

# Digitalizing the Church for E-Transformation: Study of Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan

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## Abstract

The Catholic Church is one of the oldest faith-based organizations with a presence in virtually every part of the globe. The Catholic Church is popular not only for its evangelism but also for its socio-economic interventions in the public sphere. The Catholic Church is known to leverage on the social realities within a particular era to deliver essential services to the public. This is the case of its body in Ibadan, Oyo state, Nigeria – the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan. Through the establishment of its faith-based schools and hospitals, the archdiocese has delivered educational and healthcare services, among others, to the people. Using the Ibadan Archdioceses of the Catholic Church as case study, this study attempts an explorative study of the interplay between service delivery by Catholic Church and the growing global influence of Information and Communication Technology (ICT). Through qualitative research, the paper assesses the communication and social services delivery frameworks of the Archdiocese of Ibadan and recommends adoption of electronic frameworks for deepening and expanding social services to a fast growing e-literate society.

**Keywords:** digitalization; catholic; e-transformation; e-church; information; technology.

## I. Introduction

The reality of ‘change’ was hotly contested by two ancient philosophers, Parmenides and Heraclitus. While Parmenides held that change is an illusion which does not exist, and that everything is in a static and motionless position, Heraclitus, on the other hand, was of the position that everything is in a perpetual flux. For him, change is the only permanent thing in existence. Developments in modern science and technology tend more towards the Heraclitean view that “change is constant”. According to the authors in [1] “ICT has since its introduction transformed the system of public administration and has equally been viewed in the global context as a means for achieving good governance and for enhancing quality service delivery to the public”. The tremendous improvement experienced in the services delivered to the public by various civil sectors in the society cannot be overemphasized. ICT has transformed the world into a global village.

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Information is disseminated to millions of people at the same time by just a click of a button. ICT continues to transform the education sector through electronic learning (e-learning) which involves e-research, e-class, e-teaching and so on. Banking services also become electronically powered with e-banking, mobile banking Apps, Point of Sale (POS) devices, and so on. E-Services in the areas of transportation (e-transport system), agriculture (e-agriculture), security (e-surveillance) and public service ((e-public service system) equally abound. Despite the waves ICT is making around the globe, the Catholic Church (often referred to as *the Church*) appears rather very slow at deploying ICT for its activities. The lack of deployment of social media by the Church, for example, is rapidly making the Church unpopular among its growing *netizen* members. As the author in [2] asserts, “Pastoral ministers would increasingly find themselves having little to no impact and influence on the lives of digital natives if they continue to avoid communication technologies”. Similarly, the role of social networking in effectively disseminating the Gospel and making the Church relevant cannot be overemphasized. On this, an author in [3] holds that, “Social networking has to become part of pastoral ministry or the Church will find itself increasingly marginalized in the lives of digital natives”. In regards to this, another author in [4] opines that, computer technology should become the primary instrument not only for administration by churches and congregations but equally for financial transactions, communications and multimedia presentations as well as for worship and education.

Nevertheless, discourse on the place of ICT in the Catholic Church is inexhaustible due to the daily dynamic trends in technology. Identifying authentic catholic priests has often created issues at Catholic related programs worldwide. Oftentimes catholic priests go through a lot of paper-based documentation in the process of obtaining official permission to conduct programs in parishes other than their home parish.

There exists several documented cases of missed opportunities owing to loss of baptismal or marriage certificates. Sometimes baptismal or marriage records become untraceable for re-issuance where the need arises. Circumstances such as this have led some to experience the phenomenon of a second (conditional) baptism to access baptismal certificate. The situation pictured above ought not be the case in the age of ICT, e-governance and e-administration. As noted by an author in [5] “analog governance is not in tandem with 21<sup>st</sup> century statecraft. Governance in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is characterized by a clear departure from the traditional analog form of administration. The governance space in the 21<sup>st</sup> century is continually being shaped and reshaped by the exponential developments in ICT”.

Technology, which is the driving force of this new movement, has been described as “methods, systems and devices which are the result of scientific knowledge being used for practical purposes” [6]. The role of technology in ease of doing things in the 21<sup>st</sup> century cannot be overemphasized; and the fact that, the church has witnessed the gradual development of the society through technological inventions by man is non negotiable. Technological inventions have been motivated by man’s quest for better and more comfortable existence. The digital age is a result of graduation from a series of technological eras or ages in global history. ICT is the latest of the technological advancements that began from the Stone Age, through the Mechanical to the Electromechanical Age. Man’s activities and relationships are enhanced or made easier with the coming of every new era. In essence, every new era heralds some kind of development.

It is important to note that individuals, governments, organizations and institutions take advantage of each era to update themselves and upgrade their service delivery to the public. For instance, during the Stone Age the government made extensive use of human labor for agricultural activities, but the advancement into the mechanical age saw tractors and machines replace human labor extensively in farming. Same is the experience in the transportation sector where human beings and animals which used to be means of transportation were replaced with the production of motor vehicles. There is the paradigm shift in communication from human/oral message carriers to letter writing; hardcopy to digital/electronic copy. Education and healthcare service sectors are also not left out in the transformation occasioned by the changing of eras.

The foregoing underscores the place of digitalization in the age of ICT. Individuals, governments, and organizations, including the Church, can hardly survive in the 21st century without embracing the dictates of the digital age.

## **II. Concepts of Digitization and Digitalization**

Digitization and digitalization are two conceptual terms that are closely associated and often used interchangeably in a broad range of literature. However, pointing out their subtle differences will benefit this study immensely. Digitization has been defined as the act of converting texts, pictures, or sound into digital form that can be processed by any smart device such as computers, smartphones and watches, etcetera.

[7] An author in [8] refers to digitalization as the adoption or increase in the use digital or computer technology by an organization, industry, country and so on, to provide new revenue and value-producing opportunities; a process of moving to a digital business.

Following this distinction, the authors in [9] define digitization as the material process of converting analog streams of information into digital bits. While referring to digitalization as the many domains of social life which are structured around digital communication and media infrastructure.

Sequel to the above definitions, digitalization therefore, is about connection of digitized materials or data with the support of ICT strategies to the internet for global access, using smart electronic devices like the computers, smartphones, smartwatches, etcetera. Against its analog counterpart, digitized processes are usually more effective in doing business. It saves time and human energy while facilitating transparency and accountability of work.

The initial high cost implication of digitalization can pose a threat to new initiates into digitalization of activities and processes. Digitalization requires acquiring devices like the computer (or its likes and accessories), power generating systems, internet subscription, training in ICT operation, and so on. Notwithstanding the challenges, the benefits of digitalization are far higher than the analog system.

## **III. Position of the Catholic Church on Digitalization**

The Catholic Church in its official documents declared in clear terms its interest in the means of social

communication and has continually encouraged its members to take advantage of it to spread the gospel of Christ. It is stated in [10] that, “the Catholic Church was founded by Christ our Lord to bring salvation to all men. It feels obliged therefore, to preach the gospel. In the same way, it believes that its task involves employing the means of social communication to announce the good news of salvation and to teach men how to use them properly”. The author of [10] further states that, “pastors of souls have the task of instructing and directing the faithful on how to use these media in a way that will ensure their own salvation and perfection and that of all mankind”.

The Church in its documents therefore advises its members to make concerted effort to ensure that the means of social communication are put at the service of the multiple forms of apostolate without delay and as energetically as possible, where and when they are needed. Similarly, it advocates the training of its members in social means of communication and enjoins all Catholic universities and educational institutions to be more assiduous in the promotion of scientific studies and research on social communications and to make their research outcomes available to the service of Christian education. For the Church in [10], “without the knowledge of social means of communication, an effective apostolate is impossible, especially in this 21<sup>st</sup> century that the society is increasingly conditioned by the media.

In furtherance of expression of the positive impression of means of social communication by the Catholic Church, both Pope John Paul II and Pope Benedict XVI emphasized this in most of their messages on World Communication Day (WCD). Pope John Paul II in the 36<sup>th</sup> message on World Communication Day, “*Internet: A New Forum for Proclaiming the Gospel*”, claims that, the Church approaches this new medium provided by the internet with realism and confidence. Like other communications media, the Internet can offer magnificent opportunities for evangelization if used with competence and a clear awareness of its strengths and weaknesses”. [11] Pope Benedict XVI on his part adopted the theme “*The Priest and Pastoral Ministry in a Digital World: New Media at the Service of the Word*”, for the 44<sup>th</sup> World Communications Day. He states that, “using new communication technologies, priests can introduce people to the life of the Church and help our contemporaries to discover the face of Christ” [12]. The Pope believes that a Catholic priest with competence in current digital technology is in a good position as a man of God, to develop and put into practice a pastoral outreach capable of making God concretely present in today’s world and presenting the religious wisdom of the past as a treasure which can inspire man’s efforts to live in the present with dignity while building a better future.

[13] In the same message, Pope Benedict XVI advocates the use of communication technologies by the Church, as this will not only enliven the Church’s pastoral outreach, but also give a “soul” to the fabric of communications that is now at the center of human interactions. The Catholic Church encourages effective communication and encourages its members to effectively deploy communication for the transmission of the gospel and to deliver other services to the public.

#### **IV. Documentation, Communication and Social Impact of the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan**

Notwithstanding the position of the Catholic Church on effective communication, the hallmark of which is ICT

in the 21st century, the deployment rate of ICT in the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan remains rather low. Documentation and communication systems in the archdiocese are largely analog. While it has become less common to see paper (hard-copy) documentation in many developed places, it is nevertheless still fashionable in the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan. Archdiocesan activities such as parochial, facilitation of meetings, agreement deeds to parishioners or clients' referential (bio) data are still largely paper-based. Inadequate deployment of ICT by the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan has led to the loss of essential information about various activities of the parishes and institutions as well as records about the parishioners and clients respectively. Disasters like fire outbreak, flood, theft, vandalism, and so on, constitute threats to continued paper-based documentation. More often than not parishioners go through taking affidavits or oaths-swearing to prove certain information about themselves.

Students and patients in the schools and hospitals of the archdiocese often experience cases of missing documentation and sometimes have to make double payments for the same service. Furthermore, recruitment processes in some of the establishments of the church are still analog. As such, and in some instances, application letters get lost or destroyed as a result of one accident or the other. Incidents such as these have denied many qualified applicants employment opportunities.

Also, parishes and other institutions of the church have lost some of their landed properties like pieces of land, buildings and some other acquisitions gotten through donations and wills due to inadequate documentation and archiving process. In addition, there exist cases where a parishioner from one parish goes through difficult experiences in the process of being identified in another parish (even in the same archdiocese). These challenges emanating from inadequate documentation system are however surmountable in the age of information technology.

Information and communication technology has made the world a global village. People now communicate with ease with the aid of smart phones and smart technologies. In the 21st century, distance is no barrier to social interaction as there exists several technologized social network platforms to choose from. Written information are circulated to millions of people at the same time, just by the click of a button. All these are facilitated by digitalizing work processes through adoption of appropriate technologies.

The Catholic Archdiocese Ibadan has not yet fully embraced technology to drive communication among parishioners. As a result parishioners often find it difficult to relate with the archdiocesan offices from the comfort of their homes (or elsewhere). Moving in person to the parish to get information for example comes with disadvantages such as the possibility of wasted time in hold-ups and accidents. Parishioners often miss important appointments due to inadequate information dispensation architecture.

There is substantial evidence of the impact of the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan on the public especially through its educational and healthcare services. The archdiocese has a number of nursery/primary, secondary and tertiary institutions. Most of the educational institutions of the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan are recognized as providing quality education. Some of the schools are ranked among the best, not only in Oyo State, but Nigeria in general. In addition, a few of the catholic schools are alma maters to many prominent

Nigerians either at their primary, secondary or tertiary level. Although some of the archdiocesan schools have been taken over by the government, the archdiocese has nevertheless established new ones which have maintained the status of citadels of academic excellence both for Oyo state and Nigeria at large.

Regarding healthcare, the archdiocese established many healthcare centres. A number of the healthcare centres established by the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan are stationed in particular locations around Ibadan, while others are mobile; and, all accessible to the public. While the sick access catholic healthcare centres for medical attention, medical practitioners train in them for housemanship, residency, National Youth Service, nursing, internship and full employment, among others. Some of the hospitals and clinics owned and run by the archdiocese include Our Lady of Apostles Catholic Hospital, Oluyoro, Oke-Offa, St. Mary's General Hospital, Eleta, Academy-Olomi, Mapo, Ibadan. Other means through which the archdiocese has impacted on the public include, press media, agriculture, empowerment programmes, and religious/spiritual activities.

## **V. Digitalization of the Processes of the Archdiocese: Towards the E-Church**

A document is a piece of written, printed or electronic matter that provides information or evidence or that serves as an official record. While documentation is the process of providing written details or information about something.[14] In any case, documentation as a process is largely associated with storage, especially in relation to digitalization. To this effect, storage has been defined as the retention of retrievable data on a computer or other electronic system.[15] ICT has made available different means and devices for adequate documentation and storage of data. These devices are capable of safe-keeping their contents over a long period of time. The contents are accessible with much ease on demand.

With the help of the internet, data is stored in a particular Network Access Server (NAS), connected through a network and accessible through computers, smartphones or other electronic devices. According to an author [16] “the primary purpose of a NAS is to serve as a highly-failure-resistant backup solution. They can also serve as collaborative file servers, web servers, virtual machines, and media centres”. Examples of NAS include Sinology, TerraMaster, QNAP, ioSafe and so on. Another internet driven digital storage device is the “Cloud Computing”. One author [17] defined Cloud computing as “the delivery of computing services – including servers, storage, databases, networking, software, analytics, and intelligence- over the internet (“the cloud”) to offer faster innovation, flexible resources and economic scale”. One benefit of using cloud computing services is that users can avoid the upfront cost and complexity of owning and maintaining their own IT infrastructure and instead simply pay for what they use and when they use it. Users of Cloud Computing facilities also enjoy durability, availability and security of their data.

ICT has therefore made available these various storage devices for use by all, including the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan, for any kind of data documentation. Administrators of parishes and other institutions in the archdiocese could deploy these digital storage facilities, at least as back up to the hard-copy documents. With these digital devices, data based collection of all the parishioners of the archdiocese could be created and filed according to their parishes of identification, and made available to the public via a particular website. This no doubt will make inquiries about people's status in the archdiocese very easy because of the ability to sort it

out from anywhere in the archdiocese and beyond via the internet.

With regards to communication, which fundamentally consists of “the means of sending and receiving information, such as phone lines or computers”.[18] As good communication improves and smoothenes relationships, so too poor communication sours and even causes breakdown in relationships. This experience is not different regarding the relationship that exists between Ibadan archdiocese and the public.

The means through which any communication takes place play an important role in effective communication. Without doubt, the emergence of ICT has transformed and revolutionized the communication landscape globally. The advantages of smart devices - computers, phones, tablets and so on - over analog devices like wired telephones and typewriters, among others, cannot be overemphasized. Over and above analog gadgets, smart devices and other products of ICT, make voice over phone communication more effective and interesting. Smart or digital communication enhances real time virtual communication among people across borders.

Furthermore, with the aid of messaging Apps (or platforms for written communication) written materials are exchanged within seconds at a strike of a button on the computer or smartphone. Email, Facebook Messenger, Google Hangouts, Whatsapp, Cell Phone-Based text messaging, and so on, continue to provide revolutionary real time messaging platforms. Most of the digital messaging platforms work on smartphones as well as computers. 21st century ICT has deepened means of digital communication through World Wide Web (www) and Social Networking Platforms (such as Facebook, Twitter, Whatsapp, Instagram, Snapchat and work-oriented LinkedIn. Smart platforms enable people to connect with, and follow posts from associates, friends and communities, among others.

The realities of the potency of ICT in continually redefining and reshaping communication landscapes make it imperative to rethink the administrative processes and communication practices of the archdiocese of Ibadan. Successful digitalization of the administrative processes and communication practices of the archdiocese of Ibadan will position it for an e-Church (or electronic Church), a phenomenon in tandem with contemporary e-phenomena (like e-banking, e-education and e-worship or e-gospel, among others). Various referred to as Internet Church, Online Church, Cyber-church, or Digital Church, the phenomenon e-Church refers to: “a wide variety of ways that Christian religious groups use the internet to facilitate their religious activities, particularly prayer, discussion, preaching and worship services” [19].

In line with this thought, a scholar observed unarguably that, in today’s technological age, “a community is not defined by the building where they meet”. As once submitted, “worshiping digitally is a perfectly legitimate way to express your religion and build community bonds. Rather than changing people to fit into the church, online churches are changing church to fit the needs of the people” [20].

Other benefits of digitizing and digitalizing the administrative practices and communication processes of the Archdiocese of Ibadan include bridging distances between the Archdiocese and members, among other stakeholders. As an e-Church, the Archdiocese of Ibadan will reach more people, members and non members of the Archdiocese (including the aged, the sick or the inevitably homebound as a result of pandemics, such as

smallpox or Covid-19).

## ***VI. Factors Limiting Digitalization of the Archdiocese***

While the development and use of ICTs in the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan offers new tools for evangelism and effective management of the archdiocese, it is puzzling to find that most of the parishes and institutions in the archdiocese do not have sufficiently appreciable computer systems. The result of the lack of appreciable computer systems in the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan is poor documentations with particular reference to baptismal, birth, death, marriage certificates and many other important Church documents.

Other factors limiting digitalization of the Archdiocese of Ibadan include inadequate financial resources; lack of technical know-how; electricity; limited internet access, technophobia; lack of maintenance culture; and conservative attitude of parishioners. It is incontrovertible that technological devices need power supply to function well. The issue of power has been a major problem in Nigeria over the years and this has affected most of the Churches in Nigeria. More so, some of these technological devices and infrastructure are so expensive that they are beyond the purchasing powers of average parishioners. Lastly, there is the problem of poor maintenance culture. Faulty or damaged smart technologies owned by the church are often left unrepaired, abandoned or thrown away.

## ***VII. Conclusion and Recommendations***

As an author [21] opined, “nobody knows for certain what the future of the internet will look like as it is unlikely we are done innovating. Companies continue to experiment with new styles of internet-enabled tools, from virtual reality headsets to smartwatches, and to smart speakers equipped with virtual assistants. Furthermore, technologies that used to be separate from the internet, such as televisions, cellphones and video game consoles have all gotten networked by default in recent years”. The author of [21] further notes, “it is likely that some technologies like email and the basic web will persist, but it's quite possible that some of the social networking and chat systems as well as some of the storage devices will be replaced in future, just as the current players replaced the earlier ones”. Against the background of the continued phenomenal spread of ICT and the intertwined phenomena of digitization and digitalization, it becomes a desideratum for any organization that wants to be relevant in the 21st century to embrace ICT for development. Therefore, for sustainable relevance, and for the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan to continue to make expected impact in social service delivery in the socio-economic space, among others, it must as a matter of policy deepen its present ICT architecture, among others.

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