

**“UT OMNIA UNUM SINT”: EXAMINING THE OSU-CASTE SYSTEM IN THE  
LIGHT OF JOHN 17:21**

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**Abstract**

*This work is an exposition of the Osu-caste System of the Igbo of Southeast Nigeria in the light of Christ's prayer in John 17:21. It seeks to expose the ills of the system as well as the consequences for Christian unity. The discourse begins with an introduction that sets the background of the study. It briefly discusses the Igbo people in their traditional political context. The Osu-caste system, its origins and effects are discussed. Next is an exegetical study of John 17:21 and some magisterial teachings on Christian unity. Recommendations are made for the government, Church, Igbo people and the Osu and the work is concluded.*

**Keywords:** Igbo, Osu, caste system, unity.

**Introduction**

Human society has never been free of distinctions between races, sexes, religions and even social classes. The Bible, which has some of the oldest records of human history, shows the origin of human racial and tribal distinctions dating as far back as Pre-Aramean times, when God put confusion into the minds of the people of Babel, by giving them different languages (Gen. 11:1-9). From that time, the human race has always found one basis or the other to distinguish between people. Some of these distinctions have been not only inter-racial or inter-tribal, but even among people of the same ancestral origin and those who share the same customs and beliefs. One form of classification that has existed among some human societies is the caste system. This form of stratification, which is not common among all human societies, tends to place people

in a particular society in hierarchy. Probably, the most popular of human caste systems is the Indian (Hindu) caste system which had four main castes into which everyone was categorized. These are called *asramas* which means stages of life (Olivelle, 101). In a descending order, at the very top were the Brahmins: the priests, scholars and philosophers. The second highest caste was the Kshatriyas: the warriors, rulers and those concerned with administration. Thirdly, came the Vaishyas: the traders, merchants and farmers. Fourth were the Shudras: the labourers and servants. Below all these were the Untouchables. These did not belong to any class and were seen as outcasts (Kelley, 2021). The Hindu caste system is comparable to class structures in other countries, except that this Indian system has been rigidly enforced and has lasted for two or three thousand years. Although both Buddhism and Jainism sought to reform the caste system, they were unsuccessful. It was the Industrial Revolution that finally had an impact on the centuries old custom (Cummins, 2003). The adoption of the Indian constitution in 1949 outlawed the system in 1950 (HURIWA, 2001). However, it still remains a deeply ingrained social structure, especially in rural India. This form of social classification is not common to the Indians alone. Among the Igbo of Eastern Nigeria, a caste system also exists.

### **Who are the Igbos?**

The Igbo (Ibo) are one of the three major tribes of Nigeria, the other two being Hausa and Yoruba. Nigeria is made up of over two hundred and fifty ethnic groups and has three major religions: Christianity, Islam and African Traditional Religion. Nigeria also has thirty-six states which are divided into six geo-political zones. The Igbo inhabit five of these states: Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo, and some parts of Delta and Rivers states. They are the major occupants of the South-East geo-political zone. They are known to be adventurous and are found in many parts of the world to which they migrate in search of greener pastures. Commerce and farming were the major occupations of the Igbo, but with the dawn of western education, many contemporary Igbo now seek formal education and white-collar jobs. Most Igbo also are Christians, with the Catholics, Anglicans and Methodists taking the highest population (Ezeala, 2000:5). The Igbo are blessed with a rich cultural heritage. This cultural heritage is made up of customs (Odin'ala) and Traditions (Omen'ala) that affect the entire life of the Igbo race. While all Igbos speak one language (Igbo), there are many dialects which have given rise to many disparities. However, the Igbo have many other things in common, such as dressing, music, dances, festivals, chieftaincy titles, marriage practices and a general world-view. The Igbo are also very religious. As Mbiti aptly puts it "The African is notoriously

religious by nature, and he carries his religion wherever he goes" (1975:27). This is very true of the Igbo. While in ancient Igbo-land almost every community had its local deity, thus we have such names as Alaogbaga to Mbaise, Chukwu of Arochukwu, Igwekala of Umunoha, Arishi of Okija, Efulu of Ukene and Amadioha of Uratta among others, the Igbo do not fail to carry the same devotion into Christianity. The Igbo are also a highly moral people. Thus, acts of immorality: theft, disrespect, murder, adultery or incest, among others are highly disapproved of and those who indulge in such practices are severely punished.

Onwubiko describes the Igbo polity from the angle of the Freeborn (the Diala) who were the indigenous population in Igbo community. These he describes as grouped into three grades: the Umuama who were the lowest rank and were made up of all males who were not married no matter their age, because they had not undergone some specific initiation rites which conferred adult status (1993:11); the Amala made up of all grown-up, married men and women in the village, and they formed the core of Igbo polity. They made the Iwu-Amala, law and custom, in collaboration with the elders (11); and Ndi Okenye also called Ndi Ichie. They were the real old members of the community and they were the Ofo holders, title holders and among them, were the priests of the various deities. Ndi Okenye were the custodians of tradition and customs and interpreted the traditional laws. These three groups described above were the Diala and this was because the burial of their umbilical cords was marked by specific rituals whose social significance was great (Uchendu, 1965:59). These rituals incorporated one into a particular family lineage and thus into a clan. A man without a clan was a man without citizenship. His family could not avenge his death or claim damages on his behalf. It was this concept that gave rise to the Diala - Osu social complex.

### **The Osu-Caste System**

Osu is a name in Igbo language which means one connected with the deity or the divine in a special way, as opposed to the ordinary man, born under natural and normal circumstances of his 'chi' (Aligekwe, 1991: 137). The word 'chi' is an Igbo word meaning god or deity. As described by Arinze, "An Osu is a person who is specially consecrated to spirit that has a shrine. He is symbolically immolated, and is then left to live on as a slave of his *alusi*." (177). The Osu-caste system is an old practice which prohibits inter-marriage between certain Igbo youths by classifying some of them as Diala (Freeborn) and others as Osu, Ohu, Ume and Akwasa (Outcasts). This was born out of an antiquated Igbo belief that these people (outcasts) were dedicated to the gods and therefore not fit for decent human association (Ezeala,

2000:5). It is however amazing to notice that issues of Osu - Diala, only come up when marital issues arise. Osu - Diala protagonists hardly raise such issues when looking for favours such as loans and job opportunities from those they tend to classify as Osu. In his book *Facing the Osu Issue in the African Synod: A Personal Response*, Oliver Onwubiko describes the Osu as alienated from the human word. He states: "In the case of an Osu, he became a living victim, living but dead; a child that would never grow into adulthood in Igbo- socio-cultural context (Onwubiko, 1993:10). Onwubiko proceeds to discuss the life of the Osu which involved his being renounced at the sacrifice and thus seen as dead even if his life was spared. Anyone who had contact with him was ritually impure and thus people did not transact business with him. At death, an Osu was thrown into the evil forest and no formal funeral was organized for him. As time went on, the Osu developed into little communities and even large ones and began to organize themselves and, increasing in wealth and status, began working towards self-emancipation.

The questions now rise: How, in a world so advanced in matters of science, formal education and human rights, should a practice like the Osu-caste system still subsist? Why among a tribe which is predominantly Christian, should belief in a tradition that has its basis in fetish practices that involved human sacrifice and marriage to idols, still cause sleepless nights to young men and women who have the intention of tying the nuptial knot? Is it possible that the Church is not doing enough to put an end to the practice? Where is the belief in the power of the blood of Jesus Christ shed on the cross and the waters of baptism? These questions point out the fact that, despite the roots Christianity has taken in the life of the Igbo, there is still a cling to traditional religious beliefs even by those who in a strict sense did not live when such religious practices flourished. This cling to such idolatrous practices while remaining Christian by nomenclature, is tantamount to syncretism: the combination of the beliefs and practices of more than one religion. If the Church is the sign of God's universal salvation for all humankind, then such differences as race, tribe, social class or caste should not cause division within her ranks. But since they do, then something is yet to be done.

### **Origin of the Osu-Caste System**

There are many opinions as to the origins of the Osu-caste system. This is because there is no established period for the origin of the Osu-caste system (Egekonye, 1999:53). We shall look at three origins of the Osu.

- i. The Osu in his Original Context: Onwubiko traces the Osu system to the practice of human sacrifice in Igboland. The Osu was a person sacrificed to

a deity by a community, a group of people or a family. This was to restore harmony by pacifying a deity. Also some gods in Igboland demanded human sacrifices during festivals to remove the abominations committed in the communities within the past year. Because this was aimed at the general security of the community, each individual, irrespective of age, contributed towards the general purse and with this money, the victim was purchased. Thus, everyone was involved in this sacrifice during which a victim was immolated or renounced as a living victim, carrying the iniquity of the people. Such a victim personified the rage of the god. His presence reminded the people of the rage of the god and the antecedents of his sacrifice (1993:24). Onwubiko cites the Emekuku community in Owerri Local Government Area of Imo State, where the gods Onuokwu, Onuabosi, Onuochasi, Okitankwo and Orumurukwa owned and demanded cult-slaves (Osu). During the Mgbugbauzo festival in this community, the actual dedication of an Osu took place and the elder Osu rededicated themselves to their cults by partaking in a virtual meal which contained unpeeled breadfruit as a necessary ingredient.

- ii. The Oracular Origin of Osu: Onwubiko also traces the origin of the Osu system in some communities to the role of their powerful oracles. He gives the Umunaoha people who worshipped Igwekala, and the Aro who worshipped Ibinukpabi (later called Chukwu) as examples. These oracles demanded slaves as fees for consultations and sometimes even the consultants were seized by the oracle as in the case of Ibinukpabi. The Aro were also known for selling Osu into slavery. This was not the case however, in the cult of Igwekala, where they had some degree of importance and were called Umuosu Igwekala. They were allowed to marry and live in Umunaoha. Also, Osu could mean one who had a religious function to perform, sometimes in proxy, for the agents and priests of the oracular spirit, the Ibinukpabi of the Aro (28).
- iii. The Contractual Origin of the Osu: Sometimes, people, especially the Ohu, were driven by circumstances into becoming Osu. This was because of the fear the Ohu had that he may be used in the funeral rites of his master and this makes him take refuge in the shrine of a deity as the only safe place. He consoled himself saying "*Kama m nwuo-anwuo, m efuo-efuo, onye furu efu na eri nri* - Instead of death, let me be lost. A lost person eats." In a like manner, miscreants who saw that society was out to get rid of them took to being Osu. By this act, one opted out of the secular world into the sacred and lost one's rights and stand in the Igbo society (29). Onwubiko, then describes the process of dedicating

someone to a god as Osu, called "Idu Osu" which meant escorting an Osu-to-be to the deity, citing examples with the Umuekunne community of Ngor Okpala Local Government and the Ezinihitte community both of Imo State (30).

### **The Effects of the Osu-Caste System**

The Osu-caste system has so many ills. It is a dreadful and inhuman culture and this is manifested in its hostility, barbarism and fetishism. Let us look at some of the ills, both ancient and modern, of the system which makes it repulsive to every decent mind.

- a. Religious Sacrifices: Human beings were used as sacrifices to appease the gods, instead of cows, goats and other animals. These people were seen as sin-bearers, who carried the sins of the society, similar to the Jewish practice in Leviticus 16:1-22. But in the Judaic case, a goat was used (the Escape Goat). A great tragedy in the Osu-caste practice was the actual shedding of the victim's blood and sprinkling it on the altar of the gods in a process called Symbolic Immolation. This was for two purposes: to give the Osu a perpetual scar, and to quell the fury of the deity with the blood shed at its shrine. This immolation may involve cutting off the victim's ear, or making a slight cut in the lobe of his ear (Arinze, 2008:194). The injustice here is that the victim who was innocent, was made to suffer for the guilty involuntarily. Also, the Diala needed to obtain favours from the gods frequently and for this, burnt offerings were necessary. Of course, the Osu were the most adequate objects for these sacrifices. Thus, the Osu's blood was used to cleanse the land, make requests and avert calamities in Igboland. The Osu was simply put, an object to be used for the good of the Diala. The dignity accorded to his life, was that accorded to the life of an animal.
- b. Cultural Alienation: The Osu, by virtue of being glorified "animals", were denied political, commercial and religious rights, after all animals do not rule, trade or pray. The Osu had no freedom and were made to live under fear and in indecent conditions. Thus, they were not allowed to bathe regularly or shave their hair, for fear that these may attract the jealousy of the gods or spirits they belonged to (178). In Owerri and its environs, the Eke market day was reserved to the Osu to go to the market. On such days, they were allowed to bathe. They bought and sold with fellow Osu. Many fanatical Diala did not come out of their homes on such a day in order not to incur bad luck by greeting an Osu. In fact, in some communities, it was forbidden for the Osu to step out in the morning. This was to avoid having to greet them and acquire bad luck. It was

a bad omen to greet an Osu in the morning and to avoid it, they were forbidden from coming out in the morning. While at funerals such respects and honour are accorded the Diala, as shooting canons and guns, it was forbidden to fire even one shot in honour of an Osu. It was also a taboo to weep for an Osu or to bury one in daylight. They were also denied such positions as chief priests and more especially, traditional rulers.

- c. **Political Alienation:** The Diala did all possible to prevent the Osu from emerging as leaders. The authority of the Osu was limited in kindreds where the Osu shared membership with the Diala. A younger Diala had greater say than an older Osu. This attitude manifested in more contemporary political cases. For instance, it was rumored that during the 1979 gubernatorial race in Imo State, the chances of one aspirant dropped because another one spread the rumour that he was Osu. Thus, through the years, political aspirants in Igboland have tried to take undue advantage of their opponents by branding them Osu. This was a very unhealthy development.
- d. **Social Victimization:** In the traditional Igbo community, the Osu faced untold segregation, victimization and intimidation. Unlike the Ohu, who could later become a member of his master's household, the Osu remained an outcast. The Ohu could marry his master's daughter or get married to her master's son, but such a privilege was not reserved for the Osu. Some Ohu got married to people of other classes to gain freedom, but the Osu was a perpetual slave. A status transferred to innocent descendants. The system therefore nurtured arrogance, apathy and selfishness. The Diala treated the Osu with contempt and disdain. The Osu had to avoid being the first to greet a Diala in the morning to avoid bringing him bad luck, The Osu lived in secluded, isolated and distinguished places, usually close to the juju shrine. They were seen as subhuman and inferior and should as much possible avoid communication with the Diala (179). Even in more recent times, it has been known that some Osu have been denied stalls in markets which they helped the Diala to build. The foolish irony of this is that this syndrome does not stop a Diala from seeking the Osu's aid in time of need.
- e. **Marital Quarantine:** The Diala - Osu dichotomy showed itself a lot in marital issues in ancient times. Today, we can say that of all the ills already mentioned, this is the most persevering of all. Due to the influence of civilization, western education and Christianity, a lot of the superstitious beliefs that pervaded the Osu practice have been eradicated. Many things are now overlooked. Thus, it is common to see the Osu and Diala eat from the same plate, play, hunt, work and live together. Even sexual intercourse between the Osu and Diala is a common thing.

However, the problem of intermarriage between Osu and Diala is still a burning issue. No family permits their son or daughter to get married without carrying out some preliminary investigations which include family background. A lot of Diala Christian families still forbid marriage between the two classes. Many still believe it is against Omenaala (tradition) for a Diala to marry an Osu. Even when the parents of those concerned do not care about such customs, pressure from relatives and friends could make them take a stand against such a marriage.

Some Diala Christians are so hypocritical, as narrated by Kingsley Ikenobi of Lagos, who reveals how a traditional ruler in Anambra State who had been advocating for inter-marriage between the Osu and Diala., refused to allow his own daughter to marry an Osu (Ikenobi, 1987). For a Diala to accept marriage to an Osu was considered as condescension, and often attributed to the charming of the person by the Osu. Love to some Diala, is not a charm strong enough to make a Diala insist on marrying an Osu. However, it is acknowledged that some people, especially Christians, have dared to face the custom head-on by getting married to those called Osu. Some have defied customs, traditions and the status quo, by marrying across the barrier. Some have succeeded, while others have not due to the resulting hostility, ostracism, rejection, castigation and even disinheritance from their parents and people. Sometimes Osu are seen by people as diabolically possessed and as common among Pentecostals and Charismatics, they have been recommended for exorcism and deliverance. Thus, the Osu-caste practice has caused unimaginable pain, sorrow, agony and torture to people even in our modern world.

## **“*Ut Omnia Unum Sint*” (John 17:21) and the Church's Teaching on Unity**

### **4.1 The Greek Text, Transliteration and Translation of John 17:21**

#### ***Greek Text***

ἵνα πάντες ἐν ᾧσιν,  
καθὼς σύ, πατήρ, ἐν ἐμοὶ καὶ ἐν σοί,  
ἵνα καὶ αὐτοὶ ἐν ἡμῖν ᾧσιν,  
ἵνα ὁ κόσμος πιστεύῃ ὅτι σύ με ἀπέστειλας

#### ***Transliteration***

*Hina pantes hen ᾧsin,*  
*Kathōs su, Patēr, en emoi kagō en soi,*  
*Hina kai autoi en hemin ᾧsin,*  
*Hina ho kosmos pisteuē hoti su me apesteilas*



***Translation***

So that they may all be one,  
as you, Father, are in me and I in you,  
that they also may be in us,  
that the world may believe that you sent me.

**Immediate Literary Context and Delimitation of John 17:21**

***Immediate Context***

The immediate literary context of John 17:21 is chapter 17. This chapter falls within the Book of Glory/Exaltation. This Book is broken into the Farewell Discourse (13-17) and the Passion Narrative (18-20). John 17:21 is collocated in the Farewell Discourse. The Discourse has a preamble (13:1-30), discourse proper (13:31-16:33), and then Jesus' final or parting prayer (17). The passage this paper focuses on nestles in the parting prayer section. Consequently, John 17 can be interpreted as a prayer that contains the Lord's 'last will' (Malan, 2010:3 1-10). This prayer begins with Jesus praying for himself, then prays for his disciples, for all believers, and then closes his prayer.

***John 17:21: Delimitation, its Message and History of Interpretations.***

John 17:21 is delimited in verses 20-24. In John 17:6-19, Jesus offers two key prayer matters for his followers; that they be kept faithful to him and to God's revealed name or put differently, that they be kept from contamination. In John 17:21, He particularly prays the disciples and believers yet to come may remain perfectly one in love, even as he and the Father are one. This oneness will be crowned by the inseparable union in heaven of Jesus and all his disciples (Okure, 1998:1493).

John 17:21 crowns the prayer in verses 20-24. And in Latin, the text is described as “Ut Omnia Unum Sint”. It has attracted multiple interpretations. This work shall focus on a few as it concerns this work.

In his long farewell discourse, which spans the whole of the fourteenth through to the seventeenth chapters of John's gospel, Jesus prays twice for the unity of his disciples. In John 17:11, he prays “*Ut unum sint* - that they may be one”. Here he exclusively referred to his disciples at that time. In John 17:21, he prays “*Ut oninia unum sint*: that they may all be one”. He referred here to his would-be disciples. While the first verse remains at the back of our minds, we shall focus on the second, which was his prayer for both his Apostles and his would be disciples which include all present-day Christians.

Commenting on the unity for which Christ prayer, William Barclay opines that it

is not a unity of administration or organization, and not in any sense an ecclesiastical unity, but a unity of personal relationship (Barclay, 1991:218) It was a unity of love for which Jesus prayed, a unity in which men loved each other because they loved him, a unity based entirely on the relationship between heart and heart. It was precisely that unity that was to convince the world of the truth of Christianity and of the place of Christ. It is more natural for men to be divided than united. It is more human for men to fly apart than to come together. Real unity between all Christians would be a “supernatural fact which would require a supernatural explanation” (218). May we note here that Barclay was an Anglican theologian, who, like most Anglicans, was anti-hierarchical and anti-ecclesiastical in approach. He was right in talking about unity of love and the heart, but the unity for which Christ prayed is both of the organization of the Body of Christ and ecclesiastical authority, especially in the face of Jewish antagonism and persecution.

For Matthew Henry, this prayer implied three things:

- i. That they might all be incorporated in one body: It was a prayer that the Father may look upon all Christians as one, and ratify that great charter by which they are all embodied as one church.
- ii. That they may all be animated by one Spirit: Union with the Father and the Son is obtained and kept up only by the Holy Ghost.
- iii. That they might all be knit together in the bond of love and charity, all of one heart: All that are sanctified have one divine nature and image; they all have a new heart, and it is one heart. (Henry, 1991:2033).

For Raymond Brown et al, there are two dimensions to the expression of unity as they emerge in this gospel. The vertical dimension grounds unity in the relationship between Jesus and God and the horizontal dimension sees to the command to love one another, the expression of that relationship among members of the community (Brown, 2000:979).

From the opinions of these biblical scholars and from our own personal reflections, we can conclude that the unity for which Christ prayed for all Christians, was to be devoid of any racial, sexual, social, or even cultural distinction. All believers were to be united in mind and heart, for his own sake and this was to be a testimony to the world that he was sent by the Father (John 17:27).

Another New Testament figure who dwelt a lot on the issue of this oneness of Christians was St Paul. In his letter to the Galatians he wrote: “For as many of you as were baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek; there is neither slave nor free; there is neither male nor female; for you are all one in Christ Jesus”

(Gal. 3:27- 28). Baptism is therefore a rite where a person achieves union with Christ and publicly expressed his commitment. Note that St Paul used the expression “put on Christ” as though Christ were a garment. Joseph Fitzmyer S.J. suggests that Paul either borrowed a figure from Greek religions, in which the initiate identified himself with the god by donning his robes, or used an Old Testament expression for the adoption of another's moral dispositions or outlook (Brown, 787). Whatever the case, by virtue of baptism, all who call themselves Christians adopt one spirit and become one. Secondary differences vanish through the effect of this primary incorporation of Christians into Christ's body through one spirit

All Christians now stand on the same level. As no one is accepted on account of any national, sexual or social advantages, he enjoys above another, neither is anyone rejected for the lack of them. All who sincerely believe in Christ, irrespective of race, sex, or condition, are acceptable to him and beloved children of God through faith and baptism. St. Paul expresses this in his letter to the Ephesians, when he says: “So then you are no longer aliens and sojourners, but are fellow citizens with the saints and members of God's household” (Eph. 2-19). All Christians, as members of God's household, are entitled to all the rights of the members of a family. St Paul put this teaching in action when he wrote to Philemon pleading for Onesimus (Phlm. 1:12-14), who was evidently a former slave of Philemon, for whom Paul pleaded that he may be accepted back into his master's household, no longer as a slave, but as a free member of the family. We can now say that St Paul's idea of oneness in Christ did not only imply unity, but also equality for all Christians.

In the light of the biblical exegesis carried out above, we can see that the Osu-caste system has no place in Christianity. Christ's prayer for oneness among his disciples definitely would not permit a cultural system that creates division among people of the same religion and tribe. On the contrary, Christ sought the unity of all his followers whom he hoped would come from all races on the face of the earth, for he mandated his disciples to go out and make disciples of all nations (Matt. 28:19). The Osu-caste system is an anti-thesis of this mandate. We may tolerate the ignorance of our fore-fathers who did not hear the Gospel message of Christ, but we cannot excuse those of us who have been privileged to hear it and claim to profess its beliefs and yet live contrary to its dictates.

### **Magisterial Teachings on Christian Unity**

The Church, in confirmation of the teachings of Christ and St Paul already seen above, has never ceased to emphasize the oneness of all Christians. In her Dogmatic Constitution on the Church: *Lumen Gentium*, she states:

There is a common dignity of members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity. In Christ and in the church, there is then, no inequality arising from race or nationality, social condition or sex, for there is neither Jew nor Greek (32).

Thus, the Catholic Church teaches that all Christians are one and equal in all dignity and value irrespective of what secondary qualities are appended to them. She goes on to establish this equality of all men and women in her Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern *World: Gaudiuin et Spes*, when she says:

All men are endowed with a rational soul and are created in God's image; they have the same nature and origin and, being redeemed by Christ, they enjoy the same divine calling and destiny; there is here a basic equality between all men and it must be given ever greater recognition... But forms of social or cultural discrimination in basic personal rights on the grounds of sex, race, colour, social conditions, language or religion, must be curbed and eradicated as incompatible with God's design (29).

The Church therefore urges all her children, to unite in fighting any practice that does not defend the unity and equality of peoples. She does not reserve this equality to the baptized alone, but to all men and women, by virtue of their being created "*Imago Del*". She encourages all people to spare no effort in banishing every vestige of social and political slavery and to safeguard human rights under every political system.

Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Redemptor Hominis*, stresses the unity of Christians, which arises from the mystery of Jesus Christ. This is because Christ united himself with each man, and thus made all men and women members of the human family (cf. 13). The Church therefore sees her fundamental task in enabling that union to be taught and renewed continually. In his Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Asia*, Pope John Paul II says "Simplicity of life, deep faith and unfeigned love for all, especially the poor and outcast, are signs of the Gospel in action" (34). He goes on to say that:

In addition, untold numbers of people suffer discrimination because of their culture, colour, race, caste, economic status, or because of their way of thinking. ...I join the Synod Fathers appealing to all nations to recognize the right to freedom of conscience and religion and the other basic human rights. (34)

In the light of Catholic teachings also we can see that the Osu-caste system is anti-Catholic and in fact anti-Christian. The Church has made it a point of emphasis to

encourage unity and equality among all peoples. She vehemently opposes any doctrine, culture or belief that fosters or encourages disunity. That is why her efforts in the anti-apartheid fight are well applauded. She also encourages her ministers to speak up against such evils should they rear their heads in one's environs.

### **Recommendations**

Having examined the Osu-caste system, its origins and effects, as well as Christian unity in the light of scripture and magisterial teachings, we make the following recommendations.

#### **A. For the Government:**

- i. All State Governments of South-Eastern Nigeria should excavate from history documents on the Colonial ban of the Osu-caste system and emphasize their legal power and the application of the law on matters concerning its ban to the letter.
- ii. Since there is a political body such as the Summit of South-East Nigerian Governors, it should be used to get the message across to all Igbos that it is no use seeking unity for political goals such as the quest for an Igbo president or the yearn for an independent Igbo nation (Biafra), if a cankerworm such as the Osu-caste system, the greatest seed of Igbo discord is not uprooted and exterminated. Traditional rulers should not be left out of this.
- iii. The State Governments of South-eastern Nigeria should see that at no time and on no account should any Igbo son or daughter be denied any fundamental human right because he or she is said to be Osu. Anybody who tries to be so should be prosecuted even if it be the parent(s) of a person who appeals to the issue at marital discussions.
- iv. We call on the government because it has a greater power of legislation than any other human institution, to bring the sledge-hammer down on the Osu-caste system and all its supporters. This is because "though legislation may not change the heart", says Martin Luther King Jnr, "it can restrain the heartless" (King, 1963).

#### **B. For the Church.**

- i. The Church should continue to be at the forefront of the battle against the Osu-caste system. She should expose it whenever possible and denounce it.
- ii. The Church in Igboland should be able to make legislations with penalties against anyone who refuses to let go of this evil tradition. Where necessary such people should be denied ecclesial privileges until they are repentant.
- iii. Ecclesial institutions such as schools and other ecclesial organizations such as the Knights, Parish Councils and Pious Associations should be the arm of the Church in this battle and any member of these who dares to support it should be

expelled from their ranks.

- iv. The Church should concentrate in a special way on the youth through youth organizations, encouraging them to disregard the issue and feel free to marry anyone of their choice even if their parents do not support the union for reasons of the Osu-caste system.

C. For the Igbo People:

- i. All Igbo should study the Osu-caste system and its origins. This is because a good study of this will make them know how they have let themselves be chained by an ancient and unfounded horrific tradition and how they have been guilty of its propagation.
- ii. All Igbo should extend their hands to the Osu and deal kindly with them without reservation. This should include intermarrying with them without recourse to the Osu barrier. They should make it a point of duty to emphasize those things that can bind them together and not those that can separate them.

D. For the Osu:

- i. The Osu should see themselves as special creatures by virtue of being created *imago Dei*, but they should never do so on the grounds that they are better gifted than others because they are Osu, for to do so will only yield negative results. They should never bask in the Osu light for corporate or personal gains. Thus, they should avoid creating associations that will defend and uphold their cause, unless where such associations will be open to all, Osu and Diala alike.
- ii. Finally, all Osu should see themselves as liberated and not let the issue make them feel inferior, because they will be their own captors if for this reason they feel unfit to do anything of their choice. Where the practice still stands that the Osu are rededicated at festivals, they should object to this and not take part in it.

## Conclusion

The human society is torn apart and plagued by conflicts as a result of so many differences. We are at war with one another because we are not the same colour as seen in the Apartheid of South Africa. We are at war because we are not of the same religion as seen in religious crises in the Middle-east and Africa. We are at war because we are not of the same sex as seen in the feminist movements of Europe and America. We are at war because we are not of the same socio - economic class as seen in Liberation Theologies of Latin America. We are at war because though we are of the same religion, we are not of the same sect as seen in Shiite - Sunni Islamic clashes and the Catholic - Protestant clashes across the globe. We are also at war because though we are of the same tribe and speak one language, we have for no good reason, classified

some of our brethren as inferior to the rest of us and forbidden them from the rights and privileges they deserve as fellow human beings. And so we bring the battle fought between continents, races, religions, faiths, tribes, classes, and sexes to our own doorsteps and the innocent victims of our psychologically and social genocide are our very own *Umunna* (kin). How is the crime of the Diala against the Osu different from that of the Hutus against the Tutsis of Rwanda?

Jesus Christ came to unite all people irrespective of race, gender, status or beliefs. His prayer for oneness refers first of all, to those who will believe in him. The Church must be the first example and model of the universal brotherhood of mankind. This task is not reserved for the Clergy alone, but is a task for every baptized member of the faith. There is something that we have in common irrespective of our accidental difference: we are all made in the image and likeness of God. Let us all come together to fight our differences by emphasizing our similarities. Igbo Christians has a special task in ridding their tribe of this grave evil that threatens their oneness, by seeing their baptism as their rebirth into a new life and religion with its own beliefs and practices. Thus, they are not subject to the beliefs and practices of the religion of their fathers. Let us all pray for the end of the evil and obsolete practice called the Osu-caste system, so that the Igbo race and indeed the whole human race may be united in love and in one purpose: the salvation of all. May we remember the prayer of Jesus for us: "*Ut Omnia unum sint: that they may all be one*" and make it our own "*ut omnia unum sumus - That we may all be one*". Amen.

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