

## C.K.C. Alumni Notes

### **Father Tagbo: A Profile In Service And Leadership**

*Oseloka Obaze\**



#### **Rev. Fr. Nicholas Chukwuemeka Tagbo, O.O.N.**

*C.K.C. Class of '49*

**Rev. Fr. Nicholas Chukwuemeka Tagbo**, (a.k.a. Onye Isi), clergy, educationist, administrator, poet, and mentor, is an eminent alumnus of Christ the King College Onitsha, and a member of the CKC Class of '49. Now an octogenarian, he is retired from the priesthood and education and lives in residence at the Sacred Heart Parish, Onitsha, Nigeria. He is now, the second longest serving priest, (after Monsignor Mathew Obiukwu) in the Archdiocese of Onitsha.

A native of Awkuzu, in the Oyi LGA, Anambra State Nigeria, he was born 21 August 1929, in the northern Nigerian city of Jos. Fr. Tagbo had his primary education in Jos, Awkuzu and Onitsha before entering the prestigious Christ the King College, Onitsha from 1945-1949, for his Senior Cambridge Certificate. He also taught part time at All Hallows Seminary, Enugu. Thereafter, he proceeded to the Bigard Memorial Senior Seminary, Enugu, from 1951-1953 for his theological studies and preparation for priesthood. From Bigard he proceeded to the National University of Ireland, Dublin, Ireland from 1953-1956 and obtained a combined honors Bachelor of Science (B.Sc) degree in Mathematics, Chemistry, and Botany. Eventually, he returned to the Bigard Memorial Seminary, Enugu from 1957- 1960, to complete his studies for the ministry. He was ordained as a priest, on 31 July, 1960.

Fr. Tagbo served as a tutor at All Hallows Seminary Onitsha from January 1961 to August 1962 and Tutor, at Christ the King College Onitsha, from August 1962 to May 1963. In mid-May 1963, he was appointed the first indigenus and the 10<sup>th</sup> Principal of C.K.C. Onitsha. He thus became the first alumnus and the first African to head the school founded by Irish missionaries. Fr. Tagbo succeeded Rev. Fr. John. FitzPatrick, the last of the pioneer “Architects” who served as principal from 1953 to 1963. Fr. Tagbo became the pioneer in the category of those C.K.C. principals characterized as “Builders” of

characters, leaders and infrastructure. He served as principal of C.K.C. Onitsha until the Nigerian civil war broke out in mid-1967. He had the onerous and singular responsibility of evacuating the school's movable assets, records and valued archival materials between October and December 1967, when the city fell to Nigeria troops. Thanks to his gallant effort, most of the institution's records were saved. Between 1967 and 1970, he kept the name, ideals and mission of Christ the King College alive, by overseeing the skeletal functioning of the school (only in lower Form 1 -3) at Oraukwu. Two days after the end of the civil war, on 15 January, 1970, the very day Biafra formally surrendered, Fr. Tagbo was back at the C.K.C. campus in Onitsha, personally spearheading the clean up of the badly damaged campus, and welcoming back his former staff and students, with the proclamation "*Happy Survival*".

From January 1970 to January 1973 Tagbo continued his duties as principal of C.K.C. and oversaw the rebuilding of most of the damaged buildings. He also nurtured the school back to its eminent place in academics, sports and leadership development and rekindled the healthy rivalry between C.K.C. and other schools, by always reminding the students that they were *Primus Inter Pares* – First Amongst Equals! In early 1971, under his leadership, C.K.C. had the honor of being the lone school selected in the Onitsha metropolis, to host the visiting Nigerian Head of State, General Yakubu Gowon, who was accompanied by East Central State Administrator, Ukpabi Asika and other dignitaries. It was on that auspicious occasion that Gen. Gowon made the now prescient remark that C.K.C. would produce for Nigeria, "*future leaders of tomorrow*".

At a critical juncture, when Fr. Tagbo had managed to prune down the bloated post-war student population to a manageable size, but still well above 1,000, and was preparing the C.K.C. Class of 1973, for the first ever mid-year West African School Certificate Examination, he was inexplicably transferred to Government Secondary School Afikpo (Government College Afikpo), where he took over from Dr. George Akabuogu, another eminent C.K.C. alumnus and served as Principal until 1976.

The posting to Afikpo was a challenge, but Fr. Tagbo stood up to the challenge and triumphed. Government College Afikpo had been in post-war exile in Enugu. Its main campus on the edge of Amasiri Hills in Afikpo was occupied by the Nigeria military, to the chagrin of prominent indigenes of the area, namely, Dr. Akanu Ibiam, and Hon. Aja-Nwachukwu. It was they who persuaded East Central State School Board Administrator, Dr. Offiah Nwali, that Fr. Tagbo was the administrator best suited to handle the repatriation of Government College Afikpo from Enugu to Afikpo and to oversee the school's eventual reconstruction. Fr. Tagbo would eventually characterize that daunting period as "*rough life*". Anecdotally, on arriving at Afikpo, he was appalled by the lack of table manners of most of the students, which led to his now famous quip: "*Eating is a civilized action*". As one of his students at Afikpo recalled of Tagbo, "He was a "full time" principal of GSSA. He monitored the dormitories, classrooms, dining hall, and student hangouts outside the school campus. He monitored teaching methods of those that were entrusted with his students' education from the back of classrooms. He had no tolerance for lazy and ineffective teachers. I once asked him how his students were able to achieve so much academically. He bluntly stated that he "got rid of dead woods" from his schools." Tagbo gave primacy to ethics, decorum and diligence.

In August 1976, Fr. Tagbo returned to his alma mater as the 14th Principal of the college, succeeding Mr. P. E. Ezeokeke, who had served just for one year. In returning to C.K.C., Tagbo joined Rev. Fr. M. Flanagan, as the only two individuals to head the great institution at two different periods. He served as Principal of the college until October 1985, when he retired from academia. It is noteworthy that it was during this period that C.K.C. Onitsha won the World School Soccer Championship held in 1977 in Dublin, Ireland, the first ever of such laurel for Nigeria. That singular sporting accomplishment remains unmatched in Nigeria.

Following his retirement from teaching, Fr. Tagbo served as the Catholic Curate, Our Lady's Parish in Umuoji, Anambra State from February 1986 to August 1990. Since then, he has been In-Residence at the Sacred Heart Parish, Odoakpu Onitsha. In all his years at C.K.C., Fr. Tagbo was not just a hand-on administrator; he taught literature and science classes and had the uncanny ability of knowing each of his nearly 1,000 students by name. In all his years as a teacher, Fr. N.C. Tagbo, a strict disciplinarian, kept to his charge, teaching, persuading, reforming, directing, and molding hundreds of callow young men who came through the portals of his famous tutelage. Excellence at C.K.C. was assured in academics because he did not spare lazy teachers, staff and pupils. As far as poetry went, he favored Byron, Keats and Walter de la Mare. Indeed, as principal, he made every incoming freshman class to learn and recite by heart, de la Mare's "*If I were Lord of Tartary*", within two weeks of arriving on the C.K.C. campus. Similarly, he encouraged his students to study great African poets like Wole Soyinka, Kwesi Brew, Gabriel Okara and George (Kofi) Awoonor Williams. Never one to suffer fools or charlatans gladly, he frequently referred to those who went amiss, or seemed incorrigible as "*The last of the Mohicans*", but he also kept them constantly under close observation.

In his time at school, Fr. Tagbo was a good athlete and a therefore, a keen supporter of sports. At C.K.C. he was, besides being a hands-on principal, the *de facto* coach in all sports; from tennis, boxing, javelin, hockey to soccer. But sports were about decorum, fair play, leadership and collective enterprise. Winning was not everything and sports, certainly, did not take priority over academics. Tagbo had ways of making that point. Renowned Nigerian footballer Dominic Ezeani, never tire of recalling how upon his return to C.K.C. after representing Nigeria in an international academics soccer match against Ghana, Tagbo would not grant him an exemption from a scheduled class examination. Tagbo had made the point of personally invigilating the exams, and at one point quipped to Ezeani, "Dominic, football will not write your exam for you". Another instance, often recalled, was how in 1972, during a critical qualifying soccer match that would put C.K.C. in the State finals, he grounded Kenneth "Kendo" Ilodigwe, the school's best striker, for willfully missing the team's final practice, on the assumption this his place on the team was secure. The risk of a C.K.C. loss was unfathomable, but Fr. Tagbo made his point as only he could. Moreover, Fr. Tagbo was renowned refusing to admit transfer students who were good athletes, but were below in par in academics.

Under Tagbo's guidance, Christ the King College Onitsha became the epitome athletics, and excelled in academics as well sporting events. Today, two generations of C.K.C. alumni and Tagbo's many former wards, who are now accomplished professionals in every field – government, politics, engineering, medicine, art, humanities, academic, etc -- all over Nigeria and the Diaspora, contribute to mankind's development. In retirement, Tagbo's warmth and love for his students and the old school, his sharp wit and immense capacity for recall and anecdotes are still very much intact and in evidence. He was instrumental in prodding CKC-AAA to seize the moment and take the lead role in the alumni's revitalization of the C.K.C. campus. His singular message and mantra to C.K.C. alumni has been, "*Keep alight the flame which you received in C.K.C. Onitsha*" As Fidelis Atuegbu recalled, Tagbo's parting message to his graduating students, was "*never do anything that might reflect badly on your school of family*"

C.K.C. Onitsha and most of its alumni will for years to come, remain synonymous with Fr. Tagbo, whose singular resounding contribution to grooming Nigeria leaders and public servants, is perhaps without comparison. In the post- independent years, when Rev. Fr. Tagbo assumed duties as the first indigenous principal of C.K.C. Onitsha, the challenges he faced were enormous. The responsibility fell on him to maintain the founding principles of the college, as the preparatory citadel of Catholic Mission Tertiary education, the flagship, a beacon and a legend in academics, sports, spiritual development and educational modeling of future leaders not just east of the Niger, but in Nigeria itself. Moreover, a change in the school's leadership did not mean a deviation from the college being an academic institution

dedicated to intellectual and personal growth of male youths within the context of well-rounded liberal arts education in a Catholic environment. It was hardly surprising, therefore, that His Grace, Archbishop Charles Heerey, the founder of C.K.C. Onitsha, would personally handpick a few brilliant, diligent and capable indigenous priests to take charge of the critical education sector. It is noteworthy, that about the same time of Fr. Tagbo's appointment, the Rev. Fr. Francis Arinze, now Cardinal Francis Arinze, was also appointed Archdiocesan Education Secretary.

Today, most of Christ the King College Onitsha, alumni and including those in the Diaspora, proudly trace their foundation and personal growth and accomplishment to their studentship and training under Fr. N.C. Tagbo. They, like their parents, who entrusted Fr. Tagbo unreservedly with their children, recognize his invaluable and most laudable contribution to the development of education, generations of Nigerian youths, humanity and community services and his personal role in nurturing many students now in enviable and lofty leadership positions. The world-famed Philip Emeagwali, Dr. Peter Odili, former Governor of Rivers State; Mr. Peter Obi, current Governor of Anambra State, Chief Oscar Udoji, Ambassador Lawrence Nwuruku, Dr. Mike Ejiofor, current Federal Permanent Secretary; the Archbishop of Onitsha, Archbishop Valerian M. Okeke, Senator Mike Ajaegbo, Professor Pat Utomi, Dr. Charles Anyaeji, Ambassador Dada Olisa, Research Scientist, Emma Onua, Mr. Olisa Agbakoba (SAN), Justice Peter C. Umeadi, Mr. Oseloka Obaze of the United Nations, Mr. Dominic Ezeani former Green Eagles and Rangers International Captain, late ex-international, Mr. Nnamdi Nwokocha (MON), and HRH Chief Emma Nnabuife, the Igwe of Iseke, Anambra State, to name just a few, were some of his students.

There are many C.K.C. alumni, who know Fr. Tagbo better than I do, and who could shed more light on this legendary father figure. However, if I must give a synoptic assessment of the man, it is something along these lines. Fr. Tagbo is erudite, urbane and very cosmopolitan and despite his ever-serious countenance, his bonhomie is always warm and genuine. Two heads, it is said, are better than one. Hence, in summation, I must borrow the voice of another student of Tagbo who though younger than I, knew him well. Dr. Fidelis Mpkaru, Tagbo's student at both C.K.C. and Afikpo, had this to say of the man: "Reverend Father Nicholas Chukwuemeka Tagbo is a quintessential man. He provided effective leadership to GSSA from 1973-1976 when it needed it the most. He brought the school back to its original campus in Afikpo from a forced exile in Enugu. He suffered physically and emotionally from the "politics" of the time (1973-1976), but was "consoled by the good results". He was saddened when I shared the pictorial evidence of the current physical state of GSSA. I did not expect anything less from a man who had all the necessary qualities of good leadership, *auctoritas, firmitas, honestas, salubritas, veritas et dignitas.*"

Cognizant of Rev. Fr. Nicholas Tagbo's preeminent role in shaping many lives, C.K.C. alumni for succeeding years submitted his candidature for the Nigerian National Award Honors. This year, as C.K.C. alumni worldwide join the Archdiocese of Onitsha in organizing the dual celebration of Tagbo's 80<sup>th</sup> Birthday and 50<sup>th</sup> Ordination anniversary, he was finally honored on Thursday 22 July 2010, with the well-deserved high national honor of **Officer of the Order of the Niger (OON)**. [TAG]

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*\*Mr Oseloka Obaze was Fr. Tagbo's student and a member of the CKC Class of '73.*