

THE ASABA MASSACRE:

HOW THE CHRISTIAN MAY REMEMBER IT

By Fr Patrick A C Isichei

The Unfortunate Events

Ma Nwabuno, my cousin, died a few days before the federal troops entered Asaba. On the day she was buried, the federal troops ran amok. They mowed down all my male uncles and cousins who came out to bury her: Leo Isichei, Rufus Isichei, Joseph Isichei, Okoalo Isichei, Cyril Isichei, Toi Gwam and a host of others.

Even my cousin, Fr. Biachi's father, who came to report these happenings to my father in order to urge him to protest against these senseless killing of innocent civilians to the brigade commander, never got back to his home. He too, was murdered by a Nigerian soldier. By this time my father, who had mobilized the willing and remaining population of Asaba people, was already leading them, with a dance team, to welcome the Nigerian Army. Totally unknown to him at the time, that army had already killed many of his civilian brothers and relatives and were right then spraying his own home with showers of bullets. In her eye-witness and heart-rending account, They Died In Vain, my sister tells how she lost the battle to save her youngest brother, Osi Isichei, and his friend, Calistus to the same Nigerian army, right at the very time my father was passing in front of his house in transit to welcome that very Nigerian army. She was later to return to bury her brother, in a shallow grave she dug with the assistance of a Nigerian soldier.

My then oldest brother, Emmanuel Isichei, fared no better. His clever wife disguised him as a woman, to enable him join the group welcoming the Nigerian army. He did; but its members were never allowed to welcome the brigade commander. Instead, they were led to Ogbesoa, where the males were executed en mass. The females and children were temporarily quartered at the Catholic maternity, before being transferred to St. Patrick's College, Asaba. The ordeal became too much for my second oldest sister, Mrs. Josephine Udenwaka Isichei Nworah, who died there. This horror story of my extended family and relatives can be equivalently repeated for their own families by any Asaba person who stayed back to welcome the Nigerian soldiers.

The Big Question

Why? Why should Christians come together to remember such heinous carnage of wanton and reckless destruction of innocent civilians? Why? Why should they keep alive the memory of their dead in these circumstances? Won't it inflame their tempers and

arouse revenge sentiments? Isn't it wrong for them to be angry at this rank injustice against their beloved dead? First, let it be said that such recalling is a time-honored practice of the Christian tradition. Accounts of the martyrdom of saints abound and are well documented in the history of the Christian church. But of course they were always bereft of bitterness, resentment and revenge feelings; and were often accompanied by prayers for their persecutors.

Anger as an Emotion and what to do with it.

Anger as an emotion is a gift of God. It is given to us for our protection, safety and security. It unites the body in personal defense through the fight-or-flight action. Purely as an emotion, it is a gift of God which is good. This physiological anger is not in question here. The point is what to do with the inevitable state of arousal, achieved by what we do here. Is there any sense in which this gearing up can serve us as humans and then specifically as Christians?

In these days where many psychiatrists, psychologists, social-workers, anthropologists, and other health professionals are warning about the health hazards of repressed anger and of losses that are not grieved, a forum like this affords us an opportunity to grieve the murder of our beloved ones in the interest of our health. Elizabeth Kubler Ross in Death and Dying outlined the five stages in which dying tends to occur. These are:

1. Denial, 2. Anger and 3. Bargaining,
4. Sadness and Depression,
5. Acceptance and Resolution.

She and many others have taken these stages and applied them to the grieving process. So an occasion like this allows us to grieve legitimately. It enables us to console one another and to foster our health. Ahaba, Ndo nke-nmu-na'unu. Ndonu. (= Asaba indigenes cheer up).

Making Sense of the Senseless

Somewhere in Germany, at the scene of some of the worst atrocities by the Nazi, a museum has arisen. It was financed largely by the German government and documents in gory, disgusting details the inhumanity of its peoples during that unfortunate chapter of German history, the Second World War. Germans did not gloss over it. They did not engage in quibbles or excuses or in witch-hunting. They regretted it and underscored their

determination never ever to repeat that chapter of their history by displaying in full view these words:

*"Those who do not remember the past
are condemned to repeat it"*

How I wish our Nigerian government can find a corresponding courage. A basic function of government is to protect the lives and property of its citizens. The failure of the Nigerian government to accomplish this in parts of the federation, contributed in no small measure to precipitate our civil war. In it, Asaba people suffered so senselessly and are still finding it difficult to make sense of it. So far, no Nigerian government has helped us make sense of the senseless mass murder of our peoples. Instead, we are noticing the same lamentable inability to secure the safety of life and property in many parts of our country. Our hearts go out to the people of Plateau State and other states where this is becoming increasingly intermittent. One good way to make sense of the senseless murder of Asaba people is to seek to prevent what happened to us from befalling any other people; for

*"Any man's death diminishes me, because I am
involved in mankind; and therefore never send to know
for whom the bell tolls; it tolls for thee" - John Donne*

More and more Asaba voices need to join those who are saying that this basic function of government has to be accomplished for all our peoples. If by mounting this pressure, we manage to secure this, then, our dead would not have died in vain. If not, no one should rule out the reorganizing of our country, so as to enable this basic task of governance to be accomplished, within the boundaries of different entities by those who agree to it.

It's Specifically Christian Dimension

All that we have said thus far can of course be adopted by the Christian. But they are not the exclusive preserve of the Christian. Let me now turn to how a Christian can, precisely as a Christian, remember our murdered relatives.

The Christian can never be anybody's victim. He believes that the Providence of God permeates every happening and that his heavenly Father who lets all of them be, plans or permits all of them for his own good:

*"We know that in everything God works for good with
those who love him, who are called according to his
purpose (Romans 8:28)*

No event can ever reach him except through his loving hands:

“Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation or distress or persecution or famine or nakedness or peril or sword? [...] nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of Christ Jesus, our Lord. (Romans 8:35 – 39)”

God our Father wields those who hurt our beloved ones like a person wields an axe, and he does so for our own good. We therefore look beyond our persecutors and murderers to receive our hurts from God, who uses them to train and discipline us:

“For what son is there whom his father does not discipline [...], but he disciplines us for our good, that we may share his holiness.” (Hebrews 12: 7 – 10).

But what is God’s holiness? St. John assures us that it is love. His training and discipline makes us into love and enable us to share his divine nature of love. He uses the wrong other humans do to us to bring pain into our lives as a discipline, and not as a punishment. That is why we cannot be anyone’s victim.

For this reason Jesus orders us to:

“Rejoice always, pray constantly, give thanks in all circumstances; for this is the will of God in Christ Jesus concerning you.” (1st Thessalonians. 5:16-18)

He also instructs us to pray for our enemies:

“But I say to you: Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he made his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends his rain on the just and on the unjust.” (Matthew 5:44-45)

And he challenges us to:

“Strive for peace with all men and for the holiness without which no one will see the Lord. See to it that no one fails to obtain the grace of God; that root of bitterness spring up and cause trouble, and by it many become

*defiled; that no one be immoral or irreligious.” (Hebrews
12:14 – 16)*

In a word, Christians have a dream which they must keep alive at all times. They dream about the Prince of Peace whose peace will someday conquer the whole world. They dream about the reign of this king in his kingdom on earth as it is in heaven. That king's reign will be a period when swords will become plowshares. He has commissioned us to keep alive that dream. We are to ensure that our hearts are bereft of every hostility. Therefore, there can be no better way of remembering and honoring our dead on this day than to free our hearts of all bitterness and hostility. For unless his kingdom is established first in our hearts, it stands no chance to take root anywhere else on earth. This is particularly pertinent, since it was the inability of the Nigerian army to manage its hostility which led to the massacres at Asaba.

Conclusion: A Scholarship Fund

Asaba is the home of many highly educated persons. Following the terrible murders, some Asaba children cannot afford to pay their way through school. Our people are beginning to lose their traditional appetite for education. I urge that a Scholarship Endowment Fund be established for the benefit of our children. It should seek to resurrect the interest of our children in education, and to award scholarships to deserving indigent children, as concrete outcome of remembering our assassinated relatives.

Let me conclude with another German story.

At the end of the Second World War, the bishops in a given region of Germany were trying to reconstruct one of the famous cathedrals. It had been raised to the ground. They had concluded their deliberations and determined how to raise the funds, when one of the bishops reminded them that the crucifix in front of the cathedral had lost its limbs and money would be required to fix it. One bishop wanted it pulled down completely. Another wanted it's fund raising postponed to some other time. But a third bishop was for leaving it without its hands and feet, but with the following words displayed around it:

“I am Jesus of Nazareth.

I have no hands and no feet.

Be my hands and my feet.”

May God raise up men and woman among Asaba indigenes and their well-wishers to be the hands and feet of Jesus so as to set up this scholarship endowment fund. Thank you and may the good Lord bless you and your families. Amen.