

Between Bishops and Tinubu

By Simon Reef Musa

Since the Catholic Bishops' visit to President Bola Ahmed Tinubu, the storm of reactions to the event has not abated. For a visit that was supposed to be private, the meeting provided an opportunity for the respected Catholic bishops to share their thoughts on the present suffering of citizens and the challenges the president must confront to alleviate Nigerians' pain. Though I have watched a clip in which the president defended INEC's neutrality and insisted that the economy is working, the media interview granted by John Cardinal Onaiyekan to a television station further widened the gulf in managing the fallout from a meeting that is gradually becoming a tool for opposition politicians. One of the presidential spokesmen, Sunday Dare, was first to state the visit, with a video clip showing the bishops arriving for the private visit. Thereafter, Cardinal Onaiyekan granted an interview in which he disclosed the contents of the discussion. Of course, anyone who goes about telling people that they are not being governed the way they ought to shall never lack attentive listeners; Onaiyekan's message resonated with the challenges of the times that have unleashed collateral suffering on Nigerian citizens. No one doubts that citizens are suffering under harsh economic conditions caused by the administration's current reforms, especially the removal of the fuel subsidy, which has driven up the cost of living. Only the willfully ignorant can disagree with the positions of the Catholic bishops whose trajectory of daring men in power has never been questioned. With the respected cardinal spilling the beans on what transpired at the Aso Presidential Villa, the responses from the presidential media minders inflamed public angst, which was slowly building into public outbursts. One of the presidential spokesmen, Temitope Ajayi, in a statement titled, 'Cardinal Onaiyekan's Abuse of Clerical Privilege,' condemned Cardinal Onaiyekan for publicly disclosing details of the closed-door meeting between the president and the Catholic rednecks, insisting that it was "fundamentally inappropriate" for Cardinal Onaiyekan to provide his personal account and interpretation of a private audience. Describing the assessments of the country's economic and security hardships as "neither scripture nor an article of faith", he dismissed the clerical fathers as too acerbic, caustic, and belittling of the administration's progress.

Going beyond what Cardinal Onaiyekan exposed in his television interview, Ajayi insisted that during the meeting President Tinubu addressed the bishops' concerns point by point. For instance, regarding their request to the president to return mission schools to their original owners, the aide quoted Tinubu as reminding them that it was a constitutional matter handled by state governors, not the Federal Government. The Special Adviser to President Bola Tinubu on Policy Communication, Daniel Bwala, has also dismissed the cardinal's post-meeting interview. The aide, whose believability has irredeemably plummeted since his appearance on an international

broadcast platform, joined the fray via his official X account. Accusing the cardinal of being "More Political Than Spiritual", the aide alleged that Cardinal Onaiyekan's critical comments regarding the 2027 general elections and state of the nation were mainly driven by personal political motivations rather than pastoral obligations. He accused the Catholic Church, spearheaded by Onaiyekan, of backing Labour Party presidential candidate Peter Obi during the 2023 elections. Then, Bwala ended with the tactless declaration that the cardinal "wasn't speaking for Christians; he was speaking for Catholics."

Considering what has transpired since the debate over what was said or not said during the meeting held between the president and the bishops, discussing what took place behind closed doors is inappropriate. This is more so because, less than six months to the commencement of the general elections, it was bound to be campaign material. The Catholic bishops are highly revered, and taking advantage of what Onaiyekan said could prove lethal against the government. To make matters worse, the presidency's responses were not well thought out. The media minders are struggling to debunk the reality caused by the present economic reforms. Of course, the presidential aides were not expecting the bishops to praise the president to high heavens amid suffering. However, unlike the combative responses from the presidential aides, the Secretary to the Government of the Federation (SGF), Senator George Akume, has stepped in to assuage frayed nerves over the matter. In a highly mature, measured, and conciliatory statement signed by his spokesperson, Yomi Odunuga, Akume moved away from personal attacks and refocused on the need for partnership and mutual respect between the fathers of the Catholic Church in Nigeria and the presidency. While acknowledging potential areas of conflict, there were also areas of agreement and disagreement in assessing the state of the nation. Still, these disagreements should not cascade down into disrespect. The closed-door dialogue between the president and the bishops, according to the SGF, was "candid, respectful, and constructive," not adversarial. The bishops know in their hearts that Tinubu has shown a demonstrable commitment to defeating the forces of insecurity, but the commercialization and politicization of insecurity remain Nigeria's greatest threats. As the drums of the 2027 polls grow louder, it is easier to lose focus and be inclined to douse the flames of opposing voices that may cast a bleak outlook on electoral victory. As president, Tinubu's job is not finished until all Nigerians are safe from economic hardship and the tragedy inflicted by some bloodthirsty elements. Tinubu should ensure Nigerians living at the bottom of existence are salvaged. Being the president only offers someone the opportunity to determine the destinies of millions of people. The need for Tinubu to listen more and direct his media minders to tighten their lips should not be compromised.