



Incardination, Identity, and Economic Precarity: Diocesan Priests in Nigeria between Canonical Right and Pastoral Reality

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Abstract

The canonical institute of incardination the juridical bond by which a cleric is permanently attached to a particular church for whose service he is ordained occupies a foundational position in Catholic canon law. It is not merely an administrative arrangement; it constitutes the ontological and legal framework within which the diocesan priest's rights and duties, including the right to adequate remuneration and sustenance, are grounded, exercised, and protected. This article examines the relationship between incardination and economic precarity among diocesan priests in Nigeria, arguing that the chronic gap between the canonical promise of incardination and the pastoral reality of under-remuneration represents both a juridical failure and a crisis of priestly identity. Drawing on Kii's comprehensive canonical and empirical study of clerical remuneration in Nigeria, alongside contextual data from the Nigerian church, the article argues that the solution to priestly economic precarity requires not only legislative reform but a theological re-appropriation of incardination as a bond that creates mutual obligations of care between the diocese and its clergy.

Keywords: *Incardination, Diocesan Priests, Nigeria, Canonical Rights, Economic Precarity, Priestly Identity, Canon 281§1, Excardination, Particular Church, Presbytery*



1. Introduction

The concept of incardination stands at the intersection of canonical jurisprudence and priestly identity. Derived from the Latin *cardo* the hinge that connects two surfaces and enables movement while maintaining structural integrity incardination describes the juridical bond that permanently attaches a cleric to a particular church. As Kii (2017) explains, drawing on the text of Canon 265 and its interpretive tradition, incardination is more than an administrative mechanism: it is a relationship of service, mutual obligation, and identity. A diocesan priest is not merely assigned to a diocese; he is incardinated into it united to its bishop, its presbyterate, and its faithful in a bond that canon law describes as permanent and that carries both rights and duties (Kii, 2017).

Among these rights, the right to adequate remuneration and sustenance under Canon 281§1 is among the most concrete and the most neglected. The present article examines the relationship between incardination as a canonical structure and the economic precarity that characterises the lived experience of the majority of Nigerian diocesan priests. It argues that the canonical institute of incardination was designed to provide clerical stability, accountability, and protection including economic protection but that in the Nigerian context, the economic dimension of this protection has been systematically under-delivered. The consequences are visible in patterns of clerical behaviour that canonical scholarship, pastoral observation, and empirical research converge in identifying as symptoms of structural dysfunction.



2. Incardination: History, Theology, and Canonical Significance

2.1 Historical Development

The history of incardination is, in significant respects, the history of the Church's effort to maintain clerical order against the tendency toward what canonists call *vagantes* or *acephali* wandering, unattached clergy accountable to no particular bishop and serving no defined community (Kii, 2017). James McBride, cited by Kii (2017), observed that without canonical affiliation of clerics to their diocese, the world would be filled with clergy who had no immediate superior to obey and no particular field for their ministry a condition that the Church has consistently treated as a disorder destructive of both ecclesial life and priestly identity.

Kii (2017) traces the term "incardination" to its earliest ecclesiastical use in the sixth century under Pope Gregory I, through its codification in the 1917 Code at cc. 111–117, through the reforms of the Second Vatican Council and their incorporation into the 1983 Code, particularly Canon 265. The Second Vatican Council's development of the doctrine of incardination responding to a threefold need to ensure better geographical distribution of clergy, to facilitate specialised apostolates, and to offer sacred ministers a fuller participation in the universal Church's mission substantially enriched the theological content of the institute, moving it beyond a merely disciplinary mechanism to an expression of ecclesial communion (Kii, n.d.[a]: 14).

2.2 Incardination as Bond of Rights and Duties

A critical contribution of Kii's (2017) analysis is his careful distinction between two dimensions of incardination: its concretising function and its grounding function. Incardination does not create the cleric's fundamental rights and duties those arise from the sacrament of orders



itself. Rather, incardination "concretizes and determines those rights and duties, making their exercise effective in a concrete framework, territorial or personal" (Kii, 2017). This distinction is important because it establishes that the diocesan priest's right to remuneration under Canon 281§1 is not a favour conferred by the bishop at ordination; it is a right grounded in the sacrament of orders and given concrete expression through incardination into a particular church. The bishop who fails to provide adequate remuneration is therefore not merely administratively negligent; he is in violation of a canonical right.

Kii (2017) further highlights the protective function of incardination: once a cleric is incardinated in a perpetual bond of service, he is assured that he will be employed in ministry and will receive just remuneration; he can count on the community and the bishop to support him until death. This canonical guarantee articulated in the 1983 Code and elaborated in the documents cited by Kii (2017) stands in stark contrast to the fragmented, discretionary, and often inadequate support that Nigerian diocesan priests actually receive.

3. Incardination and Economic Precarity in Nigeria

3.1 The Structural Problem

The economic precarity of Nigerian diocesan priests is, at its core, a structural problem rooted in the inadequate institutionalisation of the canonical obligations that incardination creates. Kii (2017) identifies the core paradox: diocesan priests in Nigeria are entitled to adequate remuneration and honest sustenance by right through incardination because they are linked to service in a particular Church. This identity determines not only their mission and functions proper to such clerics, but also their rights, consistent with their inherent human



dignity. Yet the present structure of support from the ministries they discharge can hardly be described as adequate.

Several structural factors converge to produce this gap. First, the absence of proper diocesan legislation defining the amount of remuneration and sustenance a cleric is entitled to receive creates the conditions for what canonists describe as capriciousness variation in clerical income driven by the subjective judgements of bishops rather than by enforceable norms (Kii, 2017). Second, the historical dependency of Nigerian dioceses on external funding sources the Holy See, mission societies, foreign charitable agencies created institutional patterns that did not develop robust internal resource mobilisation. As these external sources declined, the internal deficit became acute (Kii, 2017). Third, the peculiarly African dimension of clerical economic obligation in which most Nigerian diocesan clerics come from families and extended families that expect to be supported by the cleric from his income creates an additional financial burden that Canon 281§1, designed in a Western canonical context, does not directly address (Kii, 2017).

3.2 Manifestations in Priestly Behaviour

The consequences of this structural gap are visible in patterns of priestly behaviour that Kii (2017) documents with pastoral frankness. The rise of the "worker priest" a cleric who takes on secular employment, engages in trade, or pursues other income-generating activities beyond his pastoral responsibilities is, in the Nigerian context, less a theological option than an economic necessity for many clergy. As Kii (2017) observes, this distracts priests from concentrating on the primary duties of their state of life, which the 1971 Synod of Bishops affirmed "ought to be full-time occupation." The seeking of political appointments without due authorisation, the



engagement in commerce and trade, and the cultivation of a culture of financial solicitation from parishioners all documented by Kii (2017) represent adaptive responses to structural inadequacy rather than primarily moral failures.

4. Incardination, Excardination, and the Migration of Nigerian Priests

A further dimension of the incardination-precarity nexus is the phenomenon of clerical migration from Nigeria to wealthier dioceses in the Global North. Kii (2017) notes that one legitimate ground for excardination the canonical dissolution of the incardination bond to allow transfer to another diocese is the cleric's desire to serve in a diocese experiencing a shortage of clergy. The Global North, and particularly the United States and the United Kingdom, has recruited significant numbers of Nigerian diocesan priests to address chronic clergy shortages. Research on Nigerian priests in the United States (Ahanotu, 2019) documents the cross-cultural challenges such priests face; but the movement itself reflects the economic logic of incardination: priests incardinate where they can be adequately supported.

Canon 270 of the 1983 Code, as analysed by Kii (2017), specifies that excardination may be granted only for just causes, and *Christus Dominus* directs bishops to send some of their priests to missions or dioceses that lack clergy. But the implicit economic dimension of this movement that Nigerian priests seek assignments abroad partly because their home dioceses cannot provide adequate remuneration raises significant canonical and pastoral questions about the proper fulfilment of the obligations created by incardination. A diocese that cannot provide adequate remuneration as required by Canon 281§1 is arguably not fully honouring the canonical bond of incardination, and the consequent pressure toward excardination and external assignment represents a systemic failure.



5. Toward a Theology of Mutual Obligation

The canonical tradition of incardination, properly understood, is not merely a mechanism of control. It is, as Le Tourneau observes cited by Kii (2017) an institute that "assumes a series of attitudes and spiritual pastoral options which help to give the vocation of a priest its own physiognomy." Incardination shapes priestly identity; it tells the priest who he is by telling him where he belongs. This ecclesiological dimension of incardination has implications for how the crisis of clerical remuneration should be understood and addressed.

If incardination creates a bond of belonging that is mutual the priest belonging to the particular church and the particular church belonging to the priest then the failure to provide adequate remuneration is a failure of this mutuality. The particular church that incardinate priests without developing the institutional structures to sustain them canonically and economically is implicitly treating the incardination bond as unilateral: obliging the priest to stability and service while exempting itself from the canonical obligation of care. Kii's (2017) argument points toward a theological re-appropriation of incardination as a covenant of mutual responsibility one that demands from dioceses the same fidelity, consistency, and justice that it demands from priests.

6. Conclusion

Incardination is the legal and spiritual architecture of diocesan priestly life in the Catholic Church. It creates stability, accountability, identity, and canonically economic security. The crisis of clerical remuneration in Nigeria is therefore not merely an economic or administrative problem. It is an incardination problem: a failure to honour the full implications of the canonical bond that ties a priest to a particular church. Kii's (2017) monograph is a canonical and pastoral



call to the Church in Nigeria to take its own canon law seriously to recognise in Canon 281§1 not a pious aspiration but a legal norm, and in incardination not merely a mechanism of control but a covenant of mutual care. The future of priestly ministry in Nigeria depends, in significant measure, on whether that recognition translates into institutional action.

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