stand. The experience could be amazing. In the Boko Haram war currently going on in the Northeastern Nigeria, our chaplains have been very supportive as they combine both

their spiritual and counseling knowledge to keep our fighting soldiers reinvigorating, helping them through their services to maintain emotional stability and high morale to continue the battle without fear or breaking down. It is in real war situation that our work as chaplains becomes very challenging as we must always be with our soldiers to pray for them, counsel them, hear their confessions, anoint them if sick or in danger of death, and in some cases be with them while they are dying, and eventually bury them. The experience could be very devastating sometimes, but still, we have to be there to do the job we have been commissioned to do.

The Nigerian Army is believed to be the largest and most capable military in West Africa. This became manifest in her active role and achievements in almost all the peace keeping operations in the African sub-regions, and also in the current war against the Boko Haram insurgents going on now in Nigeria. This necessitated the much interest of the Nigerian Army to invest more on the training and retraining of chaplains and chaplain Assistants to be able to meet the urgent spiritual and psychological needs of our military. In the light of the above therefore, our chaplaincy training school is constantly engaged in the training program of our chaplains and chaplain Assistants to equip them better in order to be of greater help to our military. In a year, our training school run a number professional course geared towards making our chaplains and chaplain assistants better helpers, especially in the crisis areas. And with a good number of well-trained chaplains and chaplain assistants, our officers and soldiers in the fields are really taking care of.

## **WHAT WE DO ALWAYS TO KEEP FIT**

In our chaplaincy training school, we lay more emphasis on self-care. It will be an irony if we claim we are helping others to survive or manage their health and emotional injuries while we ourselves cannot take good care of ourselves in order to be strong enough to offer greater help to those we must help. Consequently, we uphold a number of measures to keep in check the stress or burnout or compassion fatigue, which may arise as we carryout our work.

### **a. Devotional Prayers and Meditation**

In our chaplaincy training school, we teach prayer methods, which includes group devotional prayers, and individuals having silent meditation before the Blessed Sacrament. We encourage our priest chaplains and chaplain assistants wherever they may be to maintain this common practice as we draw a lot of strength from such practice, even those in the war zones are encouraged to do the same whenever there is time to do so. Meditation is another area in our training that we give prominence, in our deep inner self, we transcend our threating situations as we encounter a greater power that may speak silently to our sub-consciousness. Meditation is a deeper prayer method that everyone who can is encouraged to get him/herself into doing it. The usual result after a good meditation period is inner refreshment and strength.

### **b. Creating Time to Rest and to Sleep**

The importance of catching some rest while we work is not negotiable. We lay much emphasis on the importance of making out time to have some rest whenever the time permits, and also to sleep sufficiently whenever we have the time. The theory of rest

and sleep therapy are very effective in calming our nerves and brain, rejuvenating and reinvigorating us to do our work effectively and sufficiently without breaking down.

**c. Physical Exercise**

As chaplains, our work could be very stressful, especial for those who serve in the barracks with large population of service personnel and their families, or those who are deployed in the battlefields. In some instances, we are tempted to work all through the clock, but the professional advice is for us to break up sometimes along the way to relax or to engage ourselves in some physical exercise that could burn off the accumulated emotional tension or stress in us. In our chaplaincy training school, physical fittingness is enshrined in our curriculum, this is done to create in our priest chaplains and chaplain assistants the importance of exercise themselves.

**d. Knowing your boundary**

Often time, chaplains and chaplain assistants are emotionally carried away by unreserved zeal and energy to work of help colleagues in crisis beyond their human strength could give. As its often the case, they will end up being fatigued, and even getting frustrated in their work. However, we educate our student chaplains and chaplain assistants to always draw boundary in whatever work they do, to give in their very best within the confine of their strength, and reserve some energy for tomorrow work. We emphasis the bad habit of working as tomorrow will not be, or as if without such a person, the work will not be done.

**e. Mixing well with other chaplains and friends**

A chaplain who is not sociable is bound to die working without having enough time to rest or friends to play with. We focus much attention on any of our chaplain or chaplain assistants living a withdrawn life in order to help him/her out of such state. In our training school, we do a lot to brake such shackle of inhibited life the whenever we notice that any of our student has such disease.

**CONCLUSION**

The above are some of the roles we play as military chaplains and chaplain assistants to facilitate effective chaplaincy work within and outside Nigeria, in peace time and as well in crisis moments for our Armed Forces and our country Nigeria.

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Col (Very Rev Fr.) JC AGBEDO