

# **THE CURRENT SOCIO-ECONOMIC SITUATION IN NIGERIA AND ITS IMPACT ON NIGERIAN PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS IN DIASPORA**

**By**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

Nigeria, Africa's most populous nation, is a country of immense diversity, rich cultural heritage, and profound religious significance. With a population exceeding 200 million, Nigeria is home to

a vibrant mix of ethnic groups, languages, and religious traditions, including Islam, Christianity, and African Traditional religions (ATR). Among these religions, Christianity – particularly the Catholic Church – has played a pivotal role in shaping the nation’s social, cultural, and moral fabric. However, Nigeria’s socio-economic landscape is mired in a multifaceted crisis characterized by soaring inflation, escalating unemployment, rampant insecurity, and profound socio-political instability. Government policies, such as the removal of fuel subsidies and efforts to balance mounting fiscal deficits, have exacerbated the cost of living, leaving millions struggling to meet basic needs. These challenges have not only hindered the country’s development but have also deeply influenced the lives and practices of its religious communities.

Religion, as a cornerstone of Nigerian society, often serves as both a refuge and a response to the hardships faced by individuals and communities. For many Nigerians, faith provides solace in times of economic distress, a sense of hope amid insecurity, and a framework for moral and ethical guidance in the face of corruption. At the same time, religious institutions, including churches and mosques, have taken on active roles in addressing socio-economic challenges, providing education, healthcare, and poverty alleviation programs where government efforts fall short. These institutions form a critical safety net for communities in distress, underscoring the indispensable and transformative role of religion in Nigeria’s turbulent environment.

Amid this challenging backdrop, the Catholic Church has historically stood as a beacon of hope, championing social justice and community development through robust charitable programs and socio-religious teachings. However, the current socio-economic hardships have significantly strained these traditional structures. Economic deprivation and political instability have led to a surge in public discontent and as reported by ACI Africa, Catholic priests, religious men and

women have increasingly become “soft targets” for kidnappers<sup>1</sup>, who erroneously perceive them as custodians of considerable wealth, while at the same time, clergy face heightened pastoral demands amid dwindling church finances and shrinking donation bases. This dual burden of insecurity and financial constraints has expanded the roles of Catholic priests and religious beyond spiritual nourishment, compelling them to actively engage in community relief, advocacy, and social services under perilous conditions.

Hence, the purpose of this paper is to examine the impact of Nigeria’s current socio-economic situation on priests and religious, with a particular focus on those in diaspora. By beginning with a general analysis of how socio-economic challenges affect religious practices across various faiths, this paper will narrow its focus to examine the specific experiences, roles, and responses of Catholic priests and religious in this complex environment. The paper is thus guided by the following questions: What are the key socio-economic challenges facing Nigeria today? How do these challenges influence religious practices and institutions across different faiths? What is the specific impact on Catholic priests and religious, especially those living in diaspora, and how do they respond to these challenges?

## **NIGERIA’S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES**

Nigeria is Africa’s largest economy and one of its most resource-rich nations, but she finds herself grappling with a cascade of socio-economic challenges that have far-reaching implications not only for its economy but also for its social and religious sectors. Despite its vast natural resources and potential, the country is mired in a cycle of hardship marked by rising inflation, persistent unemployment and worsening poverty, which has been on the rise over the past several years. This

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<sup>1</sup> ACI Africa. “Seminary Rector on Why Priests in Nigeria have become Soft Targets for Kidnappers.” ACI Africa, 27 January 2025.

economic instability is compounded by widespread insecurity – ranging from banditry and terrorism to kidnappings – that undermine public confidence in governance and erode the social safety nets that many citizens once relied upon. These challenges are deeply interconnected, creating a climate of uncertainty and distress that affects every aspect of life in the “Giant of Africa”.

Rising inflation and economic hardship have become defining features of Nigeria’s socio-economic landscape in recent years. The country’s inflation rate has soared to double digits, driven by factors such as currency devaluation, supply chain disruptions, and the removal of fuel subsidies. The latter policy, implemented in 2023, led to a sharp increase in the price of petrol, which has a cascading effect on the cost of transportation, food, and other essential commodities. For the average Nigerian, this has meant a significant erosion of purchasing power, with many struggling to afford basic necessities. The economic hardship is further compounded by stagnant wages, leaving millions vulnerable to poverty and deprivation. This economic malaise has spilled over into all aspects of life.

Also, high unemployment rates and job insecurity are another critical challenge. Nigeria’s unemployment rate stands at over 33%, with youth unemployment even higher at around 53%.<sup>2</sup> This alarming figure reflects the inability of the economy to create sufficient jobs for its rapidly growing population. The informal sector, which employs a significant portion of the workforce, offers little job security or benefits, leaving workers exposed to economic shocks. The lack of employment opportunities has fueled frustration, particularly among young people, many of whom have resorted to irregular migration or illegal activities – ranging from internet fraud, hock-up

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<sup>2</sup> "Nigeria Unemployment Rate 1991-2024." Macrotrends, [www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/nga/nigeria/unemployment-rate](https://www.macrotrends.net/global-metrics/countries/nga/nigeria/unemployment-rate). Accessed 11 Jan. 2025.

(prostitution) to ritual killings – as a means of survival. Not only do they engage in these illicit and immoral activities, but they tend to provide justification for their illicit immoral actions.

Furthermore, worsening poverty and wealth inequality further exacerbate Nigeria's socio-economic challenges. Despite the country's vast natural resources, over 40% of Nigerians live below the poverty line, surviving on less than \$2 a day.<sup>3</sup> Wealth inequality is stark, with a small elite controlling a disproportionate share of the nation's resources while the majority struggle to make ends meet. This disparity is evident in the contrast between the opulence of urban centers like Lagos and Abuja and the grinding poverty of rural areas and urban slums. The concentration of wealth in the hands of a few has fueled resentment and undermined social cohesion, creating fertile ground for conflict and instability.

Amidst these economic challenges, we have the prevalence of security challenges including banditry, terrorism, and kidnappings, which have become a pervasive threat to Nigeria's socio-economic stability. In the northern regions, Boko Haram and other insurgent groups continue to wreak havoc, displacing millions and disrupting economic activities. In the northwest, banditry has become a lucrative enterprise, with armed groups targeting villages, highways, and even schools. Kidnappings for ransom have also surged, with Catholic priests and other religious leaders increasingly becoming "soft targets" due to the perception that they have access to wealth.<sup>4</sup> These security challenges have not only claimed countless lives but have also deterred investment, disrupted agriculture, and further strained the already fragile economy.

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<sup>3</sup> National Bureau of Statistics. Poverty and Inequality in Nigeria: 2019. National Bureau of Statistics, 2019, <https://www.nigerianstat.gov.ng/elibrary/read/1092>.

<sup>4</sup> ACI Africa. "Seminary Rector on Why Priests in Nigeria have become Soft Targets for Kidnappers." ACI Africa, 27 January 2025.

Government policies and economic mismanagement have played a significant role in exacerbating Nigeria's socio-economic challenges. Corruption remains a pervasive issue, with public funds often diverted for personal gain rather than invested in infrastructure, education, or healthcare. Fiscal policies, such as the removal of fuel subsidies, have been implemented without adequate measures to cushion the impact on vulnerable populations. Additionally, the lack of diversification in the economy, which remains heavily reliant on oil exports, has left Nigeria vulnerable to fluctuations in global oil prices. These policy failures have eroded public trust in the government and further deepened the sense of despair among citizens.

### **GENERAL IMPACT OF NIGERIA'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CRISIS ON RELIGIOUS INSTITUTIONS AND CLERGY**

Nigeria's persistent socio-economic challenges have not only strained public institutions and widened the gap between rich and poor but have also deeply impacted religious organizations and their leaders. As the country struggles with high inflation, skyrocketing unemployment, and rampant insecurity, religious institutions (long seen as sanctuaries of hope and social solidarity) are increasingly forced to shoulder responsibilities that extend well beyond spiritual guidance. In many cases, these institutions are grappling with severe economic strain, an increased demand for social services, and profound psychological stress on clergy, all while confronting shifting patterns of religious participation and ethical dilemmas that test the very core of their mission.

One of the most immediate effects of Nigeria's socio-economic challenges is the economic strain on religious organizations. Traditionally, churches, mosques, and other faith-based groups have relied on donations, tithes, and community fundraising to support a wide range of activities, from maintaining places of worship to funding charitable initiatives. However, the same economic

forces that afflict the general population (such as the removal of fuel subsidies, currency devaluation, and fiscal mismanagement) have led to a steep decline in disposable incomes. As a result, congregants find themselves unable to contribute at previous levels, leaving religious institutions with shrinking financial bases.

In addition to declining donations, religious organizations are also facing challenges in fundraising and community support. Many Nigerians, struggling to meet their own basic needs, are unable to contribute to church projects or charitable initiatives. This has forced religious leaders to explore alternative funding sources, such as partnerships with non-governmental organizations (NGOs) or international donors. However, these partnerships often come with their own challenges, including bureaucratic hurdles and the risk of compromising the independence of religious institutions.

The financial sustainability of these organizations is now a major concern, with many leaders worried about how they will continue to operate in the face of ongoing economic hardship. Some religious groups have resorted to austerity measures, such as reducing staff salaries or cutting back on non-essential programs, to stay afloat. However, these measures often come at the expense of the quality of services provided, further straining the relationship between religious institutions and their communities.

Similarly, as the Nigerian government struggles to provide basic services, religious organizations have taken on an expanded role in addressing the material needs of their communities. Churches, mosques, and other faith-based groups have become critical providers of social services, including food aid, healthcare, education, and poverty alleviation programs.

However, this increased demand for social services has placed a heavy burden on religious institutions. Many are now operating beyond their capacity, stretching their resources thin to meet

the growing needs of their communities. In some cases, religious leaders have had to divert funds from other areas, such as pastoral programs or infrastructure projects, to support their social outreach efforts. This shift in focus has raised questions about the long-term sustainability of these initiatives and the ability of religious organizations to balance their spiritual and social missions.

The increased demand for social services has also led to a blurring of the lines between spiritual ministry and socio-economic welfare. In many communities, religious institutions are now seen as the primary providers of social support, rather than the government. This has created a situation where congregants expect their churches or mosques to address not only their spiritual needs but also their material concerns, such as access to healthcare, education, and employment. While this expanded role has strengthened the bond between religious institutions and their communities, it has also placed additional pressure on clergy and religious leaders, who must now navigate the complex interplay between spiritual and material responsibilities.

Furthermore, the socio-economic crisis in Nigeria has also taken a toll on the mental and emotional well-being of religious leaders. Clergy members, who are often on the front lines of addressing the needs of their communities, face immense pressure to provide both spiritual guidance and practical support. This dual responsibility can lead to psychological stress and burnout, particularly in the face of limited resources and overwhelming demand.

In addition to the pressures of their pastoral duties, religious leaders are also grappling with the emotional impact of witnessing the suffering of their congregants. Many priests and religious report feeling overwhelmed by the sheer scale of the needs they are called to address, from poverty and hunger to illness and displacement. This sense of helplessness, combined with the constant demand for their time and energy, can lead to feelings of exhaustion, anxiety, and even depression.

The psychological strain is further exacerbated by the personal sacrifices that many clergy make. Living modestly and often under conditions that are far from conducive to comfort, they bear the weight of their communities' expectations even as they confront their own limitations. In some cases, this has led to a decline in the quality of pastoral care, as overworked and stressed clergy struggle to meet the needs of their congregants.

Economic hardship has also led to changing patterns of religious participation in Nigeria. For many individuals facing acute financial hardship, faith can serve as both a refuge and a source of hope. In some areas, this has led to an increase in church attendance and a resurgence of communal prayer meetings, as people seek solace and support in the face of relentless adversity. Conversely, in other contexts, the inability to contribute financially or participate fully in communal activities has led to a sense of alienation and disengagement from organized religion.

At the same time, there has been a rise in the popularity of religious movements that promise material prosperity, a trend known as "prosperity preaching."<sup>5</sup> These movements, which often emphasize financial blessings and miracles, have attracted large followers among Nigerians seeking hope and relief from their economic struggles. However, the rise of prosperity gospel and similar movements has also sparked controversy, with critics accusing some religious leaders of exploiting the desperation of their followers for personal gain. This has led to ethical and moral dilemmas within the religious community, as traditional faith groups grapple with how to respond to the growing influence of these movements.

The socio-economic crisis in Nigeria has also given rise to a number of ethical and moral dilemmas for religious institutions and clergy. One of the most pressing issues is the commercialization of

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<sup>5</sup> Krinsky, Sam. "Pentecostal Prosperity and the Political Economy of Contemporary Nigeria," *NASA Journal of Arts and Social Sciences*, vol. 5, no. 1, 2023.

religion, with some leaders accused of using their positions for financial gain. This includes the sale of religious artifacts, the promotion of “miracle” services, and the solicitation of large donations from vulnerable congregants. Such practices have eroded public trust in religious institutions and raised questions about the integrity of their leaders.

Another ethical challenge is the growing involvement of religious groups in politics. In a country where religion and politics are deeply intertwined, some religious leaders have formed alliances with political figures in an effort to secure resources or influence policy. While these alliances can provide short-term benefits, they also risk undermining the moral authority of religious institutions and alienating congregants who feel that their leaders have become too closely tied to the political establishment.

Finally, the socio-economic crisis has forced religious leaders to confront difficult questions about how to allocate limited resources. With so many Nigerians in need, priests and religious must often make tough decisions about who to help and how to prioritize their efforts. This can lead to feelings of guilt and moral conflict, particularly when they are unable to meet the needs of everyone who comes to them for assistance.

### **IMPACT OF NIGERIA’S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES ON THE CATHOLIC CHURCH WITH SPECIAL REFERENCE TO HER PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS**

The socio-economic crisis in Nigeria has had a profound and multifaceted impact on Catholic priests and religious, who are often at the forefront of addressing both the spiritual and material needs of their communities. From financial struggles and increased pastoral demands to security threats and ethical dilemmas, the challenges facing Catholic clergy are immense. These pressures not only affect their ability to carry out their pastoral duties but also raise concerns about the sustainability of their vocation and the future of the Church in Nigeria.

The economic downturn in Nigeria has placed significant financial strain on Catholic dioceses and religious orders, directly impacting the lives and work of priests and religious. Many dioceses rely heavily on donations from congregants to fund their operations, including the maintenance of churches, schools, hospitals, and other social services. However, with rising inflation and widespread poverty, many Catholics are unable to contribute as they once did, leading to a sharp decline in church revenues.

As the socio-economic crisis deepens, Catholic priests are facing increased pastoral demands from their congregants, many of whom are struggling to cope with poverty, unemployment, and insecurity. In addition to their traditional roles as spiritual leaders, priests and religious are now expected to provide material support, such as food, shelter, and financial assistance, to those in need. This expanded role has placed significant pressure on clergy, who must balance their spiritual responsibilities with the practical demands of addressing their communities' socio-economic challenges.

The rising expectations also highlight the tension between the spiritual and material roles of the priesthood. While many priests and religious are committed to addressing the socio-economic needs of their communities, they must also ensure that their pastoral duties are not neglected. This balancing act can lead to feelings of burnout and frustration.

One of the most alarming impacts of Nigeria's socio-economic crisis on Catholic priests and religious is the growing threat of violence and kidnappings. In recent years, priests and religious have increasingly become targets of criminal elements, who view them as "soft targets" due to the perception that they have access to wealth.

The psychological toll of these security threats cannot be overstated. Many priests and religious live in constant fear of being targeted, which affects their ability to carry out their pastoral duties effectively. In some cases, they have been forced to limit their movements or avoid certain areas altogether, leaving their congregants without spiritual care. The trauma of being kidnapped or witnessing violence against fellow clergy can also have long-lasting effects on mental health, leading to anxiety, depression, and even post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD).

The Church has responded to these threats by increasing security measures, such as providing escorts for priests traveling to high-risk areas and installing surveillance systems in church facilities. However, these measures are often costly and difficult to implement, particularly in rural areas where resources are scarce.

The socio-economic crisis has also placed Catholic priests and religious in the midst of complex ethical dilemmas, particularly as they navigate the intersection of faith, politics, and social justice. On one hand, they are called to advocate for the poor and marginalized, speaking out against corruption, inequality, and injustice. On the other hand, they must avoid being drawn into partisan politics or becoming too closely aligned with political figures, which could compromise their moral authority and alienate their congregants.

## **THE RESPONSE OF THE CATHOLIC CHURCH AND FURTHER ADAPTATION TO NIGERIA'S SOCIO-ECONOMIC CHALLENGES**

In response to the socio-economic challenges, the Church in Nigeria has undertaken a comprehensive approach to support communities and promote sustainable development, leveraging its extensive network of institutions and deep-rooted commitment to social justice. The Church's comprehensive strategy includes but are not limited to charitable initiatives and

educational and healthcare services. Through these efforts, the Church not only alleviates immediate suffering but also fosters long-term development and empowerment.

The Church plays a critical role in advocating for social justice and policy reform. Through the Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC), she promotes good governance, human rights, and social equity. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, in particular, has been vocal in calling for government accountability, transparency, and policies addressing poverty and insecurity.

At the heart of the Church's response to Nigeria's socio-economic crisis is a deep theological commitment to faith, resilience, and hope, guided by Catholic Social Teaching. The Church's mission is rooted in the belief in God's providence, inspiring Catholics to trust in His plan despite adversity. The Church does not in any way subscribe to prosperity gospel as neither Christ nor his apostles did.

Furthermore, the Church offers a message of hope, emphasizing solidarity, subsidiarity, and the preferential option for the poor, as can be seen in Her principles as outlined in her social teachings. These principles encourage communities to support one another, empower local initiatives, and foster a shared responsibility for social transformation.

### **Impact on Nigerian Priests and Religious in Diaspora**

The socio-economic challenges facing Nigeria have had a significant impact on Nigerian priests and religious individuals in the diaspora. Many are afraid to visit the country due to insecurity, economic instability, and corruption, leading to the establishment of Nigerian religious communities in countries around the world.

These communities face unique challenges, including:

- Maintaining cultural and religious identity: Nigerian priests and religious individuals in the diaspora often struggle to maintain their cultural and religious identity in the face of dominant Western cultures.
- Supporting members: Many Nigerian religious communities in the diaspora struggle to support their members, who may be facing economic and social challenges.
- Advocating for justice and human rights: Nigerian priests and religious leaders in the diaspora often advocate for justice and human rights in Nigeria, particularly in the face of insecurity and corruption. <sup>4</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Nigeria's socio-economic challenges have created a complex and often dire environment for its citizens. In this context, religious institutions have emerged as critical pillars of support, providing both spiritual solace and material assistance to communities in distress. The Church's role has thus expanded far beyond its traditional pastoral duties, as it now shoulders the burden of addressing socio-economic needs in the face of dwindling resources and escalating demands.

The impact of these challenges on Catholic priests and religious is profound. They face financial strain, increased pastoral responsibilities, and the ever-present threat of violence, all while navigating ethical dilemmas and the psychological toll of their work. Yet, despite these obstacles, the Church has demonstrated remarkable resilience and adaptability. Through charitable initiatives, educational and healthcare services, and advocacy for social justice, the Church continues to serve as a beacon of hope and a catalyst for positive change in Nigeria.

However, the sustainability of these efforts remains a pressing concern. The financial constraints faced by dioceses and religious orders, coupled with the growing demands on clergy, highlight the

need for innovative solutions and stronger partnerships. The Church's commitment to Catholic Social Teaching, with its emphasis on solidarity, subsidiarity, and the preferential option for the poor, provides a robust framework for addressing these challenges. Yet, it also calls for a renewed focus on financial sustainability, vocational formation, and the mental well-being of clergy.

Looking ahead, the Catholic Church in Nigeria must continue to adapt to the ever-evolving socio-economic landscape. This will require not only strengthening its internal structures but also fostering collaboration with government agencies, international organizations, and other faith-based groups. By doing so, the Church can amplify its impact and ensure that its mission of faith, hope, and social justice remains relevant in a rapidly changing world.

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