

# A BRIEF HISTORY OF ST. FRANCIS CATHOLIC CHURCH, IKEM

Written by

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The first attempt by the Roman Catholic Mission to establish a church in Ikem was made between 1885 and 1891 as Ikem was the third place the missionaries visited after Onitsha and Aguleri. Unfortunately, Ikem was very far from the river and the missionaries could not trek. They therefore resorted to sending catechists. Kalu observed this and says,

The desperate state of the Roman Catholic mission in 1900 was in large measure attributable to the ill-informed catechists. Lejeune himself did use catechists and sent them in groups to Aguleri, Ikem, Igbariam and Osomari but they were only regarded as a temporary measure and an attempt to keep pace with the Muslims and Protestants who were spreading rapidly over the region<sup>1</sup>.

During this time, a school was set up at Amaeboito, Ikem whereby the spiritual needs of the pupils who were the converts then, were also met. However, because of the difficulties associated with trekking, this measure did not last long. In view of the difficulty in trekking, Isichei observed thus: "Thirty kilometers up-stream from Aguleri is Igbariam, where there was a catechist. The blacks who live there are farmers, mild and peaceful. Half way from Igbariam is another place called Ikem."<sup>2</sup> When the school was closed, the chiefs of Ikem under the leadership of one Chief Ebogha Nwalutu were not happy that such a good thing that came to them could get away like that. They therefore tried to invite the missionaries again in 1900 as according to Isichei, writing about "Ikem and Igbariam 1900", the chiefs have begged us to settle with them. On advice of Father Prefect, we recently went to see them; our first impression was good; well-laid and clean streets, several magnificent market places. The town comprises about 3 to 4,000 inhabitants.<sup>3</sup> It was observed that the chiefs of Ikem accepted the new found faith as a light to them. When they came another time, there was a makeshift school around Ovilivo some of the pupils of which according to Chief Ozodigbo Aghaduno, were Udogwu Obidike and Ofokansi Ezudu. However, the missionaries tried again and established school around 1947 said Chief Ozodigbo Aghaduno who was one of

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<sup>1</sup> Kalu, O. U. The History of West Africa Ed. England: Longmann. 1980: 49

<sup>2</sup> Isichei, E. The Igbo Worlds. London: Macmillan. 1977 ; 206

<sup>3</sup> Isichei, E. The Igbo Worlds. London: Macmillan. 1977 ; 206

the pupils then. According to Ozodigbo, it was the Irunaanọ age grade that enforced Ikem boys and girls of school age then, to enlist in the school. He recalled that the school however, did not take long time due to certain circumstances and the pupils were moved to Nando and later, some went to Nteje while the school remained closed till 1954

According to Prof Charles Udenze Ilegbune (a Knight of St John International, SAN, OON) while responding to questionnaires sent to him, the Missionaries came to Ikem in January 1954 from their base at St. Joseph's Catholic Church, Aguleri which was then the administrative headquarters of all the towns in our area in matters of primary school administration and also the Parish Head Quarters in matters of Catholic Christian evangelization<sup>4</sup>. Ilegbune observed that the Parish Priest and Supervisor of Schools at Aguleri at that time was Rev. Fr. Holohan. This priest, having already marked him (the young Mr. Charles Ilegbune) out to be the pioneer teacher at Ikem, on an appointed day early in January 1954, took him in his car to Ikem. According to him, he was then a freshly-qualified junior primary school teacher, having only one month before – in December 1953 – completed a one-year (Jan. - Dec., 1953) teacher training at the newly established Preliminary Training Centre (PTC) Nimo, where he was one of the pioneer students. Ilegbune narrated how Rev. Fr. Holohan drove to the expansive *Akanya* house of the then traditional ruler of Ikem, Chief Isaac Ananwude Akpeee, where Akpeee (a warrant chief) and his wife, Mrs. Theresa Chitoo Akpeee (nee Idigo) received them. Father Holohan according to Ilegbune told the couple that he had come to establish a Primary School for Ikem people.

It was observed that an instantaneous glimmer of joy sparked on the faces of the royal couple. Chief Akpee therefore exclaimed that he and his wife were overjoyed by the news and asked when the school would commence. Fr. Holohan told them that the young boy with him was Master Charles Ilegbune, from their nearby town of Igbariam and that he would be the school's first teacher and headmaster. The school, he told them, would start that very January as soon as all the start-off arrangements were completed. Father Holohan did not imagine, neither did he, Ilegbune, that he was talking to the parents of Ilegbune's future mother-in-law, Mrs. Mary Mma Anakọ (nee Akpee), the mother of his beloved wife, Theresa. Fr. Holohan told Chief to give the news of the coming school to his elders and that he would be returning within a week, to meet an enlarged body

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<sup>4</sup> Mr. Charles Udenze Ilegbune has since acquired the following other qualifications, namely: Teachers' Grade II; GCE Advanced Level in English, Literature, Religious Knowledge and History; LL.B Hons (Ife), 2nd Class Upper Division; B.L. (Nig.); LL.M (London); Ph.D (London). Furthermore, Mr. C. U. Ilegbune has since 1988 become the first Professor of Law in the Anambra East Local Govt. Area. In 2005, he was awarded the National Honour of *Officer of the Order of the Niger (OON)* – again the first in the our Local Govt. Area, and two years later in 2007, he became the first in our area to be elevated to the lawyers' prestigious rank of Senior Advocate of Nigeria (SAN).

4. Chief Ozodigbo Aghaduno is a Prominent Politician who fought for the authonomy of Ikem.

consisting of Chief and his elders. Within four or five days according to an informant Fr. Holohan sent word to him to go and inform Chief that he would be coming again on given date within the week, which he, Ilegbune did. On the appointed date, Chief and a body of elders – about 10 of them – received Fr. Holohan and the young Charles Ilegbune at Ikem. Again the venue was Chief Akpee's Akanya house. Fr. Holohan again told them about his vision for a Primary School for Ikem.

As he spoke, the faces of his audience were aglow with joy and enthusiasm. It was also observed that in the group that welcome them were, Maazi Ivemene Akupo (who later became Ilegbune's landlord), one Maazi Ughemem (whose house is near Afọ market), and Maazi Ikeqra Agbe (whose house is opposite Anako's – house and who subsequently became his intimate and abiding friend). Father Holohan told the group that the school would start with Primary One, and develop progressively year by year. He requested them to appoint a start-off venue and mobilize their children – male and female – for the school. He then again re-introduced the young Charles Ilegbune in the same terms as he had done before to Chief Akpee and his wife. After a short consultation by the group, Chief Akpee, speaking for them and the whole Ikem community, profusely thanked Fr. Holohan and told him that the school could start any time he wished; that the venue would be the zinc-roofed market stalls at their *afọ* market place, except on *afọ* market day which comes off every four days when the school should be moved to the *Akanya* house.

The Primary School – St. Francis Primary School, Ikem – officially and formally started in January 1954. The name of the School – St. Francis, after St. Francis of Assisi – was given by Rev. Fr. Holohan, Manager of all Catholic schools in Aguleri Parish. The founder of the school therefore, was Rev. Fr. Holohan. He was later succeeded by Rev. Fr. T. Sweeney as Manager of Parish schools. The Onitsha Diocesan Supervisor of Catholic Schools at the time was Rev. Father Woolfe. The Pioneer Headmaster was Mr. Charles Udenze Ilegbune of Igbariam, whose qualifications at that time were Primary Six Certificate, 1952 (First Position) and PTC Certificate, 1953. Other teachers were Gabriel Ozodigbo Ofokansi of Agbudu, Nando who held a Primary Six Certificate, and one teacher of Aguleri origin whose real name could not be remembered but who was nicknamed "Okolo Anyaegbe". According to Ilegbune, one of the pioneer pupils was Mike Isiogugu of Isinyi who lived with him and served him diligently as a houseboy. It was observed that the young Charles Ilegbune stayed only one-year in St. Francis Ikem after which he left in December 1954 to attend St. Charles College, Onitsha, for Teachers' Grade Two (Higher Elementary) training.. It was observed that despite the enthusiastic welcome which Ikem elders gave to the establishment of the primary school in 1954, there was a general attitude of school evasion among

Ikem boys and girls of school age at that time, and that the teachers with the support of the elders, were compelled to develop and enforce the strategy of pupil-hunting in homes and farms to improve and maintain the population of the school.

It could be recalled that as the main instrument of evangelization used by the society in this period was the school<sup>5</sup>, St Francis Catholic Church, Ikem, started alongside with the school though, without parish status. One understands this as Shanahan put it in 1909 thus, “if we go from town to town talking only about God we know from experience that much of our effort brings no result. But no one is opposed to schools.”<sup>6</sup> Research shows that same building was also being used for Sunday services administered by catechists. One of these catechists who used to assist the Rev fathers who normally came from Aguleri was Mr. Matthew Ebogha, an indigene of Ikem. As the Priest from Aguleri used to come for mass celebrations only on Sundays that fell on afọ market days, Mr. Matthew Ebogha was the auxiliary catechist who conducted Sunday services for the rest of Sundays that were outside afọ days when it was obvious that the catechists from Aguleri could not fulfill the obligation any longer. However, the history of Catholicism in Ikem can never be complete without the mention of Julian Ozodigbo Anakọ, Alex Mụọva Okafo, the father of His Royal Majesty, Eze ezu the first of Ikem and Anukwu Udogu whose contributions could not be quantified. After Mr. Matthew Ebogha, other catechists who later succeeded him as fulltime catechists were Mr. Anthony Uyanwa from Nteje, Mr. Samuel Ofokansi who was popularly called Nwa Mmeri and Mr. Bartholomew Akwuobi who came on the 12<sup>th</sup> of February, 1995 and was there to welcome the first Priest to assume duty as a parish Priest.

It was unfortunate that in spite the advantage of being among the riverside communities that the missionaries first visited, Ikem has for a long time been an outstation from one parish to another. From inception, she was under Aguleri Parish and when St. Anthony of Padua, Igbariam eventually was carved out of St. Joseph, Aguleri, St. Francis moved with her as an outstation. However, it was learnt that the agitation to have a church building of theirs started amongst Ikem people when one Rv Fr Edwin Emeli was the parish priest of St Anthony of Padua, Igbariam,

According to John Obiora answering a question posed to him, “Quest for a church building in Ikem, started after one harvest and bazaar sales where they realized a reasonable amount of money”<sup>7</sup>. It was discovered that it was Mr. Paul Onuora who, realizing that the money could not be wasted on nothing and that since Ikem was the major stakeholder in whatever achievement Nando main

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<sup>5</sup> Kalu, , O. U. The History of West Africa Ed. England: Longmann. 1980:58

<sup>6</sup> Shanahan was once the Bishop of Onitsha Arch Diocese of the Catholic Church.

<sup>7</sup> John Obiora was the Pioneer Treasure of the St Francis catholic Church Building, Ikem, a member of St Francis C.M.O & a Businessman at Onitsha Bridge head market Onitsha

outstation of Igbariam parish which former parish priests have confirmed, felt that Ikem people could finance a church building and suggested so to Mr. John Obiora and Mr. Martin Uchechukwu. The three then met and decided that they must achieve something with the money. The parish priest of Igbariam then was Fr. Edwin Emeli. Mr. Obiora narrated that after they have given the Bishop and the Priest their shares of the bazaar sales, what remained was five thousand (N5,000.00) which they asked John Obiora to keep. They went ahead to use the money to buy trips of sand. Then, realizing that they could not do it alone, they moved to involve the non Catholics as suggested by Paul Onuora. To actualize that, Paul Onuora promised to meet with Mr. Elias Ekwunife. Paul Onuora later met with Mr. Elias Ekwunife who without second thought, accepted to help them realize their dream even though, he was not a catholic. This idea of the three came at the right time as the parish Priest then at Igbariam, Fr. Mike Ndive from Anam, had come up with a zoning programme to fasten evangelization. Fr Ndive saw the need to create zones out of the then Nando main outstation of Igbariam parish which Ikem was one, for faster evangelization. Ikem was then zoned with Isinyi as Nando zone 3. Of course, the zoning formula generated competition amongst the three or four zones in Nando main outstation of Igbariam parish as each zone tried to have a church building of their own. The presence of Fr. Mike Ndive must be marked with greater evangelization in Ikem as Priests of Ala and Dibija who accepted to allow their wives and children to become catholic undisturbed, were wedded with their wives in the catholic church. Of course, he normally admonished them that their wives and children have been chosen by the Heavenly God to worship him and therefore, that they should be allowed to worship Him unmolested. This contributed in the tremendous growth of worshipers at St Francis church. In doing that, some of the Ala Priests and dibija so wedded, later, abandoned their earlier faith and joined Catholicism.

During their first meeting with Mr. Elias Ekwunife, he made them to understand that St Francis Catholic Church building should not be seen as the burden of the Catholics alone but the problem of all Ikem people, catholic, non catholic and all other Christian denominations. This was understood and taken as such. Mr. Elias Ekwunife was then made the Chairman of the Church building committee, and Martin Uchechukwu taken as the secretary while John Obiora was the Treasurer.

Having done this, they called the 'first all Ikem' people's meeting around the year 1987 in regard to the church building and told the people that their intention was that Ikem needed a church of her own. Ikem people, in their usual way, were enthusiastic that such good thing was coming to them after a long time. All well doing Ikem men were levied according to ones financial status and they complied with joy. It should be noted here that it was Chief Anthony Ogbonija Ofoṣkansi

who in consultation with his Epum family, donated a portion of land on which the St Francis church, Ikem building stands, It was observed also that several launchings were organized to this effect among whom that chaired them in several occasions were John Nwakaememụ Nwasolu, Fidelis Chukwuemeka and Godwin Udekwe Mụọkwụgwọ. These people and other Ikem sons and daughters made reasonable donations towards realization of the goal. On the 5<sup>th</sup> December, 1989, John Obiora bought the first set of rods for the St Francis Church, Ikem. It should be mentioned that as Fr. Edwin Emeli laid the foundation stone of St Francis Catholic Church, Ikem around December 1989, it was Fr. Mike Ndivi, a Parish Priest at Igbariam who led the Ikem people to Bishop Ezeanya for the building plan and approval.

Despite all effort by Ikem people to have a church of theirs, St Francis did not get parish status as she moved out of St Anthony of Padua, Igbariam as an outstation of St Joan of Arc Parish Nando in December 18, 1993 with Very Rev. Fr Dr. Emmanuel. O. Nwabude as the Parish Priest. Notwithstanding all odds, Ikem catholic community did not relent in their pursuit to get parish status for their church. In doing that, they embarked on building of Rev Father's house. While the building of the father's house was on, they applied to the Bishop for the upgrade of St Francis to Parish status which came to fruition on the 12<sup>th</sup> August, 2009 with Rev Father Donald Kaosisochukwu Udejaja, who assumed duty on the 15<sup>th</sup> September, 2009, as the first parish priest.. Evidence shows that since St Francis Catholic Church assumed parish status, Ikem has witnessed astronomical increase in the population of the parishioners. To this end, they now have two masses every Sunday to each of which attendance is overwhelming.

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3. Chief Ozodigbo Aghaduno is a Prominent Politician who fought for the autonomy of Ikem.
4. Chief Donatus Onyejaka Ezeudu is the first President General of Ikem