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**BOOK REVIEW**

**Congregation of the Holy Ghost Province of Nigeria. *Short Life of Bishop Shanahan, C.S.Sp.* Enugu: Snapp Press, 1996. 144pp. ISBN 978-2919-44-6.**

**By**

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Pope Francis in his message for the 54<sup>th</sup> World Communications Day released on 24<sup>th</sup> January, 2020 highlighted how the future is rooted in lived history, in these words: “So as not to lose our bearings, we need to make our own the truth contained in good stories. Stories that build up, not tear down; stories that help us rediscover our roots and the strength needed to move forward together.”<sup>2</sup> One of such stories is the story of our faith as taught, accepted and lived in the light of Bishop Joseph Shanahan’s (6<sup>th</sup> June, 1871 to 25<sup>th</sup> December, 1943) missionary activities in Southern Nigeria (c. 1902 to 1931). The Congregation of the Holy Ghost Province of Nigeria succeeded in couching the life and mission of this great soul in a book entitled *Short Life of Bishop Shanahan, C.S.Sp.*, after about seven decades of his death. This book has served as frequent reference point to scholars and sentimentalists either for decrying some excesses of the missionaries or for enlivening hope in the checkered history of religion in this part of the globe. **For this reviewer, it serves a multifaceted purpose that can be streamlined into this: to show that looking at the past with the intention to remember correctly helps a great deal in the improvement of the present and in the planning of the future.**

The *Short Life of Bishop Shanahan, C.S.Sp.* was published on 26<sup>th</sup> November, 1996 at the request of the then Archbishop of Onitsha, Most Rev. Albert K. Obiefuna. It has twelve chapters which are

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<sup>2</sup>[https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papafrancesco\\_20200124\\_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html](https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/messages/communications/documents/papafrancesco_20200124_messaggio-comunicazioni-sociali.html) (accessed: 16<sup>th</sup> September, 2021).

written in simple English grammar and in short sentences that make reading swift and comprehension easy. Chapter one is filled with the description of the early days of the young Shanahan in his country, Ireland – “The Island of Saints and Scholars”, “A land of faith and fearlessness” (pg. 6) where the influence of his family and teachers were positively eloquent. Thus, in several ways, nature and nurture prepared Shanahan for the future that waited him graciously. More so, like a carefully intended art of writing, chapter two is a too honest description of the Nigeria of late 14<sup>th</sup> and early 15<sup>th</sup> century. “Nigeria was a comparatively unexplored country. It has the reputation of being primitive...” Nevertheless, the author did not fail to add that “it had as much regard for law and justice as most of the exploiting powers.” (pg. 17). In Chapter three, the author gives Fr. Shanahan the freedom of speech to tell the story of his first days in Nigeria and to express the deep influence Fr. Lutz had on him. Shanahan was filled with the conviction that “those early pioneers were great lion-hearted men who surrendered their lives willingly to the greatest cause on earth.” (pg. 29). Chapter four mentions the appointment of Shanahan as the Prefect Apostolic of the Lower Niger Mission and the great measures undertaken by him to open-up this area. Chapter five is filled with the sojourn of Fr. Shanahan in the interiors of Southern Nigeria. His encounter with these people was cordial and mutual, thanks to his ‘self-understanding’ of the culture of the people and the hard work of the Catechists and Catechumens. Our text records, and history approves it too, that Fr. Shanahan was the first white man to visit about 60 percent of the towns he met. (pg. 51). Chapter six is a celebration of the endearing effects of the education system, put in place by Shanahan in various towns; as people became more educated, they understood the Gospel message the more. With this chapter, it is okay to articulate the catechetical method of Bishop Shanahan as ‘contextual theology’. It is credited to Shanahan that he understands the import of context in the application of the Gospel message. This understanding is technically what has become known today in theological ambiance as contextual theology that is, “an interpretation of Christian faith which arises in the consciousness of its context.”<sup>3</sup> There are many ways Shanahan appropriated this in his missionary activities in Southern Nigeria. Fr. Shanahan simply

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<sup>3</sup> PETER ONYEKWELU OKAFOR, “Editorial: Pope Francis: Apostle of Contextual Theology” in *Ministerium* Vol. 5, December 2019, xi.

understood the culture of the people and their interconnectedness with the reality of the spirit world. He based his theology on this and he won many over and had them secured as citizens of heaven. By every means, he taught Christ with the materials at his disposal. In all he did, there was a deep faith that inferred the object of his teaching. Chapter seven makes a careful recognition of the rapid expansion that has taken place through the establishment of schools and the move to open up new area in the Tiv country. Chapter eight narrates how faith was flourishing during the years of the Great War (1914-1918) and the air Flu. This flourishing was thanks to Frs. Liddane, Mellet and H. White who were powerful and known missionaries. Chapter nine is the biggest chapter of the book. Here the author recounts Fr. Shanahan's journey into the unknown territory of Cameroon. It recalls that one effect of the 1914/1918 war was the expulsion of Germans from Cameroon, making it possible for scarcity of Catholic Mission workers and the appointment of Shanahan as the Administrator of that area in 1917. Chapter ten practically re-echoes the old hymn: "the voice of prayer is never silent, nor dies the strain of praise away." God who works in a very mysterious way answered Fr. Shanahan's request for more priests when he went back to Ireland to attend to his then poor state of health. The whole event played out providentially as Fr. Shanahan was consecrated a Bishop in Maynooth College on 6<sup>th</sup> June, 1920. In Chapter eleven, there is what can rightly be called impressive moves to consolidate the faith in the Ibo (sic) land, now that schools and churches could be said to have been reasonably established. The last chapter (Chapter twelve) talks of the last days of Bishop Shanahan both in Nigeria and on earth. He has labored greatly for God – there were signs for this both from the sickness of his body and from the sweet joys of his soul.

The above presentation is only a bird's-eyes view of the entire book. Or it could technically be called a hurried synchronic reading of the text, that is, the explanation of the text as it stands. To be more objective, there is need for a diachronic reading. Diachronic reading draws us to the historical development of the time. As the Pontifical Biblical Commission (March 18, 1994) in her *The Interpretation of the Bible in the Church*, opines, diachronic reading allows us "to ask questions of texts by viewing them within a number of contemporary perspectives—philosophical, psychoanalytic, sociological, political etc." The relevance of the

*Short Life of Bishop Shanahan, C.S.Sp.* in Catholicism, especially in the South-Eastern Nigeria and the recourse scholars always make to it in their research and teaching, makes this undertaking a necessary one. Our text, considering the interpolations it made in the presentation of the life of Bishop Shanahan is at home with this basic fact in Catholic history and documents: evangelization cannot be said to have solidly taken root where and when indigenous church and clergy are lacking. Our text for whatever reason failed to consider some of the facts that stare other authors in the face. For instance, during the time of the missionaries, especially at the time of Bishop Shanahan, the need for Catholic priests was evident. If the campaign for the recruitment of seminarians were taken seriously, like that of pupils to the mission schools many indigenous priests would have been formed in Igboland much earlier than was the case.<sup>4</sup> There may also be many reasons why the author of our text circumvented some stories that show this lack of attention in the institution of local clergy. The stories of Frs. John Anyaogu and Blessed Michael Iwene Tansi suffice here, considering their influence then and now. Okwor observed that the formation programme under which the duo were subjected to was “agony not in the garden but on the road to the priesthood.”<sup>5</sup> Such an obvious appraisal of the heart of any missionary activity could not have escaped the searching eyes of the author of our text. For our text inferred that the missionaries, especially under Bishop Shanahan, though in urgent need of native priests for religious matters at least, made use of Catechist-teachers; and our text was honest enough to note that Bishop Shanahan was unrelenting in lavishing them with praise. Perhaps, it does strike a keen reader of the text (especially, the last three paragraphs of pages 58 to 59 of the book) that these Catechist-teachers who had families to fend for, do not even receive good remuneration – their reward surely is in heaven! To verify this, recourse was made to Ikenga Ozigboh who surmised that while these catechists received 60 franc per year that of the missionaries was at 1,000 franc.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> JOSEPH S. OKWOR, *The Priesthood from an Igbo Perspective: A Theological Study Aimed at Improving the Formation of Catholic Priests in Igboland* (Nsukka: Falladu Publishing Company, 1997), 22.

<sup>5</sup> JOSEPH S. OKWOR, *The Priesthood from an Igbo Perspective*, 31.

<sup>6</sup> OZIGBO, *Roman Catholicism in South Eastern Nigeria*, 187 quoted in ANGELO CHIDI UNEGBU, *The Institution and Training of Indigenous*

It could also be that our author has another motive for writing the history not just of ‘our’ own Shanahan but also of the Igbo people in such a carefully doctored fashion and intent that draws nothing out of its desire to averse history. There seems to be a dichotomy between the Igbo culture-loving Shanahan of *Short Life of Bishop Shanahan, C.S.Sp.* and Igbo culture-skeptics Shanahan of Isichei’s *Entirely for God*. For Isichei has maintained under many fora, that Bishop Shanahan has said that: “it would take six generations to form a genuine Igbo Christian.”<sup>7</sup> If this is the case, how much more forming a Catholic priest? [If we take a generation to be 35 years, then we are talking of 210 years here]. The consequences of this type of mindset lingered; such that, even when, finally Iwene Tansi became a priest in December 1937, the formation he had acquired in the seminary made him feel aversion for some of the customs of his people. Nnoruka rightly observed that “[Fr. Tansi’s] attitude to some of the cultural practices must have been one of his weak points” and this can be attributed to “their [the missionaries’] curriculum which was foreign to the custom and traditions of the people.”<sup>8</sup> Such cultural bias by the early missionaries may be understandable because the missionary activities in Africa went together with colonialism and slave trade; and the missionaries were also influenced by the Europeans’ misconceived understanding of Africans and its continent. But, that our author gave almost a contrary account of this is fishy. Another historian, Unegbu was even more concerned. For him “Shanahan’s delay in the institution of indigenous clergy in Igboland tends to cloud his missionary zeal and play down his invaluable role in the founding of the Church in Igboland.”<sup>9</sup> This same fact does not elude the eyes of another author, Ogudo. He avers that missionaries of the Southern Nigeria, [of whom Bishop Shanahan is a synecdoche], were rather interested in “building centers for the training of catechists and translators”

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*Catholic Clergy in South-Eastern Nigeria (1885 – 1970): A Historical Evaluation* (Ibadan: University Press Plc., 2019), 141.

<sup>7</sup> ELIZABETH ISICHEI, *Entirely for God: The Life of Michael Iwene Tansi* (Ibadan: Macmillan, 1980), 10. See also: “Seven Varieties of Ambiguity: Some Patterns of Igbo Response to Christian Missions.”

<sup>8</sup> SYLVANUS IFEANYICHUKWU NNORUKA, *Thy Kingdom Come* (Enugu: Victojo Production Service, 2010), 221, 185.

<sup>9</sup> ANGELO CHIDI UNEGBU, *The Institution and Training of Indigenous Catholic Clergy in South-Eastern Nigeria (1885 – 1970)*, 142.

than in the institution of local clergy.<sup>10</sup> It is equally possible that the book under review could not have intentionally evaded this history of cultural bias, but only lacked the space to capture the intricacies, complexities and unexplored nature of African culture. After all, this is simply ‘Short’ life of Shanahan, even when the author never promised us or alluded to a more detailed and elaborate life of Shanahan in future.

Nevertheless, the author of this ‘short’ book employed all the literary devices available to discuss the Nigeria of Shanahan’s days as unexplored and primitive. Granted that except for the interpretations of those words – primitive and unexplored – the Nigeria of the 15<sup>th</sup> century cannot be assumed to be anything near development; in fact, it was a comfortable society that was not really in need of improvement because it is closed-up unto itself. There was neither geographical division and real government nor roads in the Southern Nigeria of that time. All travels were by water (pg. 39). It was a Nigeria controlled by the Royal Niger Company whose only interest was economic exploitation of the West African Coast. The country had a dreadful name with its boiling sun, its fever-ridden swamps, fetid waterways and treacherous wild animals. Southern Nigeria in particular has an unenviable reputation; it was regarded as the most hopeless Mission in the whole Continent, or in the whole world for that matter (pg. 29). The Nigeria Shanahan met was also a Nigeria where slavery was allowed and openly carried out in the bank of river Niger. It was a Nigeria where the early missionaries lived in abject poverty as they spent much of their money buying off these slaves, who later became the Christians of those days. It was also a Nigeria where many of the early missionaries and the sisters of St. Joseph of Cluny died of Yellow Fever, Sleeping Sickness and Malaria. All these factors summed up to present this Nigeria, at the time of arrival of Shanahan, as a place where little or nothing of missionary tracks had taken place. Surely, from the perspective of mission, these and many other factors made Africa the most dreaded. As much as these descriptions may be necessary, one sees in them already an underlying supremacist agenda that simply summarized the life of a people, without adequate qualification, as primitive and

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<sup>10</sup> DONATUS E. O. OGUDO, *The Catholic Missionaries and the Liturgical Movement in Nigeria: An Historical Overview* (Paderborn: Verlag Bonifatius-Dr., 1998), 57-58.

unexplored. Those words remain the key of many actions and inactions undertaken by the early missionaries as presented by the text under review. There are two possibilities: it is either the author was painstakingly presenting the thoughts of Bishop Shanahan as the author has known him or the author was already infected by Eurocentricism of the time. At any rate, both perspectives represent inability to understand a people and a weird haste in condemning and relegating to the background what is so imperfectly understood.

More still, the presentation of history is already an interpretation which *de facto* bends to distortion and selective reading, even when it is not intended. The review appreciates this human natural impossibility to write disinterested history. In the Preface to his *Antiquities of the Jews*<sup>11</sup>, Flavius Josephus observed that there are several reasons for writing history, of which he elaborated on three. According to the learned historian, Josephus, people write history “to show their skill in composition; to gratify those that happened to be concerned in them; and finally, some are driven to write history, because they are concerned in the facts, and so cannot excuse themselves from committing them to writing, for the advantage of posterity.” The study of our text shows that the author has written the *Short Life of Bishop Shanahan, C.S.Sp.* for all the three reasons given above, except that the author was neither inflamed by the facts available nor was the author thinking of the advantage of posterity or those Aloysius Orjinta, C.S.Sp., in the introduction of the text refer to as “the generation that neither saw nor heard Bishop Joseph Shanahan” (pg.5). It is cleared that the book under review has enjoyed all the ‘intended’ inadequacies identified above, maybe because it was written at a time when the Cause for the Canonization of Shanahan, Claude Poullart Des Places and Francis Mary Paul Libermmann was being initiated. The author was thus making a presentation of history in a grossly biased manner informed by the results to be achieved, no matter how ‘holy’ that result appears to be. If the author had thought of posterity, it would have not been this way. History and our text are fair too in remembering that Shanahan brought with him some pastoral ingenuity. To bring the Gospel to the people, Fr. Shanahan did some mental study of the methods he was conversant with. These methods were: that of Christian Village, establishing school and

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<sup>11</sup>WILLIAM WHISTON (TRANS.), *The Life and Works of Flavius Josephus* (Oregon: Albany, 1996), 76.

institutions like hospital and dispensary (pg. 40). He ruled out that of the Christian village and that of establishment of institutions for some reasons – the former because of his lack of priests and the later because he considered it a slow means of attack on paganism. As debasing as these reasons may seem, let the interjections made previously serve. According to our author, Shanahan approved of the establishment of school as the key to the best evangelical approach to the Igbo; and to make-up for the visible lack of teachers, Fr. Shanahan through Brothers David and Otteran trained some boys from the schools at Calabar and Onitsha. These boys became catechist-teachers in many of these schools. Also, Fr. Shanahan engaged himself seriously with the evangelization of the hinterlands. He opened up schools and churches, first at Nri, followed by Nteje, Isingwu, Iboro, Awba, Uli (in Owerri province), Ozubulu, Umuoji and Abagana. In all these, mention must be made of the cordial and enormous inputs of Igwe Onyekomeli Idigo of Aguleri and Chief Ogalanya of Uli. Worthy of mention is the impact of Idigo's conversion. As Unegbu observed, Idigo's conversion became a miraculous event that was to boost the Igbo people's reception of the Catholic faith.<sup>12</sup> As much as our text showed apathy in saying it; without the robust show of faith and confidence of these men in the activities of the missionaries at those early days, the successes recorded by the missionaries would have been delayed, if not entirely abrogated.

Our author gave us every reason to envision Bishop Shanahan as an Apostle because Shanahan witnessed greatly to the truth. It is not a daring statement to say that Bishop Shanahan's catechetical formulae remain veritable technique for making Christ present and felt in every culture – his method anticipated Vatican II council (1962-1965) and in fact, from hindsight affirmed its [Vatican II's] plausibility and feasibility. From the dealings of Bishop Shanahan in the Igbo soil, our text shows, he is a follower of Christ in whose heart "nothing genuinely human fails to raise an echo."<sup>13</sup> Between the lines and spaces of our text are elaborate evidences of a Shanahan who notes keenly that "culture enlivens man through the

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<sup>12</sup> ANGELO CHIDI UNEGBU, *The Institution and Training of Indigenous Catholic Clergy in South-Eastern Nigeria (1885 – 1970)*, 91.

<sup>13</sup> VATICAN COUNCIL II, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, no.1.



cultivation of the goods and values of nature.”<sup>14</sup> However, with a diachronic reading of the text, one is brought face to face with some intentional inadequacies or subtle misrepresentation of history. However, the text makes us believe that these misrepresentations of history are so because the text is a ‘short’ history of a man whose exploits are long and because it is a text on a man whose cause for sainthood was on course. But, the diachronic reading of the text, even when our author fails to accept it in its face value, yields the conclusion that the light ignited by Bishop Shanahan in the lives of many Christians of the then Lower Niger and the Igbo people, particularly, cannot be put off by the human weaknesses that played out in the activities of the early missionaries. A more wholistic study of the text affirms that like Peter, the saints are not those who did not deny Jesus Christ, they are rather those who even in their denial of Him kept their gaze steadily on Him. And the testimony of our text about Bishop Joseph Shanahan is: “God was always on his lips, and ever in blessing and praise!” (pg. 8). Such testimony is all that is needed to be a saint!!

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<sup>14</sup> VATICAN COUNCIL II *Gaudium et Spes*, no. 53.