BOOK REVIEW

Dominic Cardinal Ekandem's
In the Lord's Vineyard: My Memoirs,
edited by Cosmas O. Nwosuh,
Iperu-Remo, Nigeria: Ambassador Publications, 2017
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by Iheanyi M. Enwerem, OP

As someone who is passionately interested in the state of the Catholic Church in Nigeria and had reviewed Fr. Cosmas Nwosuh's earlier work on Dominic Cardinal Ekandem,¹ I read with great interest and anticipation his edition of the Cardinal's autobiography, In the Lord's Vine Yard: My Memoirs (My Memoirs for short). Even with his added postscript (pp. 137-142), Nwosuh did not take anything away from the book living up to its title. He allowed the Cardinal to tell his entire life's story - starting with his humble family upbringing (pp. 1-11), then to his educational formation into the Catholic priesthood (pp. 12-30), followed by his early pastoral work as a priest and bishop (pp. 31-76) both of which catapulted him, so to speak, into prominence in both the secular and ecclesiastical positions he held (pp. 78-129), right into his retirement and eventual death (pp. 130-134).

One would need to read My Memoirs side-by-side with Fr. Nwosuh's just mentioned earlier work on the Cardinal to better appreciate the strengths and to easily discern the weaknesses of the book. One such strength is its corroboration and validation of most of Fr. Nwosuh's account on the Cardinal. More particularly, My Memoirs- a manual of sorts - is a 'must-read' for current and aspiring church pastoral agents on what pastoral ministry in the context of primary evangelisation in Nigeria entails. This is especially necessary these days when religion has largely become a comfort-seeking and money-making venture among many a priest and bishops in Nigeria as they seem to be more interested in material comfort than in genuine servant-leadership model of priestly service that Cardinal Ekandem epitomised (pp. 31-66, 94-119).

My Memoirs has some serious flaws most of whose roots are largely traceable, we believe, to a combination of human factors at the time of its dictation by the Cardinal. Of note here are his advanced age (p. 137) and fast deteriorating health (p. 131) both of which, we further believe, could have, in turn, put him in a state of possible memory loss. Otherwise, the Cardinal would be hard pressed to justify the rationale for the book’s major weakness, namely: a number of acts of omission or commission which Nwosuh factually recorded the Cardinal to have committed but which he was either economic with presenting the full account or simply passed in total silence in My Memoirs.

Two of such acts or decisions are worth highlighting. First, it is with regards to the pioneering formation of the Cardinal’s brain-child, the Missionary Society of St. Paul (MSP) (p. 80). On this matter, Ekandem’s preference was the foreign Irish-based St. Patrick’s Missionary Society and NOT the fully indigenous and large Nigerian-based Province of the missionary-oriented Congregation of the Holy Ghost Fathers (Spiritans). This preference raises some eye-brows, especially given the fact that by the time the choice was made the Nigerian Spiritans were already sending out missionaries to dioceses within and beyond Nigeria. As if to clear the doubt, his Eminence was quick to say he wrote “a letter to all congregations of priests working in Nigeria to see what congregations would offer to staff the seminary” (p. 80); but he was not forthcoming in letting his readers know what congregations he wrote, whether it included the Nigerian Province of the Spiritans and what response he got from them.

Second, it is the Cardinal’s account of his experiences and activities in Nigeria’s civil war years with no mention whatsoever of a major crisis that, during the same period, engulfed and nearly tore apart the Handmaids of the Holy Child Jesus (HHCJ) - the oldest/first and arguably the largest indigenous Congregation of women in Nigeria -with its headquarters in Ekandem’s then diocese of Ikot-Ekpene (p.109). He was totally silent on the treatment he and his fellow-Ibibio and confidant, the then Bishop Brian Usanga of Calabar diocese, together meted to the then HHCJ’s Superior-General, Mother Gertrude Nwaturuocha and her fellow Igbo-speaking Sisters in the Congregation - an obviously ethnic-based and biased treatment, the evidence of which Nwosuh fully presented from the meticulously written archival records of the HHCJs. That his Eminence could easily

\footnote{Ibid., 172-196.}
forget to comment on a crisis of that magnitude in his diocese at the
time and more so one whose initiatory role he played either opens
himself up to be accused of selective memory or puts into serious
question and doubt his obvious claims of being detribalised (pp. 114-
115) and/or of his neutrality in that civil war during and immediately
thereafter (pp. 66-76).

Another weakness of *My Memoirs* is the Cardinal's misleading
or, at best, inaccurate historical account of some events in Church and
Society in Nigeria. Two of such accounts are noteworthy here. First,
this regards his statement that "we established a new seminary at
Afaha Obong as an alternative to the existing one at Enugu" (p.71). To
start with, the establishment in question was not after the war and had
nothing to do with “the people around Enugu” feeling or not feeling
“favourably disposed towards our people [meaning his fellow non-
Igbos]” as the Cardinal seem to ethnically and divisively insinuate.
The truth of the matter is that the said establishment happened
during the war when, as a result of the fall of Enugu from Biafra to the
Nigerian Federal Forces, and for ease of accommodation, the two arms
(Theology and Philosophy) of the then Provincial Major Seminary,
Bigard Memorial Seminary, were relocated - one (Philosophy) to
Afaha Obong and the other (Theology) to Awomama - the Novitiate
House of the Spiritans. To make room for Bigard, the Spiritans moved
their Novitiate to Emekuku. And following the end of the war, Afaha
Obong metamorphosed into a brand new full-fledged major seminary,
the St. Joseph’s Seminary, and then permanently moved to Ikot-
Ekpene, with students and staff drawn from all the dioceses in the then
Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province.

Thus to avoid being seen as tribalistic or ethnically divisive, it
would have been helpful if the Cardinal had unambiguously clarified
who are the “we” he claimed to have “established the new seminary.”
The clarification is necessary because as of the time the above decisions
were made, the dioceses of the present-day Calabar Ecclesiastical
Province, where the Cardinal hails from and whose bishops he
insinuates to have made the decisions, were part and parcel of the then
Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province whose Bishops, including the then
Bishop Ekandem and now Cardinal, would have made the decisions.

The next misleading account of events by the Cardinal is with
regards to the birth of the Christian Association of Nigeria (CAN) as we
know it today. He made it appear to have been at the instance of the
Christian denominations "getting together" for the purpose of "doing away with hostility and enmity" (p. 90). But this is far from the truth. CAN's actual birth was at the instance of the then military government of General Olusegun Obasanjo whose Chief of Staff, Brigadier Shehu Musa Yar'Adua, coordinated the initiative - a fact this reviewer has addressed in great details in his extensively researched work on CAN.³ Also, My Memoirs misrepresents CAN's inauguration as its date of birth. While, technically speaking, August 27, 1976 was CAN's actual date of birth, its 'ceremonial inauguration' was in 1980⁴ and not even in 1978 as his Eminence stated in My Memoirs (p. 90).⁵

In the final analysis, My Memoirs's greatest contribution is its detailed history of the beginning of not only what is today Abuja - Nigeria's Federal Capital - but also the Catholic Archdiocese of Abuja. As Fr. Nwosuh rightly noted in his postscript to the book: "it is impossible to think of the city and archdiocese of Abuja without Cardinal Dominic Ekandem" (p. 139). He was indeed "a bridge between the [Church's] past and the present" (p. 137). As such, I should add, he was a colossus in the Catholic Church in Nigeria; and therefore not to read his My Memoirs is to have a very limited understanding not just of the Catholic Church in Nigeria and the administrative style of its leadership, the Bishops, but also the dynamics of religion and politics in the country.

There were a few editorial oversights in the text (pp. 16, 18, 30, 32-33, etc.), as well as poor binding of the book, all of which call for correction. These notwithstanding, Fr. Nwosuh has done Nigerians - Catholics and non-Catholics - well and proud to have keyed them into knowing the life and achievements of this, yes, understandably imperfect man but rightly described as “'one of the most prominent and important Nigerians of the last century'” (p. v).

⁴ Ibid., 83-84.
⁵ Ibid.