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The Real Presence **Ron Singer**

The real presence of Christ in the Eucharist is a term used in Christian theology to express the doctrine that Jesus is really or substantially present in the Eucharist, not merely symbolically or metaphorically.¹

CHAPTER ONE: Lydia Ejikeme-Ogochukwu
Owom & Aba, Nigeria, 1930-1968

As you will see, I cannot write about my adult self without at least glancing backward to the child I once was. After completing my Secondary, I was fortunate to find an employment with John Holt Plc, Aba branch. I thank God and my school training, as well as both parents, for this opportunity, which not many Nigerian girls could have received in 1948, my graduation year.

First, Mom, who would bring me along with her to five-day market, in our village, Owom, from when I was a very small girl. In addition to a basin full of eggs and veggies for sale, carried on her head, Mom would carry her first-born pickin (me) in a sling at her hip (not on the back, as with Yoruba babies). I was usually fast asleep as she bumped along the path from our house to the market, and back again later, one-mile-plus each way, which was held in the center of Owom, right beside St. Miriam's Catholic Church (named for the sister of Moses).

So it was Mom who introduced me to commerce. By the time I was four or five years old, she would allow me to wrap the goods for customers in a big cocoyam leaf, which was our paper. By age seven, I was my mother's accountant, taking the money or cowries, and returning change to customers. In those days, we were using both coins (pence and shilling) and cowrie shells (called *okpokpo*) for trading.

For this skill, I must also thank my wonderful father, who among other things (teaching

me to ride a bicycle, reading books to me), taught me to count and, later on, to do complicated problems in maths. That one became my favorite subject at school, starting with infant school in our village, and ending with girls' secondary, Aba. At GSA, I was blessed to be taught by mostly kind woman teachers, both Sisters and others, for both my home econ. subjects, such as sewing and cooking, and my academics, such as English and maths.

For all of these skills, however, the real thanks are due to God, for it was He (and His Son) who made the people in my life so kind, helpful and patient. And thanks, to God & Son, and to all those people, as well, after GSA I soon became employed by John Holt Plc, Aba.

This, my first position, proved to be a lasting blessing. I say so because, for more than twenty years (1948-1968), I worked for only one single employer, rising from junior stock clerk to assistant manager. Before I give some details from this long, happy period, I must pause to tell you a bit about the company, John Holt Ltd and then Plc. I learned many of the facts to follow from a pamphlet, *Official Company History*, that was distributed to every employee. The information was stated in both English and Igbo. I am mentioning all this in case what follows sounds like a talking pamphlet. But some of the facts, I confess, I have only learned recently, a half century later. These come from the wonderful Internet, which I am not yet too old to enjoy.

The founder, John Holt (1841-1915), was a remarkable somebody. Whether you agree, as I do, that the Europeans had no business coming here to Africa in the first place, Mr. Holt was still a good man. Maybe the reason was that he himself rose from poverty to enjoy wealth. Once he became prosperous, he stood alone among his colleagues in the trading port of Liverpool, U.K., in opposing horrible practices in Belgian Congo, such as an employee in the rubber industry could have his hand chopped off for refusing to report to work one single day, even if he was ill. Mr. Holt went on to start John Holt & Co., which was the opposite from this dirty business in Congo.

When he was just opening his career, as apprentice to "African Steamship Company," John Holt wrote to his own father, a struggling farmer, a letter in which he expressed his frank views on life. If I may quote his blunt statement, "Mankind is like a lot of hungry pigs fighting over a trough of milk...It is money I want and money I must have if I go through fire and water for it...not the gold, but the independence it brings and the cares it drives away." Ah, if only man (or woman) could have his (or her) cares driven away so easily! We Igbos know better than that.

Anyway, in 1862, Mr. Holt shipped to Fernando Po, 157 kilometres to the south of Calabar, which is on this our own Nigerian coast. Mr. Holt's position was secretary to British consul, who also owned a trading post. When consul died, his widow sold the trading post to Holt, who used it as springing board, and became a trader himself, and a man of deepening pockets. He had, by then, also entered into politics, and was a delegate to the Berlin Conference (1885) that drew the map of West Africa which has had such a horrid effect on so many African lives, my own included. More on that later...

John Holt's trading carried him to coastal Nigeria, where he made most profits from exporting our products, especially palm oil, which Europeans turned into such items as soap, candles, and machine oil. To export these products, including also the tusks of elephant (now seen only in zoos, such as the one at Ibadan, founded in 1948), clever Mr. Holt even modified his own ships specifically to the needs of West African coastal trade.

Was this man a true friend of the African? Not exactly. "The odour of these blacks is most

offensive when in a state of perspiration." But one time, when his laborer, Solomon, fell ill in one of the trading ships, Holt also wrote, "It being rather cold and he having little or no clothes to cover himself... I gave him [a coat]." And to explain his opposition to Congo oppression: "They [the Africans] made me what I am. Their labor, their muscles, their enterprise, have given me everything I possess. I am bound to protect them against outrage and injustice."

This brave opposition caused John Holt, himself, to be shunned by his colleagues, and also caused him an unfortunate brain stroke. Mr. Holt's sinking health pushed him to retire to a farm back in England, which I think was not very far to the one where he had been born. There he died, at age seventy-four, RIP. There is still a popular song in Nigeria that testifies to lasting fame: "It happened a long, long time ago, before John Holt." In one obituary notice, Mr. E. D. Morel, a major Congo reformer, called Mr. Holt "this merchant whose vision was not bounded by the palm-oil cask." Amen!

I tell you all of this because of how much the company built by this man, John Holt, Plc, has meant to my own life. For the twenty years since my graduation from secondary school (1948), until Nigeria was drowning in the violence of war (1968), Mr. Holt was, so to speak, my second father. Even when all was lost, the misfortunes of myself and of this large company were linked, hand in hand.

The manager of John Holt Plc for this whole period was an Englishman named Peter Makin, who was similar in ways to Mr. Holt. That is to say, Peter Makin could not have been a better boss. First, to describe his appearance, this was a short, thin, carrot-top, very pale (even for a white man), with large, square yellow teeth and no beard or even mustache. Without a family of his own (at least none that we knew of), Peter, as we all called him, trained me up to each new position, seven in all, in the course of these decades, always doing so with kind patience and complete fairness. And then, when our national catastrophe struck, instead of fleeing Aba like rat from sinking ship, before he was finally forced to flee, Peter did his very best to secure the welfare of each and every one of us, his employees. I bless the man for that.

Once, in 1951 or '52, as I remember, there was a big palaver over weekly receipts in textiles, where I was by then assistant sales manager, meaning that I was involved in the sale of the new Japanese cloths to market women in Aba and surrounding villages (such as my own Owom). Instead of accusing me, or any of my co-workers, for theft, Peter honored me by assigning to me the task of looking over the weekly ledger a second time, to try to explain the shortfall.

It turned out that our comptroller, Miss Evans, had made an error, adding a nought to that week's total receipts. When the error was revealed, we all watched closely to observe the response of Peter. You see, here was an error made by a white lady in senior management, for which we African employees had feared to receive the blame.

When the office had closed for the day, Peter asked us all, including Miss Evans and the two other whites, to stay behind for a few moments. Gathering us in his office, he cleared his throat and said (if I remember his words correctly), with the gentle smile he always seemed to wear, "We have, or I should say, our Lydia Ogochukwu (which he pronounced almost correctly) has discovered the source of the problem. I'm pleased to tell you that no theft was involved. Instead, an error in recording the week's receipts caused the apparent discrepancy. Although our

comptroller, Miss Evans, was the one responsible for this error, I think you will all agree that, as a rule, Miss Evans does an excellent job. That said, I think you will also agree that we should forgive her for this small mistake, which anyone could have made. That said, I'm very glad to say that the incident may be considered closed." Peter often used the phrase, "that said". I used to wonder why.

Miss Evans, who I believe originated from Wales, was a short, slender woman with medium-length, silky, very fair hair, and pink and white skin, which now turned a bright red, at Peter's compliment. We other employees were too polite to laugh at this color transformation. Peter continued: "I hope you will also agree that my decision will benefit all of us. John Holt Plc is run on the basis of trust, and my trust in each and every one of you, my friends and loyal employees, remains unshaken."

When I reached home, everyone gathered at the dinner table with sharp appetites, both for our supper and to hear the day's news from "town." This particular evening, all six of us were present: Dad, Mom, myself, Mary (aged 18), Dorcas (16), Melody (13), and the baby, Jeremy, who was now 11, and already nearly as tall as I was.

As soon as we had put away our first appetite, I recounted the speech of Peter's. As is well known, people who listen to stories from birth, as all of us had done, will develop strong memories. As I described Miss Evans' changing face, I thought my mother would die of laughter. I also thought that, if she had been a white person, her own face would have turned the same red color as poor Miss Evans'.

Dad cleared his throat and made one of his little toasts: "I think we will all agree that Lydia is fortunate to have such a kind and understanding employer." At this point, he raised his glass, and added, "To Mr. P. Makin. Would that every Englishman were as wise and kind as this one!"

Dad's toasts were often like that, with a little sting in the tail. Jerry, my soul mate in the family, caught my eye and wriggled his eyebrows in the manner of Groucho Marx, in the film *A Day at the Races* which I had allowed him to accompany me to the viewing at the Aba Town Hall, in celebration of his eleventh birthday. That recollection prompts another small detour in my story.

Ever since the end of World War II, American films had returned to our Igboland. That one, *A Day at the Races*, was one of my favorites, especially the part about how they mistook a jumping horse for a racer. Everyone in attendance that evening, Jerry and myself included, found this error hilarious. The only part none of us in the audience understood was when the false Italian brother, Chico, was selling not iced cream, but small books with secret information.

NIGERIAN INDEPENDENCE! October 1st, 1960, was the occasion for huge celebrations all across this, our new nation. These celebrations included tours by many of the most popular and wonderful musicians. A week after the Big Day, it was the turn of our own Aba. We were crazy with excitement to learn that an all-night dance was scheduled at the Town Rec. Hall, and that the featured performers were none other than the extremely famous Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson & his Mayors' Band.

I had informed my parents that instead of coming home for the weekend as usual I would be staying the night of the dance, a Saturday, with Florence, a friend from work whose family lived in Aba, and that several of us would be attending the dance together. This dance turned out

to be a major turning point of my life.

Now that we have entered the Age of Internet, I can tell you a few facts about Rex Lawson, who nine years after the concert (1969), tragically died in a vehicular crash on his way to play his music in the town of Warri. In a way, my worship of Cardinal Jim on that night of 1st Oct. 1960 was fitting, because independence celebrated our hopes as one nation made up from different ethnic groups.

Lawson was himself an Ibibio, and this was the same tribe that had directed the notorious slave trade from his hometown, Calabar (previously mentioned in connection with the life of John Holt). Many, if not most, of those captured and sold into hellish slavery were from my own group, Igbos! Of course, our own Igbo chieftains were not without guilt in this trade, since they were often acting as middlemen.

There is more! On a school excursion to Calabar when I was ten years old, we went to meet the ferry in Oron, across the lagoon from our destination. While we were there, inside the museum, I saw *with my own eyes* what I can never forget, if I live to be a thousand: carved masks tightly covered with what looked like human skin! Was this Igbo skin? Who can say? (The sign did not indicate.) I remember sitting in the ferry later, as we crossed to Calabar, with tears running down my face that I pretended to the teacher were caused by the sharp wind.

One reason the image from Oron Museum so haunts my memory is that, when the war came to Aba, I saw it repeated again and again. I refer to the many residents who were starving to the point where their faces looked like those same fleshless masks covered with skin. If I could find a *dibia* (native doctor) to remove these images from my mind's eye before I die, I might return, God forbid, to the *juju* practices of my ancestors.

As stated, October 8, 1960 was an occasion to forget the savagery of the past, to let bygones be bygones. Furthermore, this man Rex Lawson's haunting music, so sad and beautiful, could make you forget your own self, let alone ancient history or childhood fears. Unlike myself, Cardinal Rex Jim Lawson did not come from a happy family. Far from! Every single sibling of his had all died as infants or young children, and Rex's father did not stop to act as a father to his one surviving child. I read that Cardinal Jim actually sued his own father for neglect. I read, as well, that this bad man only resumed relations with his son after the latter became rich and famous. What a father! As to his mom, she died when Cardinal Jim was still a small boy.

But back to the dance, and what a dance it was! The Mayors performed all of their known songs, driving the dancers (us) crazy with excitement. Rex played his trumpet like an angel, and his Guitar Boy was equally amazing. The songs included all the very best: *Jolly Papa* (my personal favorite), plus *Abari Biya* (meaning "Almighty God"), *Ibi Na Bo* ("Good Fortune"), and *Aye Muba Ude Aja* ("Look at Anyang's face, not his/her feet, because he/she has a disease.") That last one remains strange to me, but I am sure many others have understood the meaning.

It must have been morning already, one or two a.m., when I found myself, during a break in the dancing, outside of the hall, cooling myself in company with one of the musicians. This was none other than Guitar Boy, himself, who had made me swoon so many times that night. Well, suffice to say that he tried to make me swoon again. That is, he tried to have his way with me. How did I prevent him?

As he attempted to force me down to the ground, I seized this boy's slender wrists in my

own strong two hands, and calmly stated, not shouting, "No, please, no! You are just a boy."

"What ting you dey do?" he complained. "You wan remain abandon property?" (I was by then thirty years of age, and still a virgin.)

I said, "But you must stop this nonsense immediately!" He kept trying to escape his wrists, to no avail. "One moment, please! I think that you have a mother, Mr. Boy? Imagine if she is watching what you are trying to do to me, also a woman, and old enough to be your eldest sister. Shame for you, Guitar Boy!" (By the way, did you know that in our Nigerian slang, "Guitar Boy" also stands for "Penis"?)

That made him stop. I released his wrists, and we re-entered the dance hall as if nothing had happened. This brief interlude did not prevent me from enjoying the remainder of the dance (including the guitar-playing, possibly more soulful than before, even), which continued until one hour after sunrise. Luckily, the next day was a Sunday, for which we were free from work. If it had been a workday, we would have made many terrible mistakes, much worse than adding a nought in the Ledger!

To tell truth, I was by then weary of carrying the heavy burden of my virginity. Guitar Boy's fumbling attempts only served to make me more aware of this weariness. So, a few months after Independence, I voluntarily surrendered my own independence, and finally agreed to accept the stubborn marriage proposals of my colleague at JH, Plc, Mr. Harry S.T. Ejikeme.

I had refused this man previously for several reasons, including fear of lifelong mockery of the difference in our heights. For Harry was a "full stop": very short. But I soon realized how foolish I had been to hesitate. My sweetie, Harry, and I were able to enjoy matrimony (though childless) for about six years. How many laughs and meals and other kinds of fun we used to share together! Ah, Harry was a good man! But then came the War, which ended not only our marriage, but the world as we knew it. But do not despair, Reader! There was to be life again, afterwards.

Notes

¹en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Real_presence_of_Christ_in_the_Eucharist

Ron Singer

This is the opening chapter of *The Real Presence*, an historical novel set mainly in Nigeria and centred around the Biafra War (1967-70). The novel is scheduled for release by Adelaide Books in 2021. Like one of the novel's three protagonists, the author served in the Peace Corps in Nigeria during the 1960s. He then returned in 2011 to interview pro-democracy leaders for a book (*Uhuru Revisited*, Africa World Press/Red Sea Press, 2015).