



Application of Canon 747§2 to Humanitarian Crisis in Southeast Nigeria

Aloy. Enemali

Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port Harcourt, Nigeria

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*Corresponding Author: Aloy. Enemali

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Abstract

Original Research Article

This article presents a rigorous examination of the imperative for the Catholic Church to activate its canonical mandate in the contexts of severe social strife, using the human rights emergency in Nigeria Southeast as a paradigmatic case study. It posits that Canon 747§2 of the 1983 Code of Canon Law, which charges the Church to announce moral principles and render judgement on human affairs to protect fundamental human rights and salvation of souls provides a non-negotiable juridical and theological framework for pastoral action. The analysis is made within the crisis separatist agitation, state militarization, and communal breakdown in Southeast Nigeria. Through detailed documentation of violations of human rights by both state and non-state actors, and a critical evaluation of the local churches' response, the article argues that a robust application of canon 747§2 is essential for credible prophetic witness, pastoral resilience, and the defense of human dignity. It concludes with a comprehensive, actionable set of recommendations for integrating Canon 747§2 into Church governance, advocacy, and formation, offering a model for ecclesial engagement in conflict zones globally.

Keywords: Canon 747§2, human rights advocacy, Catholic Church mandate, social conflict Nigeria, pastoral response.

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Introduction

The Church exists in a permanent tension between transcendence and history, between its eschatological orientation towards the kingdom of God and its incarnational insertion into the concrete struggles of human societies. This tension is not accidental but constitutive of the Church's identity. From its earliest self-understanding, the Church has claimed neither withdrawal from the world nor uncritical assimilation into it, but a distinctive moral presence that judge history in the light of the Gospel. It is precisely within this horizon that canon law must

be understood, not as a merely internal regulatory system, but as a juridical expression of the Church's salvific mission in the world. Canon 747§2 of the 1983 *Codex Iuris Canonici* represents one of the clearest legal articulations of this mission, explicitly grounding the Church's right and duty to speak authoritatively on social realities where human dignity and salvation of souls are at stake.

Canon 747§2 states that "It belongs to the Church always and everywhere to announce moral principles, even about the social order, and to render judgment concerning any human affairs insofar as



the fundamental rights of the human person or the salvation of souls requires it”.

This provision is both remarkable both for its scope and for its boldness. It asserts a universal competence (“always and everywhere”), an expansive subject matter (“any human affairs”), and a concrete triggering condition (the violation of fundamental human rights or the jeopardy of salvation). Far from proposing a vague moral influence, the canon establishes a juridical obligation that binds ecclesiastical authority to active engagement in situations of grave injustice. In this sense, canon 747§2 functions as a constitutional norm within the Church’s legal system, defining the parameters of legitimate ecclesial intervention in socio-political crises.

This article argues that the contemporary human rights emergency in Southeast Nigeria since 2021 constitutes a paradigmatic context in which Canon 747§2 demands concrete application. The region’s descent into violence, marked by separatist agitation, state militarization, and widespread violations of fundamental human rights, places the local churches within the area in a position where silence, neutrality, or purely spiritual responses are no longer pastorally or canonically sufficient. The Southeast Nigeria (made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states) with an overwhelming Catholic population and dense network of dioceses, parishes, institutions, clergy, religious men and women, is not a peripheral observer of this crisis but one of its principal victims and moral stakeholders. As such, it provides a critical case study for examining how canon law can and must be operationalized as a tool for the defense of human dignity in contexts of protracted conflict.

1. An Overview of the Humanitarian Crisis in Southeast Nigeria

Nowhere in contemporary Africa is the urgent application of this canon more critically required than Southeast Nigeria, a region gripped by a complex, violent and protracted crisis. Here, a resurgence of separatist sentiment, manifested most prominently in the activities of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) and its armed wing, the Eastern Security Network (ESN), has collided with a

heavy-handed, often indiscriminate militarized response from the Nigerian state. This results in a humanitarian catastrophe characterized by extrajudicial killings, enforced disappearances, brutal suppression of civil liberties, and a climate of terror that has paralyzed social and economic life. With a Catholic population exceeding 70%, the Southeast Nigeria is not merely a bystander but a primary stakeholder and victim. Reports suggests that between 20% and 30% of its territory is under the de facto control of either Nigeria security forces or non-state militant groups, creating a palpable reality of a “Church under siege”. Parishes have been shuttered, priests kidnapped, the celebration of the Eucharist disrupted, and the faithful subjected to trauma and displacement.

The human rights crisis in Southeast Nigeria unfolds within a broader regional context of historical grievance, political exclusion, unresolved trauma stemming from the Nigerian Civil War, and a visible threat of Fulani Islamization of Nigeria. The Igbo people experience of the Nigeria Civil War (1967 to 1970), culminating in defeat, starvation, and a policy of post war abandonment, left deep scars of perceived marginalization. Decades of political exclusion, under investment in infrastructure, and perceived federal neglect caused resentment. The Movement for the Actualization of the Sovereign State of Biafra, MASSOB, founded in 1999 by Ralph Uwazurike, represented a non-violent revival of the self-determination quest. It’s often-violent suppression by state forces, radicalized a segment of the populace.

The emergence of Nnamdi Kanu and Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in 2012 marked a decisive shift. Utilizing his imposing charismatic personality and eloquent mastery of rhetoric, Kanu’s broadcast via Radio Biafra and social media, tapped into deep wells of an age-long grievance, mobilizing a younger generation on the strength of the sad memory of the Biafran War. The Nigerian government’s heavy-handed response, including the lethal crackdown on IPOB rallies and the controversial arrest, detention and extrajudicial attempt on Kanu’s life in 2017, further militarized the situation. The creation of the Eastern Security Network in December 2020, IPOB’s ethical and cultural response to deadly

attacks by armed herdsmen on farming communities, introduced an organized armed dimension. The state viewed this not as self-defense, but as the raising of a militant separatist army (John Smith, 45-67).

Over the last half decade, Southeast Nigeria had been a boiling conundrum and a semi theatre of war. Parishes have been forced to suspend liturgical activities, priests have been kidnapped or threatened, and entire communities have experienced displacement. The faithful encounter violence not only as citizens but as believers who's right to worship and receive the sacraments is directly compromised. In such circumstances, the Church's canonical obligation under Canon 747§2 becomes existential rather than theoretical. The question is no longer whether the Church may intervene, but whether it can remain faithful to its own law if it does not.

2. Theological and Juridical Foundations of Church Intervention

The right and obligation of the authority of the Catholic Church to intervene in matters of social injustice and human rights violations is neither an accidental development nor a modern concession to political activism. Rather, it is rooted in the Church's self-understanding as a moral community entrusted with the proclamation of truth about the human person and society. Canon 747§2 represents a juridical crystallization of this self-understanding, but its intelligibility depends on a deeper theological and historical genealogy. This section situates the canon within the conciliar origins, explicates its relationship to Catholic Social Teaching, and demonstrates its convergence with civil and international human rights norms. Together, these foundations establish ecclesial intervention not as an overreach but as a constitutive dimension of the Church's mission.

2.1 Canon 747§2 and Vatican II: The Socio-moral Competence of the Church

The immediate theological source of Canon 747§2 is the Second Vatican Council, whose engagement with the modern world marked a decisive shift in the Church's articulation of its public role (Beal, et al.

912). Vatican II did not invent the Church's concern for justice or human dignity; rather, it reformulated these concerns in a language capable of addressing contemporary social realities. Central to this reform is *Gaudium et Spes; The Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World*, which rejected both ecclesial withdrawal from history and triumphalist domination of it. Instead, the Council affirmed a posture of critical solidarity, insisting that the Church "scrutinizes the signs of the times and interprets them in the light of the Gospel" (GS.4).

This interpretative responsibility is inherently normative. To scrutinize and interpret social realities is to evaluate them against moral criteria grounded in revelation and reason. *Gaudium et Spes* explicitly acknowledges the Church's competence to speak on matters of justice, peace, political authority and economic structures, insofar as these realities affect the dignity of the human person (GS.26, 73, 76). The Council thus expanded the perceived scope of the Church's teaching office, situating moral judgment of social orders firmly within the Church's pastoral mission.

More specifically, *Dignitatis Humanae, the Declaration on Religious Freedom*, anchors the Church's defense of human rights in the dignity of the human person. It affirms that the right to religious freedom has its foundation in the very dignity of the human person (DH. 2, 14). This dignity implies a wider spectrum of civil and social rights, to life, to a just legal order, to participation in public life, immunities that protect the person from coercion. The Council's teaching imbues Canon 747§2 with a specific content, the moral principles to be announced are those flowing from human dignity, and the judgement to be rendered is against any power that violates this dignity.

The canon's formulation reflects this conciliar synthesis. The phrase, "it belongs to the Church" (ecclesia est) asserts proper competence rather than borrowed authority. The temporal universality, "always and everywhere", echoes Vatican II's insistence that the Church's mission cannot be confined to sacristy or sanctuary. By embedding these principles within canon law, the post-conciliar Church ensured that engagement with human affairs

would not depend solely on episcopal temperament or political context, but would be anchored in juridical obligation.

2.2. Canon 747§2 and Catholic Social Teaching

While Vatican II provides the theological matrix of Canon 747§2, Catholic Social Teaching (CTS) supplies its substantive moral content. CTS is not an optional appendix to ecclesial doctrine but an integral expression of the Church's moral vision, addressing the ordering of society in light of the Gospel. Core principles such as the dignity of the human person, the common good, solidarity, subsidiarity, and the preferential option for the poor form the evaluative framework through which Canon 747§2 is exercised.

The canon's reference to "moral principles, even about the social order" presupposes this tradition. It authorizes the Church not merely to condemn isolated acts of violence but to assess structural injustice. This is particularly relevant in contexts like Southeast Nigeria where violence is sustained by systemic failures; weak governance, militarized security strategies, economic exclusion, and unresolved historical grievances. Canon 747§2 empowers the Church to name these structures as morally deficient where they generate or normalize violations of fundamental rights.

Moreover, the canon's dual criteria; "the fundamental rights of the human person" and "the salvation of souls", should not be interpreted as competing justifications but as mutually illuminating realities. CTS consistently insists that material injustice and spiritual harm are deeply intertwined. Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* famously declared that development is "the new name for peace", underscoring the moral inseparability of social conditions and human flourishing (76). Likewise, Pope St. John Paul II emphasized in *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* that "one must denounce the existence of economic, financial and social mechanism which are ... accentuating the situation of wealth for some and poverty for the rest. He maintains that mechanisms which support structures

of sin dominate relationship between persons and nations" (36).

In practical terms, this means that ecclesial silence in the face of systemic violence is not a neutral act but a failure to protect the moral ecology necessary for salvation. When fear, coercion, and impunity dominate social life, consciences are deformed, moral responsibility is obscured, and violence becomes normalized. Canon 747§2 obliges the Church to intervene precisely to prevent such moral corrosion. Its exercise, therefore, is not political activism in disguise but pastoral realism informed by a robust moral theology.

3. The Human Right Question: International Human Rights Law, Canon Law, and Nigerian Bill of Rights

A particularly compelling dimension of the Church's engagement with human rights lies in its resonance with secular legal frameworks. This convergence is not accidental; rather, it reflects the Church's conviction that moral truth concerning the dignity of the human person is accessible to human reason and can therefore be articulated within juridical systems across cultural, political, and religious boundaries. As a result, the Church's human rights advocacy transcends the perception of a sectarian moral claim and emerges instead as a universally intelligible appeal to justice, law, and conscience. This is in line with Canon 22 of the *Codex Iuris Canonici*, 1983 which canonizes civil law "in so far as it is not contrary to divine law, and provided it is not otherwise stipulated in canon law".

3.1. Human Rights in the Nigerian Constitution

Within the Nigerian constitutional order, this convergence is especially evident. The 1999 *Constitution of the Federal Republic of Nigeria* (as amended) enshrines a Bill of Rights in Chapter IV; a robust catalogue of fundamental rights that closely parallels core principles of Catholic Social Teaching. Section 33 guarantees the right to life, stipulating that no person shall be intentionally deprived of life except in execution of a lawful court sentence.

Section 34 categorically prohibits torture as well as inhuman and degrading treatment. Complementing these protections, Section 35, 38, 40, and 41 safeguard personal liberty, freedom of thought, conscience and religion, peaceful assembly and association, and freedom of movement respectively. Consequently, when state security forces conduct operations that results in extrajudicial killings, arbitrary detentions, or collective punishments, they violate not only the moral law proclaimed by the Church but also the supreme constitutional law they are sworn to defend. In such instances, the Church's intervention is not oppositional to the state but restorative of constitutional fidelity.

3.2. Human Rights in Canon Law

A similar harmony is evident within the Church's own juridical tradition. *The Code of Canon Law* devotes a coherent body of norms, particularly Canons 214 to 221, to the fundamental rights and obligations of the Christian faithful. Canon 214 affirms the right of the faithful to worship God according to the prescriptions of their own rite. Canon 215 guarantees the right to freely form associations for charitable or apostolic purposes, while Canon 216 recognizes the right to promote apostolic initiatives in accordance with one's vocation in the Church. These ecclesial rights, however, are not exercised in abstraction; the presuppose a stable civil environment in which more basic natural rights, especially the right to life and personal security, are effectively protected. When non state actors enforce sit at home orders that prevent access to Sunday Mass or parochial life, they simultaneously infringe civil freedoms, notably freedom of movement under Section 41 of the *1999 Constitution of Nigeria*, and ecclesial rights, particularly the right to worship enshrined in Canon 214. Such violation demonstrate how civil disorder directly undermines the Church's sacramental and pastoral mission.

3.3. Human Rights in International Law

This convergence extends further into the domain of international human rights law. *The Universal Declaration of Human Rights 1948*, together with its

associated covenants, to which Nigeria is a signatory, provides a global moral and legal vocabulary for articulating human dignity. Central among these are the right to life (Article 3), freedom from torture and cruel or degrading treatment (Article 5), and freedom of movement (Article 13). The Church has consistently engaged this internal framework not as a rival moral system but as a valuable expression of humanity's shared ethical intuition. As Pope St. John Paul II observed in his 1995 address to the United Nations, human rights constitute a moral reflection of the unity of the human family and the one human nature from which these rights flow.

Seen in this light, Canon 747§2 does not authorize the Church to impose a narrowly confessional or distinctly Catholic legal order upon a pluralistic society. Rather, it empowers and obliges the Church to function as the conscience of society, calling both state and non-state actors to account according to the universal, constitutional, and moral standards they themselves formally recognize. The Church's judgement, exercised within this canonical mandate, thus becomes a form of public service and a deliberate act of moral remembrance in social context.

4. Human Rights Violation in Southeast Nigeria: A Deeper Assessment

The crisis confronting the citizens of Southeast Nigeria is not abstract theological or speculative moral problem but a lived humanitarian emergency, marked by persistent, patterned, and mutually reinforcing violations of fundamental human rights. These violations are experienced concretely by parishioners, clergy, traders, students, transport workers, and the entire communities within the territory. To invoke Canon 747§2 responsibly, the Church must first confront this empirical reality of injustice with factual clarity and juridical seriousness. Canon 747§2 explicitly affirms the Church's right and duty "to pronounce moral judgments even in matters pertaining to the political order, whenever the fundamental rights of the human person or the salvation of souls requires it". Such mural pronouncement presupposes accurate knowledge of the facts on the ground. Thus,

canonical moral judgement is inseparable from discernment rooted in evidence, testimony and lived experience of the people.

This section, therefore, traces the historical evolution of insecurity, identifying recurring patterns of abuse by both state and non-state actors, and examining the direct ecclesial consequences of sustained violence. Diocesan and parish records, justice-and-peace documentation, eyewitnesses' testimony from clergy and laity, and consistent civil society reports serve as material witnesses. Such an approach grounds the Church's moral voice in truth, thereby safeguarding its credibility and fidelity to its canonical mandate.

4.1 Violation by Non-State Actors

Non-state actors associated with separatist agitation have perpetrated systematic violation of fundamental human rights in Southeast Nigeria. These actions stand in direct contradiction to the canonical rights of the faithful articulated in Canon 213, which guarantees that the Christian faithful have the right to receive spiritual goods – especially the Word of God and the sacraments from the Church. The enforcement of “sit-at-home” orders has become the most visible mechanism of abuse. Initially presented as acts of symbolic protest, these orders have evolved into coercive instruments enforced through intimidation, arson, abduction, and targeted killings.

Empirical evidence from parishes across the dioceses in Southeast Nigeria shows that compliance is no longer voluntary. Traders who opened shops have been assaulted, transport workers attacked, and commuters killed. Parish priests have documented cases where victims sought refuge in rectories after violent reprisals. Such acts constitute direct violations of the right to life and bodily integrity, rights which the Church recognizes as flowing from the inherent dignity of the human person. By intentionally depriving person of life without any semblance of due process, these actors usurp moral authority and negate any ethical legitimacy they claim.

Freedom of movement and economic activity has likewise been gravely restricted. Weekly Monday sit-at-home orders effectively confine entire

communities, undermining livelihoods in a region heavily dependent on daily trade and informal commerce. By forcing closures of markets, schools, and workplaces, non-state actors exacerbate poverty and structural vulnerability, thereby obstructing the Church's mission to foster the integral development of persons.

Religious freedom has also been systematically compromised. Although sit-at-home orders typically fall on Mondays, the violent enforcement has created an atmosphere of fear that spills into Sundays and liturgical seasons. Funerals, weddings, weekday Masses, and catechetical programs are frequently cancelled. Priests have received threats and warnings against public worship. Such interference constitutes a direct violation of Canon 214. In arrogating to themselves authority over worship and conscience, non-state actors commit not merely political coercion but ecclesial harm.

Compounding these violations is the entrenchment of a criminal economy marked by kidnapping, extortion and armed robbery. Clergy, religious, traditional rulers, and business leaders have become frequent targets, destabilizing both social and ecclesial structures. This fusion of ideological agitation with organized crime erodes any residual moral credibility of violent separatism, leaving communities trapped in fear and ecclesial life severely impaired.

4.2 Violation by State Actors

While non-state actors have inflicted grave harm, the Nigerian state's response has also been characterized by serious and persistent human rights violations. Security operations in and around Southeast Nigeria have frequently involved use of excessive force, indiscriminate raids, and collective punishment, practices that undermine both civil legality and the Church's understanding of justice rooted in human dignity.

Numerous eyewitness accounts and human rights reports document allegations of extrajudicial killings during military and police operations in towns within the region. Unarmed civilians have reportedly been shot during raids or at checkpoints, often without

subsequent investigation. Such actions violate the sanctity of life, which the Church upholds as inviolable, and create pastoral crises that the Church structure must address.

Arbitrary arrest, prolonged detention without charge, torture, and enforced disappearance further characterize state abuses. Young men are routinely detained during security sweeps and held in undisclosed facilities, denied access to legal counsel and family. These practices undermine the resumption of innocence and violates the Church's insistence on due process, reflected analogically in Canon 221 which guarantee the faithful the right to defend their rights in a competent form and not to be punished except according to law. For families, enforced disappearance inflicts prolonged psychological and spiritual suffering, suspending mourning and pastoral closure.

Collective punishment has emerged as a recurrent security strategy. Entire communities may be raided and displaced in retaliation for attacks attributed to militants. Homes are destroyed, livelihoods disrupted, and populations forced to flee irrespective of individual culpability. Such actions violate principles of proportionality and distinction recognized in Catholic Social Teaching.

Finally, the legal handling of high-profile separatist figures has further eroded public trust. Perceived irregularities in arrest, rendition, and trial processes have reinforced narratives of injustice and martyrdom, amplifying agitation. In this context, the state's failure to adhere consistently to its own legal standards has become a moral issue with direct pastoral consequences. It complicates the Church's evangelizing mission and necessitates the exercise of its prophetic role under Canon 747§2, not as a political partisanship but as a defender of justice, human dignity and the salvation of souls.

4 Evaluating the Local Churches Response Through Canon 747§2[H1]

Canon 747§2 provides a precise juridical lens through which the Church's engagement with situations of grave injustice must be addressed. The canon established a dual obligation: first, to proclaim moral principles that illuminate social realities in the

light of the Gospel; and second, to render judgment to concrete human affairs when fundamental rights or the salvation of souls are endangered. Applied to the Local Churches in Southeast Nigeria, this dual mandate offers a structured framework for evaluating ecclesial response amid sustained violence and widespread rights violations in the region. Here, we examine the Church's performance under both dimensions, identifying areas of fidelity, deficiency, and pastoral risks.

4.1 Announcing Moral Principles: Achievements and Limitations

The Catholic Church in Southeast Nigeria has not been silent in the face of violence. Episcopal homilies, pastoral letters, and communiques from both diocesan and provincial levels have consistently called for peace, dialogue, and respect for human life. The various Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) of the dioceses in the region have engaged in advocacy, distribution of humanitarian relief materials, and documentation of abuses. Liturgical prayers for peace and public condemnation of violence in all its forms have been regularly offered. These actions reflect an awareness of the Church's moral responsibility and genuine pastoral concern for a suffering population.

From the perspective of Canon 747§2, these efforts represent a partial fulfilment of the obligation to proclaim moral principles. The sanctity of life, the rejection of violence, and the call to reconciliation are foundational elements of Church moral teaching. By reiterating these values, the Church has provided spiritual orientation and pastoral comfort to the faithful in Southeast Nigeria. In a context of fear and uncertainty, such proclamation has helped sustain communal identity and hope.

However, a canonical evaluation must also attend to the quality and clarity of this proclamation. Canon 747§2 does not merely require the repletion of general moral truths; it demands their application to concrete social realities. Here, significant limitations emerge. While violence has been condemned in principle, the moral logic underpinning specific forms of violence has often remained unexplained. The faithful have received little sustained catechesis

on the ethical evaluation of political struggle, the moral limits of resistance, or the criteria by which claims of self-defense, liberation, or state security should be judged.

Catholic Social Teaching offers well-developed principles, such as proportionality, discrimination, and legitimate authority, that are directly relevant to the situation in Southeast Nigeria. Yet, these principles have rarely been articulated in a systematic and accessible manner. As a result, many lay Catholics are left to navigate the competing narratives without adequate moral formation. Some come to view violent coercion as regrettable but necessary; others interpret state brutality as inevitable. The absence of sustained moral education risks allowing violence to be normalized rather than challenged. Canon 747§2 requires precisely this kind of moral specificity. To announce moral principles effectively in this context would mean stating clearly that no political cause, however, historically grounded, can justify the terrorization of civilians, the denial of freedom of movement, or the obstruction of religious worship.

4.2 Rendering Judgment: The Deficit of Prophetic Specificity

If the proclamation of moral principles has been uneven, the obligation to render judgment represents an even greater challenge. Rendering judgment, in the canonical sense, involves naming concrete actions as morally illicit and identifying responsible agents where evidence permits. This is most controversial and risky dimension of Canon 747§2, particularly in contexts where violence is ongoing and ecclesial leaders fear retaliation or accusations of partisanship.

The ecclesial judgment by Church authorities in the region has largely remained abstract. Condemnation of “unknown gunmen” or “excesses by state security forces” lack the specificity required to disrupt patterns of abuse. Such language, while understandable as a protective strategy, weakens the Church’s moral authority. Canon 747§2 does not demand recklessness, but it does require courage proportional to the gravity of injustice. When killings, abductions, and collective punishment

becomes routine, generalized lamentations risk being interpreted as acquiescence.

The absence of explicit judgement on state actions is particularly consequential. While bishops in the region have occasionally urged security agencies to act professionally, there has been little public demand for accountability in specific cases of alleged extrajudicial killing or mass arrests. Canon 747§2 reference to “any human affairs” encompasses military operation and security policies. To render judgment in this context would involve publicly affirming that certain actions, such as killing unarmed civilians or detaining individuals without due process, are grave violations of moral and legal norms and demanding independent investigation and redress. Similarly, judgement on non-state actors has often been indirect. Where evidence strongly suggest that separatist enforcers are responsible for killings or threats against worshippers, moral clarity requires explicit condemnation. Naming such acts as mortal sins and crimes against humanity is not an act of political alignment but an exercise of pastoral truth-telling. Without such clarity, violent actors retain the ability to cloak their actions in the language of liberation or resistance, further confusing the moral landscape.

4.3 Moral Authority, Perceived Neutrality, and Ecclesial Credibility

One of the most serious consequences of inadequate judgement is the erosion of moral credibility. In context of conflict, neutrality is rarely perceived as impartiality; it is often interpreted as fear, compromise, or covert allegiance. Among segments of the faithful, there exists a perception that the Church is either overly cautious or selectively vocal. Whether or not this perception is justified, its existence undermines the Church’s ability to function as a trusted arbiter. Canon 747§2 implicitly rejects false neutrality. By mandating judgement where fundamental rights are violated, the canon affirms that the Church must practice a principled partiality, partiality towards the victim, toward truth, and towards justice. This does not entail political partnership but moral clarity. The Church’s authority derives not from power but from fidelity to the

Gospel and to its own law. When that fidelity appears compromised, the faithful experience disorientation and disappointment. The pastoral risk of deficit in judgment is therefore profound. Silence or vagueness allows competing moral narratives to dominate public discourse. Violent actors both state and non-state, fill the vacuum with self-justifying rhetoric. The faithful lacking authoritative guidance, may internalize these narratives or retreat into cynicism. In such an environment, the Church mission to form consciences is gravely impaired.

Evaluated through the lens of Canon 747§2, the Church in Southeast Nigeria stands at a crossroad. Its effort to announce moral principles demonstrate genuine pastoral concern but require greater depth, consistency, and specificity. Its reluctance to render judgement reflects understandable fears but risks undermining the very moral authority the canon seeks to protect. The challenge ahead is not merely to speak more often, but to speak more clearly- to allow canon law to function as a living instrument of truth in the service of human dignity.

5. Recommendations

The gravity of human rights crisis in Southeast Nigeria demands more than incremental adjustments to existing pastoral practice. Canon 747§2 properly understood, calls for a decisive reorientation of the Church's public witness; one that is simultaneously prophetic in truth-telling and pastoral in accompaniment. This section proposes concrete canonical and ecclesial pathways through which the local Churches can recover moral clarity, restore credibility, and contribute meaningfully to peace and justice. These proposals do not seek to politicize the Church, but to enable it to exercise its lawful mission with integrity and courage in a context of sustained suffering.

5.1 Recovering the Prophetic Office through Canonical Consciousness

At the heart of ecclesial reorientation lies a renewed consciousness of the Church's prophetic office. Canon 747§2 is not an optional or secondary norm; it articulates a constitutive dimension of Church's

identity. To implement it effectively, the dioceses in the region must internalize the canon as a guiding principle of episcopal governance, pastoral planning and public engagement.

This recovery begins with episcopal leadership. The bishops as the primary teacher and judge in their local Church, bears a unique responsibility to ensure that moral proclamation is both clear and courageous. Pastoral letters addressing the crisis should move beyond general appeals to peace and explicitly articulate the moral evaluation of specific practices, such as extrajudicial killings, coercive sit-at-home enforcement, kidnapping and collective punishment. These letters should be grounded in Scripture, Catholic Social Teaching, and canon law, thereby demonstrating that moral judgement is an ecclesial duty rather than a political intrusion.

Canonical consciousness must also extend to the clergy. Priests and deacons require ongoing formation in social ethics, human rights and the juridical dimension of their pastoral mission. Many clergy hesitate to address contentious issues from the pulpit out of fear of misinterpretation or reprisal. Structured diocesan and provincial guidelines rooted in Canon 747§2, can provide both theological clarity and institutional support, enabling clergy to speak with confidence and coherence. Such formation ensures that prophetic witness is not dependent on individual temperament but embedded in ecclesial practice.

5.2 Strengthening Institutional Mechanism for Moral Judgment and Advocacy

To render judgement credibly, the Church must rely on accurate information and transparent processes. The Catholic diocese in the Southeast Nigeria should therefore strengthen institutional mechanisms dedicated to monitoring, documenting, and responding to human rights violations. The Justice, Development and Peace Commission already present in the dioceses could be expanded and restructured to serve as a canonical instrument of moral discernment and advocacy. This would involve systematic documentation of abuses by both state and non-state actors, conducted according to internationally recognized standards of evidence.

Verified reports can then inform episcopal statements, ensuring that moral judgments are grounded in fact rather than rumor. Such documentation also positions the Church as a credible interlocutor with civil authorities, human rights organizations, and international bodies.

Canon law permits and encourages collaboration with lay experts. Lawyers, sociologists, psychologists, and human rights groups within the dioceses can be formally integrated into advisory councils. Their expertise enhances the Church's capacity to assess complex situations and propose realistic solutions. In this way, moral judgment becomes a communal ecclesial act rather than a solitary episcopal pronouncement.

Advocacy must also extend beyond statements to sustained engagement. The Church can convene structured dialogues with security agencies, traditional rulers and community leaders, insisting on respect for human dignity and the rule of law. Where violation persist, the Church should not hesitate to call for independent investigations and judicial accountability. Such actions embody Canon 747§2 insistence that moral principles have concrete social implications.

5.3 Pastoral Accompaniment and Healing of a Wounded People.

Prophetic clarity must be matched by pastoral compassion. The same canon that authorizes judgement is ultimately ordered towards the salvation and healing of souls. The wide spread trauma in the Southeast Nigeria demands robust pastoral response that addresses both spiritual and psychological wounds. Dioceses/parishes should be encouraged to develop trauma-informed pastoral ministries, including counseling services, support groups for victims of violence, and liturgical rites of lament and healing. The Church sacramental life, especially the Eucharist, Reconciliation, and Anointing of the Sick offers powerful resources for restoring hope and meaning in the aftermath of suffering. By explicitly naming injustice in prayer and preaching, the Church validates the pain of victims and counters narratives that normalize violence.

Youth ministry requires particular attention. Many young people in Southeast of Nigeria have been drawn into cycles of violence, either as perpetrators or victims, due to unemployment, anger, and loss of trust in institutions. The Church can offer alternative pathways through vocational training, civic education, and theological reflections on nonviolence and human dignity. Such initiatives are not peripheral but central to long-term peacebuilding and moral renewal.

5.4 Reframing Neutrality as Principled Moral Witness

One of the most significant shifts required is a redefinition of ecclesial neutrality. Canon 747§2 makes clear that the Church cannot remain neutral in the face of grave injustice. Instead, it must practice a principled moral witness that transcends partisan alignments while decisively siding with truth and the vulnerable. This reframing should be communicated clearly to the faithful. Catechetical program and adult faith formation can explain why the Church speaks on social issues and how such engagement flows from its divine mandate. When the faithful understand that moral judgement is an act of pastoral care rather than political activism, resistance diminishes and trust is restored. Externally, principled witness enhances the Church's credibility. When state and non-state actors recognize that the Church's positions are consistent, evidence-based, and rooted in moral law, its voice gains weight. Even when such witness provokes hostility, it preserves the Church's integrity and long-term influence.

Conclusion

Any serious assessment of the human rights situation in Southeast Nigeria must begin with historical memory. The experience of the Nigeria Civil War (1967-1970) remains a defining trauma that continues to shape political consciousness of people from Southeast Nigeria made up of Abia, Anambra, Ebonyi, Enugu and Imo states. The aftermath of the war, characterized by mass starvation, the loss of lives, and policies perceived as punitive, such as the twenty-pound compensation policy and systematic

underrepresentation in federal structures, produced a durable sense of marginalization.

The emergence of the Indigenous People of Biafra (IPOB) in the early 2010 marked a turning point. Through highly emotive rhetoric and digital mobilization, IPOB framed contemporary suffering as a continuation of historical injustice. The Nigerian state's response, characterized by mass arrests, military deployments, and the controversial designation of IPOB as a terrorist organization, further escalated the tensions.

Ultimately, application of Canon 747§2 becomes in the situation, not merely a tool for critique but a framework of hope. By reclaiming its canonical mandate, the Church in Southeast Nigeria can help break the cycle of violence and despair that afflicts the region. Moral clarity exposes injustice; pastoral accompaniment heals wounds; institutional engagement fosters accountability. Together, these elements constitute a holistic ecclesial response worthy of the Gospel. The path forward will not be without cost. Prophetic witness invites misunderstanding and risk. Yet, the alternative, silence or ambiguity in the face of suffering, carries a far greater moral and pastoral cost. For the dioceses in Southeast Nigeria, fidelity to Canon 747§2 offers a way to stand with a wounded people, not as a political actor, but as a Church faithful to its law, its mission, and its Lord.

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