



## LET THE LITTLE CHILDREN COME TO ME

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By Rev. Fr. Stephen Ojapah MSP

But Jesus called them to him, saying, **“Let the children come to me,** and do not hinder them, for to such belongs the kingdom of God” (Luke 18:16). In Africa like any other society, children are a blessing from the Lord. In most cultures the birth of a child is celebrated with fun fair and trumpet blowing. The Urhobo people and the many tribes of Southern Nigeria celebrate the birth of a new baby with the splashing of face powder on any bystander. Amongst the Maguzawa people of Gidan Mai Kambu in Katsina state, the birth of a new baby is celebrated with a loud scream known as *buda*. Every culture has special ways of announcing the birth of a new baby. All to buttress one simple fact: children are blessing from God. The scripture says: “See that you do not despise one of **these little ones.** For I tell you that in heaven their angels

always see the face of my Father who is in heaven” (Matthew 18:10).

These blessings are so delicate that the society becomes outraged when they are abused and exploited. Any form of abuse and exploitation is intolerable by our various institutions and systems. Any system that encourages the abuse and exploitation of children shocks our conscience collectively as a nation. The late Islamic scholar, Sheikh Uthaimen, described children as a trust given to parents by God. He also said that children are to be well fed, well-groomed, properly dressed for seasons and appearance. Children are entitled to education, religious learning, and spiritual guidance. Their hearts must be filled with faith and their minds entertained with proper guidance, knowledge, and wisdom. **“Train up a child in the way he should go; even when he is old, he will not depart from it”** (Proverbs 22:6).

For years now, the Almajiri system of education in the north has become a source of worry for all meaning Nigerians. Personally, I must say that I have not been educated enough about the system until the Federation of Muslim Women’s Association in Nigeria in collaboration with the Nigeria Supreme Council for Islamic Affairs organized an online conference on the 27<sup>th</sup> May, 2020 titled: *The Almajiri Child: Challenges, Potential and Way Forward*. After

listening to great scholars, like Hajiya Halima Jibril, who is the National president of FOMWAN. Shiekh Dr Khalid Aliyu, Secretary General of Jama'atu Nasri Islam. Hajiya Suwaiba Yakubu Jibril; Head of programs, Action Aid Nigeria on Advocacy for Dan Almajiri Network. Dr Usman Abubakar of Ahmadu Bello Zaria, Convener of Alternative Education for Almajiri. I became more open to the heavy burden of reforming a system that has served Northern Nigeria for over six hundred years.

Muslim traders first came to the Nigerian regions of Kanem and Borno in the 9th century, and the religion spread through trade and migration. Almajiri began in Kanem-Borno in the 11th century, when many rulers practiced Islam. More than 700 years later, in the 19th century, Islamic scholar, Usman dan Fodio founded the Sokoto caliphate, and furthered the cause of Islamic learning. Prior to the British arrival in Nigeria, Almajiri children stayed at home with their parents and attended tsangayu to study the Quran. All the schools available then were in close proximity with the immediate environment of the students. Inspectors were introduced to go to the schools and report the affairs of the school to the province. The schools were funded by the state treasury, the community, parents, zakah controlled by local emirs, sadaqqah and sometimes the farm output of the students. In the pre-colonial era, Almajirai did

not beg because there was sufficient funding to feed and cloth them.

The British colonized Nigeria in 1904, and with them came many changes to the Almajiri system. During the colonial era, the British deposed Emirs and defunded the Almajiri system. The remaining Emirs lost control of their territories, this resulted also in the loss of fundamental control of the Almajiri. With no support from the community, Emirs and government, the system collapsed. The British neither established secular schools on a large scale nor advanced existing institutions. Most Western education (Boko) was conducted by Christian missionaries, but this education was only available for a small portion of Nigerians. Because Islamic scholars did not have a western education, they were disqualified from white-collar and political jobs.

One Muslim response to the establishment of Christian-led secular schools was to create integrated Muslim-led secular schools. In 1921, there were more than 30,000 Islamic schools in Northern Nigeria. The British did, however, establish large urban centers, so many *malammai* (teachers) migrated from rural areas to the cities. Many northern cities, such as Kano, became important centers of Islamic learning. Parents started sending their children to the cities to study Islam, and the relationship between the almajiri and the *malammai* (teachers)

became more salient. The teachers and students had no financial support, so, they turned to alms begging and menial jobs for survival. Eventually this practice became the norm.

One of the fundamental problems we have as a people in Nigeria, is mutual suspicion. The North suspects the East, the East suspects the South and the North while the South distrusts the East and the North. All with legitimate reasons, so much so that National Issues are treated with tribal and religious sentiments. No wonder we are hardly on the same page. Again, with COVID 19 a lot of opportunities are coming to us handy, and we must not miss it. The solidarity I experienced at the conference reflects the values of the Christian gospel and the teaching of Islam. If we truly are coming from a tradition that values children then we must collectively come up with better ways of affecting the Almajiri system in tandem with the 21<sup>st</sup> century. According to the Psalmist, “Behold, **children are a heritage from the Lord**, the fruit of the womb a reward. Like arrows in the hand of a warrior are the children of one’s youth. Blessed is the man who fills his quiver with them! He shall not be put to shame when he speaks with his enemies in the gate” (Psalm 127:3-5).

I was particularly motivated by the keen interest of Christians who were on that

conference, Priests, Pastors, Rev Sisters, Students from Malasia, USA, Indonesia and many other countries. Nigeria has come to stay, it is in our interest and the interest of our great grandchildren, that the country succeed, therefore lets all hands be on deck to chat the cause for the future of every child. Whether in the North, South or East. Finally, an Almajiri discussion cannot be successful without the contributions of great scholars like Shiek Dahiru Bauchi. Thank you must sincerely FOMWAN AND NSCIA for putting up such a timely conference but please invite Shierk Dahiru and all who have the interest of children in your next conversation on the need to emancipate children from mental and physical suffering that takes the form of servitude. Jesus says, **'Whoever receives a child in my name receives me,** and whoever receives me, receives not me but him who sent me" (Mark 9:37).

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