



*smyrna, Tennessee*

# **St. Patrick's**

## Anglican Church

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*An Ancient Faith for Modern Times*

### ***Letters from the Wilderness***

#### **#12**

Dear Saints and Shamrocks,

Jesus said that when people say all manner of evil against us falsely that we should consider ourselves blessed (Mt 5:11, 12). That being the case then Archbishop Akinola is one of the most blessed men on planet earth. Ms Schori and her followers have accused him of violating ancient traditions of the Church and being schismatic (hello pot!) The media has portrayed him as power hungry and the shrill agenda driven groups have even compared him to Hitler. That comparison is so worn out. They need to update it to Idi Amin or Pol Pot or Pauly Shore. Anyway the point is that Archbishop Akinola is blessed indeed.

Beth and I had the privilege of meeting him at the installation of our Bishop. We were standing in front of the church, just having registered and a car pulled up and out stepped His Grace. He was wearing an open collared shirt and slacks and around his neck was a humble wooden cross hanging on a small diameter rope. Having seen so many beautiful jeweled crosses on a plethora of bishops I

wondered what his real pectoral cross looked like when he was in “uniform.” After introductions we chatted for a brief while and then he was whisked off to a meeting.

The next day at the installation of Bishop Minns, Archbishop Akinola was vested in all of the bishop’s finery. Around his neck was his real pectoral cross. It was the same humble wooden cross on the small diameter rope.

To me it was a perfect symbol for who he is. Like that cross he is not showy but he is powerful. He is the kind of man who fills a room when he walks into it. He does so not because of pride but because of God’s favor is upon him and God’s favor is upon him because he is a man who truly lifts up Jesus in an uncompromising way. Being the leader of the largest segment of the Anglican Communion makes him a target of all forms of evil, both fleshly and spiritual, and so he needs to be in our daily prayers.

I came across the following article from the London Times. It is long but it is worth the read because it gives you insight into the man who is leading us and will equip you to pray more intelligently for him.

Peace

Fr. Ray †

From The London Times  
July 5, 2007

## For God’s sake

**Archbishop Akinola of Nigeria, the world’s most powerful Anglican leader, tells Religion Correspondent Ruth Gledhill that his conservatism is the true faith and that evangelism can combat Islamic terrorism**

When Peter Akinola, Archbishop of Nigeria, consecrated 20 bishops in a single service, an observer asked how this was possible. He replied: “You have not seen anything yet.” This is a man whose name strikes fear into the souls of Western Christian leaders. Heading a Church of nearly 20 million practicing Anglicans, he is the most powerful leader in the Anglican Church. While churches

are closing in the US and Britain, he cannot open them fast enough. If things continue as they are, his could well be the future face of worldwide Anglicanism. Time is running out for the Archbishop of Canterbury, Dr Rowan Williams, to avert schism.

Dr Akinola has become a totem of conservatism in the debate over homosexuality. The irony is not lost on him that he is attempting to preach a gospel back to England that was brought to his country by English missionaries in the mid-19th century. To modern, liberal, Western eyes, Dr Akinola is at the most extreme end of fundamentalist Christianity. Few can imagine the “broad” Church of England being led by such a man – but in Nigeria he is at the more liberal end of the Christian spectrum. More importantly, he is in the front line of relations between Christianity and Islam. In the northern, Sharia states of Nigeria, Christians have been driven from their looted homes, even murdered. The relationship with Islam is central to his ministry and he has found a way to counter Islam without violence: it is called evangelism.

I met this enigmatic Archbishop, who in his 63 years has never given an interview to a British national newspaper, in his office in the Abuja diocese. In the small room up a narrow stairway, the most ornate structure was a set of beautifully crafted wooden shelves that this former carpenter designed himself. “God has used my upbringing in carpentry to bear in my work as a bishop,” he says. He wouldn’t be the first to say so. He wore a clerical shirt with no collar, a cross around his neck. His feet were bare. The contrast between this and the Archbishop of Canterbury’s splendid palaces in Lambeth and Canterbury could not have been greater.

Anglican leaders from Africa are portrayed in the West as homophobic fundamentalists whose adherence to biblical truths is born of no more than an ignorance of modern exegesis. “I have been so demonized by the Western media,” says Dr Akinola. “I tell people when they talk about this, Christ had it so much worse. If this is the price I have to pay for leading the Church at this time, so be it. They can punch me here, punch me there, but in the midst of all that are people who say Akinola is the right thing.”

His reluctance to be in the public eye has been perceived as arrogance. The impression in the West has been of a man determined to wrest leadership of the Anglican Church from Canterbury. “I kept on saying you do not have to go through Canterbury to get to Christ.” In the pulpit, few can match his fiery passion. Outside it, he is strangely diffident.

The land in Nigeria is strewn with enormous stones. Massive boulders teeter on top of others. They look as though they could fall at any moment, but have been there for centuries. His friends say of Peter Akinola that, as his name suggests, he is “hewn from the rock”. There is a stubborn stillness about him. His church has broken communion with the Episcopal Church of the US over the ordination in 2003 of the openly gay bishop Gene Robinson. Dr Akinola will not contemplate

going back into communion with the US unless they abandon completely the liberal gay agenda. It will never happen.

Akin, a common name in the western part of the country, means courageousness, boldness, warlike valour. Ola means wealth and prosperity. With his own business and a Vespa scooter in the 1960s, he was indeed heading for a life of prosperity when he was called to give it all up and follow Christ into the seminary. But he almost had no adult life at all. As a young man, he told me, he narrowly escaped being a victim of a ritual sacrifice. His body parts were to be made into “concoctions”, he said, and sold. He was vulnerable because, when he was 5, his father, who would have protected him against such abuse, died. “Unfortunately my father died on December 12, 1948, before I could get to know him,” he says. “Before he could make any impact on my life he was gone. So my mother had the responsibility of bringing me up.”

He was sent to live with a paternal uncle who was a carpenter, and was not sent to school until the age of 10. “I grew up in a very hard way.” At 16, he wanted to go to secondary school, but was sent instead to northeastern Nigeria to learn a trade. From there he was apprenticed as a cabinetmaker in Lagos. He was living with a relative. “Very ugly things happened to me while I was there,” he says. “Another uncle of mine was not thinking well of me. He was going to sacrifice me for a ritual to make money. That is one of the mysteries of my life. God is gracious. It is a very long story. But let me just say I had premonitions. I saw a very clear vision of what was going to happen. The following day, things began to happen the way I saw them. It was not a dream, it was a real vision. It was a serious matter. Frightening. Overwhelming.

“But I came out of the house to go to where I was supposed to be sacrificed and I saw this figure far away at the other end of the road, beckoning me to come. In white. I ran and ran and ran. The faster I ran, the further distance between me and the figure. I never found it. I believe very strongly that the Lord was taking me away from that dungeon.”

When Dr Akinola was growing up it was common, especially in the southern part of the country, for every family to have both Muslims and Christians among their number. On Sunday, the whole family would troop off to church, and then on Friday they went together to mosque. Although in the southern part of the country Muslims and Christians still live together in harmony, there are 12 states in the north where Sharia, or Islamic law, has a hold, and some Christians have suffered.

“We began to see certain threats in the north,” says Dr Akinola. “Religious disturbances, crises, rioting, to the extent that Christians were killed and maimed and properties looted.” His response was informed by his missionary vocation. “By virtue of our religion we cannot fight because we are told, if you are slapped on the right cheek you must turn your left cheek. Love your enemy and pray for him. So how do we respond to these unprovoked attacks on Christians? Evangelism is the answer. Make the Church grow.”

The bigger the Church gets, the fewer conflicts Christians will face. "That is what we believe. So we have put ourselves into the work of mission very seriously." The era of bishops living like lords in their own little empires has long gone. "Every bishop in his area is an evangelist," he says.

When his predecessor, Archbishop Abiodun Adetiloye, stepped down, there were 76 dioceses. He had trebled the size of the church by planting a bishop in every city. "I was the Dean then. We did not know who would be Primate. I said, Baba has finished the work, everything is now done, alleluia! He said, Peter, that is a big mistake you are making because the work is yet to begin. As God would have it, I then became the Primate and we set a vision for ourselves as to how to carry on with this great task."

He decided to aim for doubling the Church. He is nearly there, with almost 130 dioceses and bishops, including Bishop Martyn Minns, consecrated recently to care for conservative evangelicals in the US. His bishops pastor to nearly 20 million practicing Anglicans. That compares with an official tally of 25 million in the Church of England, but a paltry one million of these are churchgoers. Dr Akinola points out that the US Episcopal Church has fewer than two million worshippers, served by 200 bishops. "If I had the means of supporting them I would have 200, 300 bishops," he says. "We are growing. There are many reasons why we are growing. We believe we have no option but to take the command of Christ very seriously."

He says the issues troubling the Anglican Communion are of no concern to Christians in Nigeria. This does seem to be the case. I asked one Nigerian diocesan bishop whether he would be coming to the Lambeth Conference next year, the ten-yearly gathering of the communion's 800 bishops. He was surprised by my question: he thought the conference had been cancelled.

Nigeria's bishops will not meet to decide about Lambeth until September. Dr Akinola says he does not know how they will decide. But at this point, attendance by Nigeria looks extremely unlikely. And if they stay away, this will mark the start of true schism. The Lambeth Conference is one of the communion's four instruments of unity. For the Nigerians to attend, the Archbishop of Canterbury would have to invite Bishop Minns, which he will not.

And the Episcopal Church in the US would have to backpedal on its liberal agenda, which would be a betrayal of everything it has struggled for in the past two decades.

Dr Akinola does not deny that homosexuals exist in Africa. "All we are saying is, do not celebrate what the Bible says is wrong. If the Bible says it is an aberration, it is an aberration. Do not do it." He sees no point in his church attending the Lambeth Conference if the bishops cannot share together in Holy Communion. He begins to get passionate, becoming eloquent in his anger. "The missionaries brought the word of God here and showed us the way of life. We have seen the

way of life and we rejoice in it. Now you are telling me this way of life is not right. I have to do something else. Keep it for yourself. I do not want it.”

No Nigerian bishop needs to go to Canterbury to learn how to be a bishop, he says. “No Nigerian Anglican needs to go to Lambeth Palace to learn how to become a Christian. It is all available here. We rejoice in our fellowship, we rejoice in our heritage as Anglicans. We celebrate it. But our unity will never be at the expense of truth, of the historic faith.”

In spite of what Western church leaders fear, he has no ambitions to lead a breakaway church. “That has never been on my mind. This is the media thing. You see we have scripture. We have our traditions. We have not broken the law. It is your churches that are breaking the law. You are the ones breaking the rules. You are the ones doing what should not be done with impunity. We are saying you cannot sweep it under the carpet. Maybe in the past you could get away with it, but not any more. We have aged. So we are not breaking away from anybody. We remain Anglicans. We are Anglican Church. We will die Anglicans. We are going nowhere.”

I ask him about his comments a few years ago, when he was reported as saying that homosexuality was an aberration unknown even in the world of animal relationships. He urges me to see these remarks in their context. A diocese in Canada was moving towards authorizing the first Anglican liturgy for same-sex blessings. “I was shocked to my marrow the very first time I heard the Church is saying a man can marry a man. What? It is from that shock, that surprise, how is that possible? Is it a kind of experiment or something? They are sick or tired of normal heterosexual relationships? How could that be? That is the context in which I said what I said.”

The demand from the West that his Church liberalize he sees as a gross reimposition of an old imperialism. “For God’s sake let us be. When America invades Afghanistan it is in the name of world peace. When Nigeria moves to Biafra it is an invasion. When England takes the Gospel to another country, it is mission. When Nigeria takes it to America it is an intrusion. All this imperialistic mentality, it is not fair.”

He has been criticized for not speaking out against a new law proposed in Nigeria to make it an offence to promote homosexuality. “The Western world does not have a monopoly of homosexuals,” he says. “They are everywhere in the world. But we do not desire to celebrate it. We see it as a problem that can be treated. There have been a lot of importation of Western values and practices in our country. Now the Western world is highlighting the gay issue as the thing. We realize that if care is not taken, our country will be one where you can do whatever you want to do.” The new law was intended to prevent wholesale importation of Western values and practices, he says. He admits to problems with the specific provisions, which are, to Western sensibilities, draconian. “But what you have there is still much less, much softer than if it were to be sharia. This is our context. On the one hand the Christian community is happy that we

have this provision. It is just our hope that it will help to preserve the institution of marriage, family life as we know it. But if it is not passed, fine, we will look for something else. It is purely democratic.”

He is buoyed by the fantastic growth of his Church, and cannot help but note the rate of church closures in the US. “I am not God. I keep saying, this is God’s own church. As bad as things are, I can say with certainty that there are still millions of people whose knees have not bowed down to Baal and whose lips have not kissed Asherah.” (Baal and Asherah are Canaanite deities that feature in the Bible.)

Like me, he has heard the hope that lights up among Western liberals at talk of his pending retirement, as if once he is gone Nigeria will suddenly cease its evangelical mission. “Someone told me they hope when Akinola retires the Church will revert,” he says. “They are making a big mistake. The Church is already receiving hundreds of people who are better, stronger. I can assure you this is God’s own church and the gates of Hell shall never prevail against it. God raised Peter Akinola to what he has done. The same God will raise hundreds of people more gifted than me to get the job done. It is God’s Church not mine.”

He retires in 19 months, and intends to spend his last year as Bishop of Abuja, and then go back home to his village and become a simple preacher again. “I cannot remember God calling me to a position of power. All this stuff about power. It is not me. My motto of life is, the simpler the better. You can ask my colleagues, my bishops, how I operate. Some people say I do embarrass them with my humility.”

Many bishops in the West are looking forward to his retirement, but they might be better sticking with what they know. There are 120 more bishops in Nigeria, all of them with the potential to become the next Primate. If Rowan Williams hopes that by dragging things out, he can delay schism until Akinola retires and then bring Nigeria into line, he’s in for a shock. As Akinola speaks, the fire that has been masked behind his diffidence grows stronger. I get a sense that the battle for the soul of the Anglican Church, for the soul at the heart of Africa itself, has only just begun.