


# They have killed your prophets: Roman Catholic Church priests in Nigeria and (non)state actors

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Received: 07 Apr. 2024

Accepted: 20 May 2024

Published: 03 July 2024

**How to cite this article:**Uroko, F.C., 2024, 'They have killed your prophets: Roman Catholic Church priests in Nigeria and (non)state actors', *Theologia Viatorum* 48(1), a246. <https://doi.org/10.4102/tv.v48i1.246>**Copyright:**© 2024. The Author.  
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This article examines why Roman Catholic priests are targeted by kidnappers and Islamic extremists in Nigeria. Although there have been studies carried out on kidnapping in Nigeria, to the best of the researcher's knowledge, the literature on why Roman Catholic Church priests are targets of kidnappers in Nigeria is difficult to find. In this study, the literature was extended to this area. Data were collected through classified documents from national and international gazettes and periodicals and analysed using documentary analysis. According to the findings, Roman Catholic priests are heavily involved in citizen education and human rights awareness in Nigeria and command media attention whenever they are attacked. Furthermore, the huge financial returns from the priests and their active participation in politics are other motivating factors for their present victim status. The recommendations are also discussed.

**Contribution:** Roman Catholic priests of Nigeria are targeted because of their active participation in politics, their efforts to strengthen Christianity in Nigeria, their role in educating citizens about their rights and privileges, and the large ransoms obtained from the relatives of these priests when they are kidnapped. These circumstances have practical implications for theology.

**Keywords:** religion; culture; priests; prophets; Roman Catholic; kidnappers; justice.

## Introduction

Priests in Nigeria have been subject to attack by non-state actors. They include Pentecostal, Orthodox and Roman Catholic priests. For instance, a pastor of the Redeemed Christian Church of God (RCCG), Olugbenga Olawore, and 14 others were kidnapped on 19 April 2024 (Agency Report 2024). Also, on May 29, 2022, His Eminence Samuel Kanu, the Prelate of the Methodist Church Nigeria, was kidnapped along the Enugu-Port Harcourt Expressway (Odunsi 2022). However, this study specifically focussed on Roman Catholic Church priests (both diocesan and religious priests) who were victims of non-state actors.

On 01 July 2022, Roman Catholic priests held a protest against the massacre of one of their own, Reverend Father Vitus Borogo, who was the Chaplain of the Catholic Community at Kaduna Polytechnic. According to Enyiocha (2022), more than 700 Catholic priests were participating in the protest. They were protesting against the kidnapping and killing of Roman Catholic priests in various parts of Nigeria. For instance, some of the Roman Catholic priests who have been killed include Rev. Fr. John Gbakaan of the Diocese of Minna; The Rev. Fr. Godfrey Chimezie of St. Theresa's Parish, Umuahia; and The Rev. Fr. Christopher Odia (DailyTrust 2022). These priests were supposedly killed by their abductors after they were kidnapped and ransomed. Also worrisome is the kidnapping of many priests. Take, for instance, the kidnapping of Frs. Peter Udo and Philemon Oboh by armed persons on 02 July 2022, and Fr. Emmanuel Silas, who was abducted in Kaduna on 04 July 2022 (Mayaki 2022). A group known as *Aid to the Church in Need* revealed that at least 18 priests had been kidnapped in Nigeria as of July, with five in the first week of July alone (Mayaki 2022). Furthermore, the Roman Catholic nuns have also been victims of kidnappers. On 05 October 2023, three daughters of the Missionary Daughters of Mater Ecclesiae and Risen Lord congregations were kidnapped. The nuns, Srs. Rosemary Ejiwokeoghere Osiowhemu and Josephine Mary Chinyekwu belong to the Missionary Daughters of Mater Ecclesiae, and Sr. Maria Ngozi Okoye belongs to the Risen Lord congregations (Ugwu 2023).

The issue of kidnapping is not new in Nigeria. Even before Nigeria's colonisation by Britain, kidnapping has been a norm. People were kidnapped and used as war and sex slaves. Looking at

history, during the regime of Major General Aguiyi Ironsi, the then military president of Nigeria, and Lt. Col. Francis Adegunde, both were abducted on 29 July 1966, at the government house in Ibadan and then tortured and killed (Alumona 2023). It was on 10 July 2003, that the then governor of Anambra State, Chris Ngige, was kidnapped. Ezigbo (2020) calls it the first civilian coup. Thus, the Nigerian political arena is not a new context for issues of kidnapping. There was an era when there were kidnappings by the Niger Delta militants, who used that to send warning signals to the Nigerian government about the desecration and destruction done to their environment by multinational oil companies. According to Aghedo (2015), the kidnapping was for ransom and not to kill, and it was mostly carried out by youth in the region. Akpan (2017) reveals that the kidnapping in the Niger Delta had economic and political motivations coupled with a liberation motive. However, the shift from kidnapping that has economic and political motives to the kidnapping of Roman Catholic priests is something that demands investigation.

Despite the fact that religious persecution of the Roman Catholic Church is evident, such as the 04 June killing of at least 40 people attending a Pentecost Mass in Owo Roman Catholic Church (Burton & Binniyat 2022), the targeting of church priests for kidnapping and even murder is becoming a recurring phenomenon. It was on this premise that Ampadu (2019) reported that the Roman Catholic Church is facing enormous challenges at the hands of the government and politicians. This is similar to what the Prophet Elijah faced in Israel in I Kings 19:10. This was a discouraging time, and Elijah cried because the prophets were being killed, and he felt help was needed. Critically examining the arguments Elijah offered, there were actually vital reasons for him to remain alive, demonstrating the irrational nature of disbelief and fear (Guzik 2018). Essentially, Elijah is stating that life is unfair here. If he is doing God's work, his life should not be jeopardised (although this is generally the case). He, like us, desires an uncomplicated existence (Atozmom 2022). This shows that religious persecution is something that did not start in Nigeria; however, the tool at the disposal of the prophets of old was Yahweh. What tools can help persecuted Nigerian priests overcome a complex and polarised society such as Nigeria?

This study examined causative factors for the incessant attacks on Roman Catholic Church priests in Nigeria. Specially, the Roman Catholic Church and National Development. In addition, it explores the political, economic and social challenges in Nigeria. It also discusses the reasons for the widespread kidnapping of Roman Catholic priests in Nigeria.

## Research methods and design

A phenomenological approach was used in this qualitative study. A phenomenological approach allows perceptions, viewpoints and understandings to be analysed and then used to generate an understanding of what it feels like to

experience an event (Regoli 2017). Data were collected through classified documents from national and international gazettes, periodicals and databases. Also, journals and textbooks were consulted. The data were analysed using documentary analysis. According to Hefferman (2009), documentation analysis refers to the numerous techniques involved in evaluating and interpreting data derived from the inspection of documents and records pertinent to a certain subject.

## The problem in Nigeria

When Chinua Achebe eulogised that the trouble with Nigeria is leadership, people took his statement with a grain of salt. In his words:

The trouble with Nigeria is simply and squarely a failure of leadership. There is nothing basically wrong with the Nigerian character. There is nothing wrong with the Nigerian land, climate, water, air, or anything else. The Nigerian problem is the unwillingness or inability of its leaders to rise to the challenge of responsibility and personal example, which are the hallmarks of great leadership. (Achebe 1983)

Nigeria is suffering from leadership challenges in the political, social and economic spheres, which has really affected religious unity and sustainable development in Nigeria. Politically, many people who are vying for political positions are going there for their personal motives, personal gain and cabal control. Nigeria's political office-holders have been involved in a number of high-profile corruption cases. Politicians will claim to be fighting corruption while using anti-corruption agencies in Nigeria to fight political opponents. It was on this premise that Sogunro (2019) lamented that politics in Nigeria has ceased to be a conversation about the people and the ideas that best represent their interests, but politicians are concerned about what affects them, forcing Nigerians to watch this sad display of impunity by Nigerian leaders. Regrettably, money intended for the provision of water and other necessities to citizens is being stolen by political office-holders. Also, politicians, especially governors of states in Nigeria, are owing workers' salaries, yet they live flamboyant lifestyles with monies meant for salaries. During the coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19), it was discovered that palliatives that were given to state governors to share with suffering Nigerians were diverted to private warehouses by these governors. This shows the level of loss of conscience among Nigerian politicians. Unfortunately, they are very religious, pretending to be pious and zealous Christians and Muslims. There was a case of the governor of Cross River State, who was owing workers' salaries, but he went to a church to donate 25 million naira. The priest of the church rejected the money, insisting that it should be used to pay the state workers' salaries (Ike 2022).

Socially, what is observed is the blatant taking of lives by militants, otherwise known as Fulani herdsmen. They kill in the hundreds and thousands with no reprimand from the government or security agencies. Duke and Agbaji (2020:134)

reported that Nigeria is facing a significant internal and security challenge that has political, economic and environmental implications. The most worrying aspect of the current situation is the pillaging, raping, killing and kidnapping by the so-called Fulani herders. There are reports that security agencies give cover to Fulani militants to kill and take people's land. There are also reports of police brutality. The police, which is supposed to bring social cohesion and a peaceful society, are involved in killing Nigerians. They collect money on the highway, blatantly and obscenely. They have also been reported to have taken people's property by threatening their victims with the gun given to them by the Nigerian government. This led to mass protests in October 2020, otherwise known as the ENDSARS protest.

There are serious economic challenges in Nigeria. The number of poor people in Nigeria seems to be higher than war-torn Syria and Libya. The international community seems not to have enough data about poverty in Nigeria. We have millions of graduates from Nigerian tertiary institutions spread around the country, only for the government to say that there is no work for them. This may have contributed to the increasing cybercrime and blood money rituals going on in different parts of the country.

### The Roman Catholic Church and national development

The first Catholic presence in Nigeria dates back to the arrival of Portuguese explorers in the 15th century. Missionary activities were initiated along the coastal regions, particularly in Benin City, where the Oba of Benin was receptive to the Catholic faith. These early efforts did not establish a lasting Christian community. The Portuguese mission in the various missions between 1472 and 1621 failed to establish the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria. Thus, the 15th century laid the foundation for Roman Catholicism in Nigeria (Uroko 2024). Various factors, including local resistance, the transatlantic slave trade and competition with Islam, contributed to the decline of the initial Catholic missions. The significant growth of Catholicism in Nigeria began in the 19th century. The Society of African Missions (SMAs), founded in France, was instrumental in this revival. The SMA is a catholic missionary society founded in 1856 by Venerable Bishop Melchior de Marion Brésillac (SMA n.d.). They were very much involved in evangelism. It was in 1860 that Father Francesco Borghero, an SMA missionary, arrived in Lagos, marking a turning point in the establishment of a permanent Catholic presence. According to the information, on December 2nd 1860, he was nominated as the 'superior ad interim' of the Vicariate Apostolic of Dahomey. On 05 January 1861, the 30-year-old Borghero, accompanied by two priests, set sail for West Africa on a French warship. Reaching Gorée, the destination of the ship, they were well received by the Holy Ghost Fathers who had been based there and in Dakar (on the mainland opposite Gorée) for almost two decades (Hogan 2012). According to Gantly (1992):

Borghero's third visit to Lagos took place in September 1863, when he was besieged by delegations of Christians asking him to

open a station. These were mainly returned slaves and their families and descendants who were uneasy with the necessity of sending their children to Protestant schools. During his stay he baptised some 13 adults and ministered to a congregation of some 200 people on Sunday September 27th, baptising on that day a further 45 adults. Borghero returned to Lagos in April 1864 where on 11th of the month he was given a plot of land for the mission by the Governor. His companion, Fr. Hector Noche (he was to die later that year in Porto Novo), remained on after Borghero's departure, and presided over the blessing of the mission land in a ceremony attended by some 500 people, including a number of Protestants. (pp. 159–160)

The Vicariate of Benin Coast was established in 1870, covering areas that are part of modern-day Nigeria. Missionaries focussed on establishing schools and healthcare facilities, which became pivotal in attracting converts and promoting Catholic education and social services (Makozi & Afolabi 1982).

The place of the Roman Catholic Church in Nigeria cannot be overemphasised. Its role includes contributing to Nigeria's economic, social, political and religious development. The Roman Catholic Church has been involved in poverty eradication programmes in various communities in Nigeria. The Catholic Church emphasises that poverty poses a significant danger to humanity, advocating for solidarity between the affluent and the impoverished as aligned with the divine intention of creation (Asogwa 2020). Lebofa (2021) observes the extensive historical involvement of the Catholic Church in combating poverty, engaging in charitable activities and developmental efforts in line with its commitment to advocating for and supporting the less fortunate, as guided by the principles of Catholic Social Teaching.

Asogwa (2020) went on to say that many people are employed in Roman Catholic Church building projects and others are employed as watchmen, teachers, accountants, office messengers, divers and so on. The Roman Catholic Church has also been involved in building schools that the rich and the poor can attend, compared to the costly schools that other churches have built. These schools employ both academic and non-academic staff. They also give scholarships to indigent students. It is crucial to highlight that from 1910 to 1915, the dominance of Roman Catholic influence in education became increasingly apparent. Acknowledging the significant desire for Western education within the nation and understanding that schools provided the most effective means 'to attract people to our faith', the Catholic Church initiated an ambitious educational initiative (Ekechi 1971). The Roman Catholic Church has also built hospitals. It employs people and pays them a salary. It brings treatment to the doorsteps of Nigerians. Hospitals supported by the Roman Catholic Church represent a distinctive aspect of the contemporary healthcare system (Ashley & O'Rourke 1978).

### Elijah: They have killed the Prophets

In this passage, Elijah expresses his feelings of despair and isolation. He believes that he is the only faithful follower of



God left, as he perceives that the Israelites have abandoned their covenant with God, destroyed his altars and killed his prophets. Elijah's statement reflects his sense of loneliness and the challenges he faces as a prophet.

In the era of Elijah, there was a prevalent practice of syncretism, where different religious beliefs were blended together. This syncretism did not necessarily seek to exclude Yahweh, except in the perspective of extreme individuals such as Jezebel, but rather aimed to merge traditional and contemporary beliefs. However, this inclusive approach presented a challenge to Elijah's commitment to monotheism. According to Olley (1998:45), Elijah's ascension symbolises either his purity or a validation of his prophetic mission.

### Muslim fundamentalism in Northern Nigeria

There have been numerous religious fundamentalist movements in northern Nigeria. There is the Maitatsine movement. In the early 1980s, the Maitatsine movement, led by Mohammed Marwa Maitatsine, emerged as a radical Islamist group. Maitatsine preached against Westernisation and the Nigerian state, leading to violent uprisings in Kano and other cities, resulting in thousands of deaths. Mohammed Marwa referred to himself as a prophet – to the extent that one account reports that some of his followers referred to Marwa in lieu of the Prophet Muhammad as God's prophet – and a reformer (*mujaddid*), with reference to Usman Dan Fodio (Adesoji 2011). He was also notable for his vociferous condemnation of Western culture, education and technology and Marwa was known to refer to anyone who sent their children to a state school as an 'infidel', which is echoed in the contemporary Boko Haram movement (Isichei 1987).

Boko Haram, meaning 'Western education is forbidden', was founded in 2002 by Mohammed Yusuf. The group initially focussed on opposing Western-style education and government corruption but evolved into a violent insurgency. United States Commission on International Religious Freedom (n.d.) found that Boko Haram targets include churches, individual Christians, persons engaged in 'unIslamic' activities, Muslim critics, northern elders, schools, police stations, government buildings, newspapers and banks. After Yusuf's death in 2009, Boko Haram became increasingly radicalised under Abubakar Shekau, carrying out bombings, kidnappings and attacks on civilians, schools and government institutions. The group declared a caliphate in parts of Northern Nigeria and pledged allegiance to ISIS in 2015, rebranding itself as the Islamic State West Africa Province (ISWAP). Boko Haram has caused significant humanitarian crises, with thousands killed and millions displaced. Since the beginning of the conflict, more than 43 000 people have died from Boko Haram violence and those who have survived this violence are often left with enduring physical and mental trauma (Adeboye 2021).

### Roman catholic priests as victims of kidnapping

Catholicism was first brought to Nigeria by the Portuguese circa 1472, but its expansion was limited until the 1800s. During this later period, Catholic missionaries from various European nations, including France, Spain and Italy, began arriving in Nigeria, leading to significant growth of the Catholic Church in the country (Asojo & Asojo 2015). The Roman Catholic Church is the largest church in Nigeria, notwithstanding that it does not use the evangelism and crusades that Pentecostals used to draw members. Since 2015, church priests have become an endangered species. Between January 2021 and July 2022, over 62 priests have been kidnapped in different parts of Nigeria, with the Roman Catholic Church getting the highest causality. Some of the Roman Catholic priests were kidnapped in their parishes, others in their houses, others on the road and others were kidnapped on prayer grounds (Table 1). Despite the Roman Catholic Church's efforts to foster mutual respect and cooperation with individuals of different faiths, including Orthodox Christians, Jews, Muslims, Protestants and others, it has unfortunately faced incidents of clergy kidnapping (Asojo & Asojo 2015).

**TABLE 1:** Selected cases of kidnapped (killed) Roman Catholic priests in Nigeria.

S/N	Names	State	Source	Date
1	Rev. Fr. Victor Ishiwu, serving as the Parish priest of St. Jude's Catholic Church in Eburummiri, Ibagwa-Aka, Igbo-Eze South Local Government Area, was abducted	Enugu State	Reporter 2022	19 November 2022
2	The Rev. Fr. Christopher Odia, the priest with Roman Catholic Church in Ikabigbo community in Etsako West Local Government Area, was kidnapped and killed	Edo State	Sunday 2022	26 June 2022
3	Father John Mark Cheitnum was kidnapped	Kaduna State	Okakwu 2022	July 15, 2022
4	Father Donatus Cleopas was kidnapped	Kaduna State	McKeown 2022	15 July 2022
5	Father John Gbaka, who served as the parish priest of Saint Anthony Church in Gulu within the diocese of Minna, was abducted and killed	Niger State	Jannamike 2021	15 January 2021
6	The Rev. James Kantoma was kidnapped	Plateau state	Anuku 2022	13 June 2021
7	Chinedu Nwadike, the deputy registrar at Spiritan University in Abia State, was taken captive	Abia State	Okeoma 2022	12 August 2022
8	Catholic seminarian, Emmanuel Nwafor was kidnapped	Enugu State	Ugwu 2022	05 August 2022
9	Fr. Emmanuel Silas of the diocese of Kafanchan was kidnapped	Kafanchan LGA	Mayaki 2022	04 July 2022
10	Rev. Fr. Victor Ishiwu was kidnapped	Enugu State	Sahara Reporters 2022b	19 November 2022
11	Fr. Vitus Borogo was kidnapped and killed	Kaduna State	Hassan-Wuyo 2022	26 June 2022
12	Father Peter Ochang, serving as the chaplain of the RCM Parish in the Alok Catholic Diocese of Ogoja, was abducted	Nasarawa State	Asare 2022	25 November 2022
13	Father Joseph Aketeh was kidnapped and killed	Kaduna	Junno 2022	18 April and 20 April 2022
14	Father Peter Amodu was kidnapped	Benue State	Burton & Binniyat 2022	06 July 2022

S/N, serial number.

Most of these kidnappings were carried out by the Fulani herdsmen. Among those targeted in kidnappings are priests and other clergy members. Priests have been kidnapped for ransom, a tactic that criminal elements have used to exploit the insecurity in the region. These Fulani herdsmen typically demand ransom payments, leveraging the influential positions of clergy within their communities to exert pressure on the church and the community to meet their demands. It was obscene to learn that Nigerian Army was working with Fulani herdsmen to kidnap for ransom in Abia as made known by the police (Sahara Reporters 2022b).

## Why are roman catholic priests victims of kidnapping and killing?

State and non-state actors have launched a scathing attack on Roman Catholic priests. The reason for this cannot be overemphasised.

### Participation in politics

The Roman Catholic priests appear to be dissatisfied with Nigeria's political developments. We have seen Roman Catholic priests rebuking corrupt governments and private individuals who are known to be corrupt or indulge in conflicts. There are also Roman Catholic priests who are known to be vocal in the media. They are involved in a media campaign against any unjust practices by the government. For instance, the Roman Catholic Reverend Father Matthew Hassan Kukah, Bishop of Sokoto Diocese, is known to rebuke the government. He remained steadfast in his criticism of poor governance in Nigeria, determined to see positive change. Remaining silent in the presence of injustice is akin to condoning corruption. His words are not directed at any particular government; he has been vocal about these issues before the current administration and will persist even afterwards. It is imperative that we collectively and earnestly work towards repairing our nation. Our current situation is not coincidental; we must unite to address it. It is human greed that spawns many of the world's problems, and human actions are often the root of all evil (Ankeli 2021).

The Roman Catholic Church's priests have been vocal against government indifference to the current security challenges Nigerians are going through. Poor leadership has been and continues to be the most unfortunate factor in Nigeria's general development and rise (Ozoigbo 2019:278). The Roman Catholic priests are dissatisfied that so many Nigerians are in internally displaced persons (IDPs) camps, and the government appears unconcerned. Onuminya (2022) expressed concern that a government failing to ensure the safety of its citizens loses its moral legitimacy. He observed a troubling trend of declining humanity in Nigeria, with this erosion increasingly accepted as the norm. This situation is exacerbated by rising unemployment and poverty, amplifying the issue of insecurity as a significant concern. Typically, Roman Catholic priests speak out against government policies that worsen insecurity, poverty and unemployment. As per Adenike (2021), insecurity stands as the primary cause

of substantial disruptions in poverty and unemployment, with both poverty and unemployment showing notable and meaningful increases in response to insecurity shocks.

In various meetings, the majority of Roman Catholic priests have urged the government to prioritise Nigeria's security and development. Following the meeting, the Catholic Bishops Conference stated, regrettably, it has become routine for Nigerians to awaken daily to mourn the tragedies of killings, lynching, kidnappings and lawlessness across the nation. The absence of consistent measures to prosecute criminals and the perceived insincerity in safeguarding lives and property by both the Federal Government and security forces have instilled fear in many Nigerians, leaving them anxious about their safety on a daily basis.

Roman Catholic priests have always insisted on the government protecting the security of their citizens. They rarely hide their feelings towards any government that is not doing well.

### Still active in church activities

Islamic fundamentalists who thought that the church would not be holding services are surprised to see the Catholic Church still organising church services. The Roman Catholic priests usually encourage their members to continue to come to church services notwithstanding the persecution they receive from Boko Haram and Islamic fundamentalists. For instance, the rampaging Fulani vandalised and torched two of the parishes of the Roman Catholic Church in Sokoto on 14 May 2022, over the Reverend Father's preaching against Nigeria's government, headed by a Fulani man. As per Bishop Matthew Hassan-Kukah of the Catholic Diocese of Sokoto, all Masses within the Sokoto metropolis have been halted (Oyero 2022). However, within a short time, Roman Catholic priests encouraged its members to start attending churches, which was not a welcome development for Islamic fundamentalists. They felt the best way to vent their anger was to kidnap Roman Catholic priests and kill some of them who were perceived to be stubborn. Giovanni (2022) lamented that for various reasons, Catholic priests are targeted for kidnapping. Clancy notes that priests have been unwilling to cave in to the pressure of radical groups, instead continuing to lead their churches despite the dangers.

### Citizen education

Roman Catholic priests have been notifying Nigerians about the atrocities of the Nigerian government. They educate both the literate and illiterate about government corruption and ineptitude. These Roman Catholic priests encourage Nigerians to vote out corrupt leaders and shun elections based on tribalism, ethnicity and religion. Civil education serves as a means of socialisation to cultivate capable and engaged citizens (Biesta 2019) and aids efficient political participation. Politicians who use religion to manipulate people tend to target Roman Catholic priests as a way of threatening people not to educate them about

their rights and privileges. Burton and Binniyat (2022) found that Roman Catholic priests always educate their congregations about their civil and political rights. This is what cabals in Nigeria do not want, as they are always interested in how to siphon all the money in the national treasury. They send boys to kidnap these priests so that others will be afraid of talking.

### Profile and self-esteem

These kidnapers believe that Roman Catholic priests are respected by their congregations as well as by the general public. Most times, Roman Catholic priests have their injunctions published in newspapers, radio, television and social and digital media. Roman Catholic priests are believed to demonise Islam through their teachings in the media. They are believed to instruct their members and other non-members on teachings and morals contrary to the teachings of radical Islam. Also, Fulani herdsmen also believe that any attack on Roman Catholic priests brings national and international attention and, in a way, enables the Islamic terrorists to achieve their aim of making Christians afraid of carrying on with their activities. Burton and Binniyat (2022) suggested that because of the global influence and organisational framework of the Church, any assault, no matter how remote the location, ensures the desired international media coverage sought by terrorists. To a great extent, it has been paying off for the Fulani kidnapers.

### Huge returns

Kidnapers are counting millions as evidence of their nefarious activities. The majority of the money paid to release Roman Catholic priests is publicly acknowledged, making attacks on Roman Catholic priests imminent. Between 2nd July and 4th July, the Roman Catholic Church acknowledged the abduction of four priests: Udo Peter and Philemon Uboh were both taken in Edo State on 2nd July; Luigi Brena, an Italian priest, was also abducted on 3rd July in Edo State; and Emmanuel Silas was kidnapped in Kaduna on July 4th. Subsequently, the priests were freed by their captors, reportedly following the payment of ransom (Okakwu 2022). Unfortunately, when this money is paid, these kidnapping groups use it to recruit more Muslims, especially teenagers who are willing and able to escape poverty. These young Muslims see kidnapping as the only way to save their families from want. With their first gain, they are willing to engage in more kidnapping businesses. Thus, the circle becomes systemic. Giovanni (2022) disclosed that the Roman Catholic Church has been prepared to provide ransoms of up to N200,000 demanded by extremist factions. Sometimes there have been cases where the government has stepped in to assist in the payment of ransom. These kidnapers see it as the only way to get their own share of the 'national cake'. Unfortunately, some government officials who are involved in this business of kidnapping push the government to pay the kidnapers and still go back to collect their share from the kidnapers. Thus, terrorists extort money from the

government through kidnapping, and state actors also extort money from the government indirectly.

## Implications of the endangered species status of Roman Catholic priests

The increasing kidnapping of Roman Catholic priests has reinforced the strain on religious fault lines in Nigeria. Nigerians' sociological base is threatened by religious suspicion in Nigeria. Nigeria's structure is streamlined between its Christian and Muslim populations. The Roman Catholic Church has the highest population of Christians in Nigeria. According to Ikenwa (2019), the population of baptised Roman Catholics stands at 23.5m, with over 3000 parishes scattered all over Nigeria. Obi (2022) highlighted that beyond the division into over 60 dioceses nationwide, the Roman Catholic Church's unity and universality represent a strength unparalleled in numerous social contexts.

Christians see the attack on Roman Catholic priests as a clear sign of religious war against Christians. Christians nationwide express concerns about the government's failure to address the escalating insecurity (BBC 2022). Nzor (2022) expressed dismay that despite the deaths of more than 12 Catholic priests in 2022 and the abduction of numerous others across Nigeria, the Nigerian authorities and security agencies have allowed this disturbing trend to persist. This is the reason that Christians are rejecting the Muslim-Muslim tickets of political parties in Nigeria. According to Christians, the incumbent president, who is from the north and witnessed the kidnapping of Roman Catholic priests by Islamic extremists, should not be re-elected. Thus, voting for candidates based on religious lines is now the order of the day.

In Roman Catholic churches, there is fear among congregants. Everyone seems to suspect each other. People will be in the church but are prepared to rush out under the slightest provocation. In fact, in some parishes, worshippers are being searched before they are allowed to enter. Roman Catholic Churches, which are usually beehives of activity with marketers selling their products, have turned into ghost communities out of fear of what would happen next.

The issue of religious conflict can easily be aggravated by the indiscriminate kidnapping and killing of Roman Catholic priests and the ineptitude or a lack of political will on the part of the government to control the situation. If Roman Catholic parishioners in southern Nigeria decide to reciprocate the activities of terrorist herdsmen, there is the likelihood that a full-scale conflict will emanate, which will lead to the loss of lives and destruction of properties worth millions of naira.

## Conclusion

Roman Catholic priests are targets of attack because of their active participation in politics, strengthening of Christianity



in Nigeria, education of the citizens on their rights and privileges, and the huge ransoms received from relatives of these priests whenever they are kidnapped. This tells of the sorry security situation in Nigeria, where a section of the Christian religion has come under severe attack. It began with an attack on Roman Catholic Churches in the north-east, then moved to the north-west, then to the north-central and finally to southern Nigeria. One will not forget in a hurry the brutal murder of Rev. Fr. Odia, who was kidnapped and killed on 26 June 2022, by extremists under the guise of religious hatred. This kidnapping and killing of Catholic priests has instilled fear in the hearts of Nigerians, especially the Christian community, which sees this as religious persecution. It is paramount to state that the kidnapping of Roman Catholic priests in Nigeria is a resultant effect of poor leadership in Nigeria at all levels – local government level, state government level and federal government level. This reflects in the increasing level of poverty, irrespective of religious affiliation. There is a need for Muslim leaders and clerics to speak out against the activities of Fulani herdsmen, who use cattle rearing as a cover for kidnapping and other nefarious activities. Also, there is the need for the prosecution of kidnappers caught in accordance with the extant rules of the Nigerian constitution. This would serve as a deterrent to those thinking of committing the act.

## Acknowledgements

The author would like to acknowledge the benevolence of Professor Ernest.

## Competing interests

The author declares that no financial or personal relationships inappropriately influenced the writing of this article.

## Author's contributions

F.C.U. is the sole author of this research article.

## Funding information

This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial or not-for-profit sectors.

## Data availability

The data that support the findings of this study are available from the corresponding author, F.C.U., upon reasonable request.

## Disclaimer

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