

## **REFLECTION ON BLESSED IWENE MICHAEL CYPRIAN TANSI**

### **By Ikechukwu Eya**

The full name of the holy man we are celebrating today is Blessed Rev. Fr. Iwene Michael Cyprian Tansi, OCSO. I will explain every one of these long names and why he took them. I believe that most of us have heard about Blessed Tansi, with varying degrees of familiarity with his life history. Fr. Tansi, as he was fondly called, is called "Blessed" because he was beatified by Pope St. John Paul II in 1998. He was a priest of the Archdiocese of Onitsha. His first name, given to him at birth, was "Iwene", which is a short form of "Iwegbunam". Michael was the name he took at baptism. Cyprian was the name he took at his profession as a Monk. Tansi was his surname. OCSO stands for the "Order of the Cistercians of Strict Observance". Members of this monastic Order are also called Trappist Monks. Blessed Tansi was from Aguleri in Anambra State, Nigeria.

The Church Calendar features, among other things, feast days of all the saints and Holy people elevated by the Catholic Church. As Catholics growing up from our various backgrounds and localities, we have been hearing about and praying through saints. Saints felt like mysterious figures, special people, mostly white, whose life stories appeared heroic, but remote. Some black people had been proclaimed saints by the Church, such as St. Augustine, St. Cyprian, and recently, St. Josephine Bakhita from South Sudan, but most of these were saints from the early Church from mostly North Africa; we were not very familiar with them. Fr. Tansi kind of brought the trophy home!

The core of this reflection is how God calls us repeatedly to his service and witness and our response to those calls. This is also the central message of today's readings, especially the first reading and the Gospel, where Jonah and the apostles were called and missioned by God. Blessed Tansi did not start out as a Catholic or even a Christian. He was born into an African Traditional Religion-worshipping family in 1903. Like most of us, his Christian journey began with a conversion, which, in his case, happened before age 10, and as the only person in his family to answer that call. Although his parents were not Christians, they recognized the value of the Western education that the missionaries brought and sent Iwene to school. It was while enrolled in the Standard education school system that he developed interest in the Christian message, went through catechesis and received baptism, taking the name Michael. From then on, his response to his Christian calling was total. He developed a consuming love for God, cultivated an extra-ordinary prayer life and astonishing asceticism, and allowed his life to unfold in the context of his new life and experience.

Our Christian calling invites us to be men and women for others. Very often, it takes many of us a whole lifetime to realize this. Michael Tansi understood this very early. The depth of his closeness to God opened up to him vistas of revelations, just as Jesus said, "I praise you Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and learned and

revealed them to little children (Mt. 11:25). Michael Tansi completed his Standard education in flying colors. He noticed that there were shortage of teachers for the schools opened by the missionaries and decided to become a teacher. He attended Teacher training program, receiving his teaching credentials at only 16 years old. This is another call. Those who were familiar with missionary schools in those days or passed through them would remember that it was not for the faint-hearted; they would remember the rigors, the high bars of intellectual and moral expectations and standards that are nothing like what we have today. After teaching for many years, Michael Tansi was made a Headmaster of one of the Mission schools. We can only imagine what it means to be made a headmaster of a mission school in 1925. This represents yet another call. And what this means is that Michael Tansi kept listening to God and answering his calls to him for service in different capacities. He was not driven by desire for greater salaries, but by the needs at the time, borne out of the love for God. St. Paul said that, **Caritas Christi Urget Nos** (the love of Christ moves us urges us on. 2 Cor 5:14-15). Part of the lessons we learn from this is that God calls us at different times in our lives and we have to continuously listen and answer, like Michael Tansi did. God's call is not definitive, once and for all thing. We are called to be Christians, to be parents, civil leaders, a mentor to others, an exemplary and humane neighbor, manager, employer or friend, etc. We have to pay attention to what God is using us to accomplish in our lives, in the lives of others and in the society - in other words, the movement of God in our lives.

Michael Tansi received the call to the priesthood as a headmaster, and responded affirmatively, despite that this went against the grand plans and intentions of his family in sending him to the missionary school in the first place. It was a "gun battle" with his family on this, but at the end of the day, God's plan won. What lessons are there for us to learn as Igbos, who often have legendary and fool-proof plans for our children for their material success in this world? How we want them to be doctors, lawyers, Engineers, etc. We have to remember that God has plans for all his children and we have to leave room for God in our plans, because the children we have were delivered by us, but in truth were given to us to keep, for stewardship, of which we will render account. Their creator may have a different plan for them. So, we have to listen to their interests, as we guide them (and not always what we want them to be), as those interests might be their vocation - where God is calling them. Recognizing and following them often underlie personal fulfillment and career success.

Michael Tansi was ordained a priest in Onitsha by Bishop Charles Heerey on December 19, 1937. He was an exemplary priest, ascetic, prayerful and humble, but not timid. He fought to overthrow some of the evils of the time, including such social ills as maltreatment of women, fetish beliefs, oppressive pagan practices and faith lukewarm-ness. His mother was a victim of fetish beliefs, as she was accused of being a witch and murdered by pagans. He is credited with the saying that if you decide to be a Christian, you might as well live entirely for God; and that if you decide to eat vulture, make sure you indulge in enough of them, eat at least 7, so that when you are called a vulture eater, you really deserve the name. Don't go and eat tadpoles when you

decide to eat frogs. He ran a school and a dormitory for boys, whom he trained in discipline and supported their intellectual and spiritual growth. He catechized and baptized some of these boys. One of them is Francis Cardinal Arinze. Take on Tansi's cook. Fr. Tansi established a social center and took special interest in preparing young women for marriage and skills acquisition.

Fr. Michael Tansi responded to yet another call, as a priest: to be a monk. Priesthood and monastic life are two different things, despite the fact that some monks can be called to be priests and priests can be monks. Fr. Tansi's Bishop, Charles Heerey, was addressing priests on one of their days of recollection and expressed to them his desire to establish a monastery in Nigeria. That was in 1949. There was no monastery in Nigeria then. He asked that priests who would like to volunteer to be sent to a monastery in Europe to be trained so as to come back and help found a monastery in Nigeria should let him know. Your guess is as good as mine! Fr. Michael Tansi was said to have volunteered! Fr. Michael and his local Ordinary arrived at the Cistercian Monastery in England in 1950 and he handed Michael over to the Cistercian authorities. Michael would be at the Monastery for the next 14 years beginning with novitiate. He struggled with this but kept his commitment, invoking his native discipline and drive. As it pleased God, Michael could not realize his goal of coming back to Nigeria to establish a monastery, due to a combination of factors, including post-independence political unrests in Nigeria, and as he took ill in England and died on January 20, 1964.

Everyone around Michael, from the time he was baptized as a teenager up to his life as a Monk in England, knew him as a holy man. Human testimonies matched divine verdict in the miraculous healings attributed to his intercessions after his death.

Fr. Michael was exhumed and brought back to Nigeria in 1988, following the opening of the Cause of his sainthood. He has moved through different stages of sainthood making process and was beatified by Pope St. John Paul II in 1998. Only one step remains for him to be canonized - an approval of just one more miracle attributed to his intercession.

Who is a saint? Who is called to be saint? And who should be a saint? One common denominator about saints is that they were holy. So, holiness is an essential ingredient of sainthood. "Be holy, because I, the Lord your God, am holy" (Lev 19:2). Holiness is a universal imperative and call issued to every human being, particularly Christians. If we are of God, we must "smell" like him. But what constitutes holiness? What does it mean to be holy? Two scripture passages answer these questions vividly. "Hear O Isreal, the Lord your God is one Lord, and you shall LOVE the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your mind and with all your soul..." (Deut 6:5). And the twin imperative: "You should LOVE your neighbor as yourself" (Lev. 19:18). Love means fulfilling your obligations and the responsibilities of your state in life; treating others the way you would like to be treated, by recognizing God in all his creations. This was the hallmark of Blessed Tansi's professional and religious life. So, saints are not some special people selected by God and equipped to live extra-ordinary lives; they are ordinary people, like you and me, who chose to live by the will of God and his precepts, made manifest in the life and teaching of

Christ, in spite of the difficulties, challenges and even persecutions involved. They are like Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ did not enjoy being crucified, He did not even want to die. He prayed and asked God to allow the cup to pass by him. But he was ready to do the will of God, the Father, whatever it takes. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me..." (Mt 16:24). This is particularly instructive for those "Christians" who believe in and preach only prosperity gospels and cross-less Christianity.

May we continue to pray through the intercession of this brother of ours, for our needs, both material and spiritual ones, and also to pray that the will of God may come to its fullness in the remaining process of Blessed Tansi's canonization by the Church.