

AMAKA TALK BACK

Rev. Fr. Dr. Charles Okwumuo

22nd Principal of Christ the King College Onitsha



Rev. Fr. Dr. Charles Okwumuo is the 22nd Principal of Christ the King College (C.K.C.) Onitsha. He was appointed manager of the College in August 2010, following the full transfer of the College to the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha by the Anambra State Government. He was appointed Principal of the College, effective September 30, 2010. Rev. Fr. Okwumuo is the thirteenth Nigerian to head the seventy-eight year-old Catholic school, which was founded by Irish Missionaries in 1933, and was run by them until 1963. We are gratified by his appointment, which emerged from a consultative process between the Onitsha Archdiocese and the Anambra State Government. Please join us in welcoming the 22nd Principal of a great school, as he extensively shares his vision, concerns and challenges about our great Alma

Mater and what he considers the way forward for C.K.C. Onitsha with “The Amaka Gazette” (TAG).

The Amaka Gazette: *First, we wish to formally congratulate you on your appointment as the 22nd Principal of CKC Onitsha. You are a priest but not an old boy of the college, so Archbishop Valerian Okeke must have immense confidence in you to entrust you with this task of running this great institution. How did it all happen?*

Fr. Charles Okwumuo: First and foremost, I want to congratulate CKC AAA, *The Amaka Gazette* and its editorial crew for the beautiful things you are doing; and above all, for your passion for CKC even in a foreign land. You have taught us to appreciate what we have.

As regards how it all happened, I must remark that my appointment as the Principal of CKC was a bolt from the blues. After my Doctoral programme at the Catholic Institute of West Africa, Port-Harcourt, I came to Onitsha to see my Local Ordinary, Most Rev. Valerian Okeke who doubles as the Archbishop of Onitsha and the Metropolitan of Onitsha Ecclesiastical Province. The idea was to inform him officially that I was through with my studies, thank him for the unique opportunity given to me and for being very supportive. After articulating my gratitude in few sentences, he came straight with a bombshell, “You are going to CKC as the Manager of the school. We must recover that College and bring back its original glory.” From the way he spoke to me about CKC, it became crystal clear to me that the college has a special place in his heart. Few days later, I got an official letter of appointment as the Manager of the College and functioned in that capacity until September 30, 2010 when I was officially pronounced the Principal of the College. This happened in the presence of the entire staff of the College, the key members of Anambra State Post Primary Schools Service Commission and the Archbishop himself. The rest is history.

TAG: *We are privy to your maiden State of the School report. Nonetheless, can you offer a synoptic overview of your vision for the school and the challenges ahead?*

CO: My vision for the school is to return CKC to her prime position as the leading Secondary School East of the Niger by providing, sustaining and optimizing the best possible environment for teachings and learning. This is consonant with the maxim of **Primus Inter Pares** -- being First Among Equals

Translating this vision into reality involves a good deal of challenges, which can tax the capabilities of the best of minds in education industry. The first challenge is to inspire the students and teachers alike to seek excellence in all things and to transform every member of the CKC family into an implacable enemy of mediocrity. Since a tree cannot make a forest, it is critically important to get our teachers to buy into my vision of our dream CKC. Moreover, given the crisis of value in our society, the issue of mentoring our young and upcoming students cannot be overemphasized.

Another major challenge is how to reverse the cumulative infrastructural decay that came to be associated with the Government take over of schools from voluntary agencies in the then Eastern Nigeria. This decay has been going on in our schools for the past thirty years or so. Like I did say elsewhere, CKC has impressive structures on the ground but these structures are crying for attention. As I speak to you now, my students are living in dormitories with badly broken doors and windows. In this rainy season for example, they do not always find it easy to protect themselves from the cold and splashes of rain which would have been put in check if windows and doors were in place. A good number of our roofs are leaking generously. The staff quarters, The Youth Corpers' Lodge and some classrooms are leaking badly. We can't afford to leave our students and teachers at the mercy of the elements. When Prof. N. T. Izuchi came here in person, I took him around the CKC campus to witness some of the pathetic cases. The pictures are still with him, in addition to the pictures which accompanied my maiden report on CKC. I invite you to go through the pictures for pictures do not lie. Such kind of environment does not and cannot promote teaching and learning. I beckon on all lovers of CKC to come over to Macedonia and help us. Another challenge staring us in the face is near collapse of discipline which has become a commonplace in public schools. However, we are responding firmly and decisively to these challenges. For me it is a case of no retreat, no surrender, until victory is achieved.

TAG: Since your appointment, have you sought the counsel of Fr. N.C. Tagbo; after all he left huge footprints in this college and your accomplishments will always be assessed against his leadership legacy? Did he give you any advice?

CO: It is an understatement to say that Fr. N. C. Tagbo left a huge footprint in CKC. Fr. Tagbo is not just one of the former Principals of CKC. He is not just a person but an icon, a living legend, an Oracle, an institution and an academic tradition rolled into one. He is someone that I have admired from my youth and ever since then, I have maintained a good rapport with him till date. Given this background, to ask whether I have sought his counsel or whether he has given me any advice is belaboring the obvious. Having said this, may I also remark that seeking counsel is my stock in trade and that I deem it necessary to widen the compass of my consultation.

TAG: In real terms, you are the second principal appointed since the school was returned to the Catholic Archdiocese of Onitsha in January 2009. What is your relationship with the Anambra State Government?

CO: I relate with Anambra State Government as one of the Principals of Secondary Schools in the State. Ordinarily, we relate with the Government through the Post Primary Schools Service Commission (PPSSC). It is through this body that the educational policies and interventions of the State Government trickle down to the grass root through the Principal. This, however, does not rule out any direct contact with the Governor as the need arises. The Governor himself has publicly expressed his willingness to work directly with the Principals of Secondary Schools. Consequently, I have been to the Government house a number of times to see if I can get the Governor to visit CKC and help us to fix some of the structures which we have on the ground. I have also tried to approach him by proxy but no success has been registered in this direction.

I stand to be corrected, but from what we have seen so far, Governor Peter Obi is perhaps the most education-friendly Governor from the day the state was created till date; at least as far as Secondary Schools in the state are



concerned. Apart from the brand new buses, the fifty lap tops distributed to the schools, the Millennium Development Projects, the ICT facilities and a number of other facilities put in place in our Secondary Schools by the State Government, it makes a beautiful spectacle to see the number of Secondary Schools which are being renovated by the State Government. In all honesty, I have not seen such level of work being done in public schools for the past three decades. Even as we speak, such rehabilitations are going on in nearby schools such as Q.R.C., Washington Memorial Grammar School, Our Lady's High School, formerly called Chukwurah High School, Metropolitan Secondary School to mention but a few. However, that such Government-induced rehabilitations are conspicuously absent from CKC raises a number

of fundamental questions. Has the Governor completely forgotten his Alma Mater? Could it be that CKC offended him sometime in the past? What could be done to appease the Governor and make him look favorably on his Alma Mater? I make these questions public because I am definitely at my wits end. Besides, time is not on our side. It will be deeply appreciated if anyone could help us to win the attention and sympathy of the Governor for CKC. I am not asking for a preferential treatment in favor of CKC for the simple reason that it may create a moral problem.

There is absolutely nothing wrong in doing for CKC what has been done for most of the schools around here. If the issue is placed on the scale of justice, the pendulum is sure to swing inexorably in favor of CKC. Though he is the Governor of the entire state, he is also a product of CKC. This privilege is of God's own making and there is nothing we can do to change it. Our people use to say 'Akwukwo nni n'aka n'oku agwolu ya' i.e. "there is greater quantity of vegetable in the dish where it was prepared." This is simply natural. I believe and hope that it is not too late for our able Governor to remember CKC. May I also use this opportunity to thank the former Governor of Rivers state, Dr. Peter Odili, an Old boy of our college for all he did for CKC when he was in and out of office.

TAG: Your predecessor had hinted that a common curriculum was in the works for all the schools in Anambra State handed back to the Catholic Mission. Where is that scheme now and do you now have in place common operational modalities for the Mission schools as was the case before the civil war?

CO: My Predecessor was not discussing curriculum as such but common educational policies and operational modalities which would be operative in all the schools handed over to the church by the Government. This would make for effectiveness and uniformity. The document is already in print and we are using it as a kind of guideline for running Catholic Schools in Onitsha Archdiocese, Nnewi, Awka and Orlu dioceses. It was endorsed by the Bishops of these dioceses with the Bishop of Nnewi Diocese, Bishop Hilary Okeke as the Chairman. The document may be subject to revision as the need arises.

TAG: Speak to the overall state of education in Nigeria. In your assessments, what is the way forward?

CO: To say that a country is as good as its educational system is an affirmation that is neither debatable nor subject to compromise. This is precisely the reason why the current rut in our education sector has implications which are vast and scary for the entire nation. That no Nigerian University is listed among the best 500 universities in the world is a telling and sad commentary. The highly heeled in our society train their children overseas. In recent times, there is a mad rush on the part of parents to send their children to study in Ghana. Those who may not afford it send their children to private or special schools in the country while public schools which cater for the greater percentage of our people are left to swim or sink.

The students themselves resort to 'magic centers' or 'sort' their way through in order to obtain their certificates which they cannot defend. Ultimately, the entire nation is the casualty but the future generation of our children is the worst hit. Unless we reverse this current regression to the abyss, the future of our country remains black and bleak. The Government at all levels must as a matter of urgency review its budget on education. A staggering proportion of our hard earned revenue is spent on our so called legislators while our education sector is under funded. Even the relatively meager allocation which goes to the education sector is drastically whittled down by corruption before it gets to its final destination. Nigeria must be ready to finance the education of its citizens. Moreover, the current culture, which nurtures an obvious disconnect between output and acquisition of certificates must be discountenanced. Any system of education which does not equip the student to face life and challenges in the society is not worth the while.

TAG: You have done an excellent job in renovating the School refectory – with fans, televisions, new dining tables -why did you and the Archbishop give priority to the dining room?

CO: I guess you are pulling my legs to lighten our discussion. Otherwise, it will amount to a factual error for anyone who flipped through my maiden report on CKC to conclude that priority is given to the refectory. The report and indeed our renovations touched practically every aspect of the life of our students. If you take a cursory glance at the report once again, you will probably eat your words. Besides, our students are not just disincarnate spirits, angels or mere 'agent intellect.' They are human beings, concrete individuals with body and soul as a substantial unity. What they eat and where they eat are no less important than what they read and what they think. After all, a sane mind is found in a healthy body and subhuman environment does not promote healthy teaching and learning but militates against it. So, putting in place a decent refectory for our students is not off the mark.

TAG: This College was long renowned for academics as well as sports. How do you intend to revitalize those two niche areas?

CO: First, our admissions will be based strictly on merit. Secondly, we shall reduce the population of our students to manageable proportion by limiting our new intake to two hundred and sticking to our policy of "fail and fail out". We shall emphasize discipline, integral formation, academic excellence, supervise teaching and learning and

ensure strict compliance with the school time table. We shall provide sporting facilities and encourage active participation in sports as co-curricular activities. Already we have hired a football coach to train our football team. Other sporting events will not be glossed over. A continuous exposure of our students to competitions will go a long way to bring out the best in them. Excellence in academics and sports is already in our tradition. All we need do is to set in motion the necessary machinery for recovering that tradition, if we have lost it.

TAG: *Over the years the unfettered rivalry between CKC and DMGS contributed to the attainment of excellence in many spheres for both schools. Are there presently any formalized areas of continuous exchanges and competition between the two schools?*

CO: The traditional rivalry or healthy competition between CKC and DMGS may still exist but it is no longer as pronounced as it used to be in those days. There are still competitions among secondary schools in the zone, in the state and even beyond but they are not restricted to CKC and DMGS.

TAG: *Are you engaged with the Old Boys of the College and if so, what is your message to CKC alumni in Nigeria and in the Diaspora?*

CO: Of course, I am in contact with the Old Boys of CKC. I have had a number of interactive sessions with some of them. I have attended some of their meetings. With his background as an Engineer, the Chairman of Onitsha Branch, Engr Onyeka has been very helpful in some of the renovations going on in the school. Dr. Charles Anyaeji has also graciously given us his time and attention whenever they are needed. The Secretary, Anambra State Post Primary Schools Service Commission, Mr. Nzemeka Olisah, a former Principal of CKC and an old boy of the college is also ever ready to help us.

At this juncture, many CKC Old Boys would have been mentioned by name but for want of time and space. May I also use this forum to thank the Old Boys who have undertaken to institute prizes for our performing students. I also want to thank the members of PTA for their co-operation. They were visibly delighted in our last P.T.A meeting when I told them of the existence of CKC-AAA and what they are doing for the school. I thank our team of teachers for their commitment.

In all honesty, I am encouraged by the support of our Old boys, even those I get acquainted with for the very first time. Never to be forgotten is His Grace, Most Rev. Valerian Okeke, and the Archbishop of Onitsha -- an eminent old boy himself -- for his inspiration, his moral and financial support. It has become very clear to me that I am not alone in this business. It is no exaggeration to say that the name CKC has the capacity to throw many doors open. As I thank God for this, I want to assure our Old boys wherever they are that this institution which has impacted so positively on the lives of people across the country will never be allowed to witness even a partial eclipse. It can only wax from strength to strength to the glory of God.

TAG: *Thanks immensely for your time and views and God bless.*

CO: Thank You. Bonitas Disciplina, Scientia. Primus Inter Pares. May the fame of our College last forever! [TAG]