



Utume Theological e-Journal
Don Bosco Utume
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PRIESTLY IDENTITY TODAY



Featuring Topics

1. A Systematic Exposition of the Optimal Understanding of Priestly Identity Today
2. The Fading Face of Priestly Identity in Contemporary Society
3. Challenges and Renewal of Priestly Identity Today
4. Pastoral Zeal as Priestly Identity
5. Rejuvenating the Priestly Identity: A Pastoral Perspective
6. Priesthood: A Gift and a Task: The Place and Relevance of a Catholic Priest in the Contemporary Milieu
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8. The Ideal Image of a Priest as Traced in the Scripture and Church Tradition
9. Priestly Identity as Envisioned in the 1983 Code of Canon Law
10. Mission And Spirituality of Priests

Don Bosco Utume, Salesian Theological College

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Word of Introduction from the Director

In his Apostolic Letter *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* given to the Church on May 22, on the Solemnity of Pentecost, in the year 1994, Pope John Paul II made the following affirmation from his vast experience as the Shepherd of the Church to whom Christ entrusted the responsibility of tending His Sheep (Jn: 21:16) a very definite statement regarding the identity of a Catholic Priest. He states very clearly, “Although the teaching that priestly ordination is to be reserved to men alone has been preserved by the constant and universal Tradition of the Church and firmly taught by the Magisterium in its more recent documents, at the present time in some places it is nonetheless considered still open to debate, or the Church’s judgment that women are not to be admitted to ordination, is considered to have a merely disciplinary force.

Wherefore, in order that all doubt may be removed regarding a matter of great importance, a matter which pertains to the Church's divine constitution itself, in virtue of my ministry of confirming the brethren (cf. Lk 22:32) I declare that the Church has no authority whatsoever to confer priestly ordination on women and that this judgment is to be definitively held by all the Church's faithful.”

The identity of a Priest today in the Catholic Church is a topic worth reflecting on especially by Priests and candidates who are preparing themselves to be priests in the Catholic Church. It is in this context that Don Bosco Utume, Salesian Theological College came up with the theme *Priestly Identity Today* for reflection during our last academic year. The annual theological Symposium that was held during the last academic year was a moment of sharing and deepening our reflections on this topic and the subsequent essay writing on the same topic was another moment of study and reflection that was carried out in the college. I congratulate the entire College for this serious exercise that was carried out under the leadership of our Principal

Dr. Fr. Seby Kidangan sdb. What you are going to read and benefit from, is the result of research done by a number of our students. I really congratulate all those who participated in the entire process of research and study, and contributed articles to this second volume of *e-journal* of the College.

In a Speech given by Cardinal Ratzinger on October 1, 1990 at the opening of the VIII Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on priestly formation in his concluding remarks he said: “an intimate personal relationship with Christ is fundamental for priestly life and ministry. All priestly formation should lead to the fostering of this relationship. The priest should be a person who knows Jesus intimately, has met Him and learned to love Him. The priest should therefore be a man of prayer, a truly “spiritual” man. Without strong spiritual substance he cannot last in his ministry. From the mystery of Christ, he should also learn in his life not to seek himself nor his own promotion. He should learn to spend his life for Christ and for his flock” (*L’Osservatore Romano*, Vatican, October 29, 1990, pp. 6-7).

The true identity of a priest can be found only in his intimate relationship with Christ. He who really loves Christ will certainly wish to know Him ever better. Anyone who is a priest or aspiring to be a priest therefore should manifest his will to know Christ more deeply. The years of formation given in any Theological center should inspire in a candidate this deep desire to know Christ and to love Him. Since to love Him means to know Him, it follows that a will that is eager to study carefully and diligently is a sign of a solid vocation. A true vocation to priesthood is born and nurtured in a community of believers, the visible body of Christ. Hence, true love for Christ is manifested in a person’s love for the Church. I do hope that anyone who reads this *e-journal* will be helped to grow in his love for Christ the Eternal Priest and feel more deeply part of the Church, and to find the true identity of a Priest in our time.

Fr. Michael Kalathipullatt, sdb

Editorial

Reclaiming Priestly Identity

It is an undeniable truth that there has been an identity crisis among the Catholic priests since the Second Vatican Council.¹ There are several reasons for this crisis. There has been a move in the Church to secularize the clergy and to clericalise the laity. The crisis of priestly identity is also partly due to a wrong understanding of the two ways of participating in the priesthood of Christ, the ministerial and the common priesthood.² There are also a number of other factors that have contributed to the crisis in priestly identity, some of which are examined extensively in the second volume of the *Utume Theological e-Journal*.

The increasing instances of where priests fail to live up to his vocation necessitates a close examination of the formation given in the seminary, especially the theological formation imparted in our centres. We cannot justify some of the ruinous actions of our own beloved priests. Therefore, when we examine this growing number of incidents especially those which damage the image of ministerial priesthood, we need to ask questions such as: What is the identity of a priest? What are some of the factors leading to this identity crisis? How can we overcome this identity crisis? The second volume of the *Utume Theological e-journal* addresses the challenges that the priests face in living out their ministerial priesthood and also stipulates the paths for renewal. Certainly, these well-written articles draw up some action plans and generate a few recommendations for priests and seminarians.

The theme chosen for this second volume is “*Priestly Identity Today*.” Don Bosco Utume, the Salesian Theological College recently organized a Writing Competition on the above theme for the students of the college. The articles thus collected were edited along with other scholarly works thereby giving the shape to this edition of our theological e-journal. The present volume consists of ten articles that investigate the crisis of priestly identity today.

¹ Cf. Thomas M. Kocik, *Priestly Identity Crisis*, in *Homiletics & Pastoral Review* (April 1999): 18.

² Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, Instruction, *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community*, no. 7, 4 August 2002, in https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_20020804_istruzione-presbitero_en.html (accessed July 23, 2021).

The insightful article entitled *A Systematic Exposition of the Optimal Understanding of Priestly Identity Today* by Asia Emmanuel Omoruyi attempts to outline the meaning of priesthood in the Bible and the Church's tradition. The author opines that the identity of a priest is the identity of Jesus Christ himself.

The article by Otieno Isaiah Mwango, *The Fading Face of Priestly Identity in Contemporary Society*, explores with a sense of confidence and gratitude the priestly vocation. The author attempts to present some ways and means to safeguard and foster priestly vocations. The article ends on a positive note encouraging priests not to get discouraged but to remain focused and dedicated to their priestly calling.

In his well-researched article, *Challenges and Renewal of Priestly Identity Today*, Joseph Ngezahayo presents the nature of priesthood and its characteristics. He provides an understanding of the challenges of priestly identity in today's world and proposes ways of renewal. He concludes by asserting that the Church is in need of priests who incarnate the charism of the Good Shepherd.

Lazar Arasu in his article *Pastoral Zeal as Priestly Identity* examines priestly identity from a pastoral perspective. It is pastoral zeal that gives meaning to the priesthood. According to the author pastoral zeal is a practical way of extending the Kingdom of God and of being the leaven for the world.

In her far-sighted article *Rejuvenating the Priestly Identity: A Pastoral Perspective* Mary Wambua Nzilani discusses ways that might help the priest rediscover his identity. She firmly believes in the importance given to ongoing formation for priests. The author gives practical recommendations for rejuvenating the identity of a priest.

The theological reflection of Ndoda Francis in his article *Priesthood: A Gift and a Task* presents faithfully the place and relevance of a Catholic priest in the contemporary milieu. Priesthood is a way of the cross. This reflection is a wake-up call urging that despite their struggles, priests remain faithful to their vocation.

Nkandu Paul in his article, *Priesthood in the Contemporary World* underlines the concept of the priesthood and its identity. The article aims to present essential characteristics of priestly identity and practical ways of living priestly identity today. Priestly identity does not change with time and culture.

The Ideal Image of a Priest as Traced in the Scripture and Church Tradition by Akinyele Sunday Cyril clarifies the terms and explores how the priestly identity is rooted in the sacred scripture. The sacramental status of the priestly office and its administrative demands are clearly outlined in this article. He exhorts every priest to take up the mission of Christ assiduously and be ever willing to seal his mission with his life if necessary.

Seby Kidangan Ouseph in his article *Priestly Identity as Envisioned in the 1983 Code of Canon Law* looks at the identity of a priest from the juridical and ecclesial perspectives. The article focuses predominately on the *tria munera* of the priest, i.e., the preaching, sanctifying and governing functions, and this study brings out vividly the priestly identity of the priest in the third millennium.

The final article written by Nabaasa Venansio on the *Mission and Spirituality of Priests* presents the pastoral challenges that the priests face and some practical solutions. A detailed study of the notion and spirituality of priesthood is offered in this article. The author concludes by describing the service that a priest of today can offer to humanity.

Dear esteemed readers, this e-journal is a humble attempt of Don Bosco Utume, Salesian Theological College, at nurturing the writing skills and capacity for deep theological reflection of its students. Therefore, I invite you, dear readers, to applaud and appreciate the efforts made by the authors. I wish that all of us make a conscious effort to reclaim the identity of the priest in order to fulfil the mission entrusted to us.

Editor

Seby Kidangan Ouseph, sdb

**A Systematic Exposition
of the Optimal Understanding of Priestly Identity Today**
Asia Emmanuel Omoruyi

Introduction

We find priests in almost all the religions of the world including the Christianity. But the notion of Christian or Catholic priesthood which has its basis in the Bible and in the Tradition of the Church has left many in a state of wonder, awe and confusion. In addition, a critical view shows that there is a plethora or superfluity of notions of priestly identity today which have been amplified by the modern means of communication and by individuals who have given their own relative but derogatory understanding of the priesthood and attempted to universalize it. All the more reason for us to delve into the topic of our discourse.

In this work, we will attempt to look at the public perception or notion of who a priest is, followed by an examination of the meaning of priesthood both in the Bible and the Church's tradition. This historical sketch will help us to assert what priestly identity today entails which is the kernel or the heart of our discourse. We will do this due reference to the understanding of the Second Vatican Council of the ministry of a priest. This will then pave way for the conclusion.

1.1 Public Perception of Priestly Identity

Many people's ideas of priestly identity today stem from their experience with some priests or what they have heard about the priesthood. Sometimes, this is very subjective. Some see priests as promiscuous bachelors searching for social recognition; as men of deception and contradiction who have all the basic amenities of life at their disposal; as potential pedophiles because of the sexual abuses of minors in some places; as those who enjoy an exorbitant lifestyle or who give food to the poor (like any other NGO's); as men with a confused identity, gloomy

individuals; as mis-appropriators of funds; as men searching for prestige, power, social status and security; as men with psychological problems, and often beyond human comprehension and, in fact, mysterious. Some are inclined to look at priest with suspicion simply because they are priests. Nevertheless, some others see priests as men of God and deeply spiritual persons who cater for the spiritual welfare of the community and also essential mediators who intercede for the community.

Having seen these different individual conceptions of the identity of priests, let us now delve into the biblical understanding of who a priest is. This will give us a good foundation for what follows.

1.2 Priesthood in the Biblical Tradition

In order to understand the roots and meaning of priesthood, a biblical study of the term is necessary for a good and sure foundation for our reflection.

1.2.1 Old Testament (OT) Understanding of Priesthood

As we glance through the pages of the OT, we find that the roles and functions of priests changed and developed over the centuries. According to the book of Genesis, the priestly function of offering sacrifices was fulfilled by the heads of Israelite families (Gen. 31:54), while other references state that there were also other priests, who served in the established temples of their neighboring nations (Gen. 41:45; 47:22; Ex. 2:16; 18:1). The first formal mention of established priesthood occurs in Ex. 28:1-4. Here we find that sons of Aaron were established as a priestly class who were also called the tribe of Levi. Through Aaron and by divine decree the priesthood became a reserved dynastic role and function (Ex. 29:9).³

³ R.K. Duke, "Priests and Priesthood," in *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*, ed. T.D. Alexander and D.W. Baker (Leicester: InterVarsity Press, 2003), 647.

In the Book of Numbers, a distinction is made between the priests of the family of Aaron and Levite priests. Only Aaron and his sons are called priests and the Levite priests are identified as cultic functionaries (Num. 3:12-13; 8:16-19). The same distinction is also found in Lk. 10:31-32 in the New Testament (the parable of Good Samaritan). Further clarity is given regarding this distinction in Numbers (8:5-22), which describes how the Levites assisted the priests in their duty and, in their holiness, they stood in the middle of the common people and the priests. Numbers 3:5-10; 4:1-49; 18:1-32 clearly states the duties of Levites: first, they should help the priests by guarding the holy objects of cult not allowing them to be touched by the common people. Secondly, they should help to move the objects of cultic worship by loading and transporting them. They were also to be actively involved in taking the tabernacle to different places. But the holiest objects were wrapped by the priests (Num. 4:5-15). Thus, it is clear that the Levite priests had nothing to do with acts of worship and the cultic duties of offering sacrifices or burning incense, but they merely assisted Aaron and his sons (Num. 18:2).

Later, when the Temple of Jerusalem was built under King Solomon in the 10th century BC (1 Kings 6), their functions were restricted to assisting the priests in the temple by slaughtering the animals in accordance with the instructions in the book of Chronicles and other temple laws.⁴ Though both Levite the priests and the priests of Aaron clan were entrusted with serving in the house of God, only the priests of Aaron's clan served God (Yahweh) and could stand in the holy place.⁵ In the Book of Numbers the perpetuation of the priesthood had to take place through a son of Aaron (Num. 25:10-13). We can therefore say that Priesthood in the OT is closely linked to the Temple.

⁴ Risto Nurmela, *The Levites: Their Emergence as a Second-Class Priesthood* (Atlanta: Scholars Press, 1998), 8.

⁵ Leithart, "Attendance of Yahweh's House: Priesthood in the Old Testament," 19.

1.2.2 Non-Israel Priesthood

Genesis 14:18-20 is the first reference in the Bible to someone being identified as a priest. The first non-Israel priest named in the Scripture is Melchizedek who is called as “priest of God Most High”. In Ps 110:4 the psalmist writes: “You are a priest forever in the line of Melchizedek.” The Letter to the Hebrews also speaks about this mysterious king (7:1-14). Genesis chapter 14 mentions him as a priest-king who procured “bread and wine.” This was a good will gesture of generosity on Melchizedek’s part since bread and water were the normal food of the people (1 Sam 16:20). There was also animal sacrifice (Num 15:2–10; 1 Sam 1:24; 10:3). In Melchizedek, we find kingship and priesthood combined. His bringing of bread and wine, intended to refresh Abram after his battles, also had a religious significance because Melchizedek was a priest. Melchizedek also blessed Abraham. This blessing was twofold: an honour to the Almighty God (Gen. 14:20) and an honour to Abraham (Genesis 14:19). Abram also gave Melchizedek one tenth of everything. Although tithing is primarily directed to God, it was also given to those kings who were considered to be the representatives of God on earth. Abram gave the tithe to Melchizedek because he was both king and a priest representing God. The mention of a non-Israel priest has great historical significance because it describes the goodness and greatness of a priest. Melchizedek was a king and a priest, as his name and title state. Both Abram and Melchizedek recognized each other as great, and that is why their encounter was fruitful.

1.2.3 Priestly Functions in the Old Testament

The Old Testament describes in detail the various priestly functions and priestly jobs entrusted according to the respective traditions. They are categorized as follows: service at the sanctuary (Ex. 30:7-8, Dt 10:7-8; 31:9,25; Lev. 1:5); mediating between God and the People (Ex.

28:15-29,38); the priests as purifiers (Lev. 4:1-6:7; 16:1-21); the priests as the teachers of Torah (Ezra 7:6, 11); the priests as judges (Ex. 18:5-27; Deut. 1:9-18); the priests as prophets (Deut. 10:8); the priests as participants in sacred war (20:2-4); priests as boundary-interpreters between the Holy and Unholy (Lev. 10:10), etc.

1.3 Priesthood in the New Testament

In the New Testament four types of priesthood are identified: the Jewish priesthood, the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the ministerial priesthood and the common priesthood. The references to the Jewish priests occur more frequently in the gospels, where priests are involved in the life, the ministry, and the death and resurrection of Jesus. We also find references in Acts and finally in Hebrews, where the author discusses the priesthood of Jesus vis-a-vis the Jewish priesthood. The Gospel according to Luke (1:5-9) describes the function of a priest called Zachariah who was of the lineage of Abijah. In reference to the Jewish priesthood, reference to the “High Priest” or “Chief Priest” (Archiereus)⁶ frequently occurs in the New Testament (Mt 2:4; Mark 14:1, etc.). They were part of the Jewish Sanhedrin and came to be known as a separate class. It was a special privilege of the High Priest to enter the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement and to offer sin offerings and prayers (Leviticus 16, Heb 9).

1.3.1 The Etymology of the New Testament word “Priest”

The etymological origin of the New Testament word “priest” is a Greek word *presbyteros* (elder, city father),⁷ which refers to a person of experience, mature age and importance in society.⁸ It describes a special kind of religious intermediary,⁹ designated by the

⁶ “Archiereus” is a Greek term for bishop, when considered as the culmination of the priesthood. It is used in the liturgical books of the Eastern Orthodox Church and Eastern Catholic Church, for those services which correspond to the pontifical services of the Roman Rite.

⁷ Thomas Rausch, *Priesthood Today: An Appraisal* (NJ: Paulist Press, 1992), 2.

⁸ Avery Dulles, “Models for Ministerial Priesthood,” in *Origins* 20 (Oct. 1990): 85.

⁹ Dulles, “Models for Ministerial Priesthood,” 286.

Latin word *sacerdos* or the Greek word *hiereus*; both signify a person who is sacred.¹⁰ God's power should be in him; he should be consecrated and operates in the divine sphere.¹¹ Thus we can understand that the priest is set apart for activities in the divine realm (consecrated). Gradually, in the tradition of the Church the priest became not only a spiritual leader but also an office bearer whose authority was extended to the realm of administration which the community accepted. Above all, Jesus is the eternal high priest, the foundation and model of priesthood in the Church.

1.3.2 Jesus as the Priest of the New Testament

The New Testament invites us to recognize in Jesus the priest “par excellence”, not in the sense of a continuation of the Jewish temple and dynastic priesthood, but as a new kind of priesthood and something greater than that of the Temple priesthood. In fact, he is the fulfilment of the OT priesthood. We read in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*: “Everything that the priesthood of the Old Covenant prefigured finds its fulfilment in Christ Jesus, the one mediator between God and men (2 Tim 2:5). The Christian tradition considers Melchizedek, “priest of God Most High,” as a prefiguration of the priesthood of Christ, (Heb. 5:10, 6:20), “holy, blameless, unstained” (Heb. 7:26), who by a single offering has perfected for all time those who are sanctified (Heb. 10:14) that is, by the unique sacrifice of the cross.¹² Christ, the High Priest and unique Mediator, through his life, death and resurrection made the Church “a kingdom of priests for his God and Father” (1Pet 2:5, 9; Rev 1:6; 5:9-10). Jesus himself was the temple, “something greater than the Temple” (Mt 12: 6). This did not abolish temple worship (Mt 5:17) and the Jewish priesthood but raised both to a higher level, from cultic service limited to the

¹⁰ Albert Vanhoye, *Old Testament Priests and the New Priests: According to the New Testament* (Massachusetts: St. Bede's Publications, 1986), 19.

¹¹ G. Schrenk, “Hieros,” in *Theological Dictionary of New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel (Michigan: B. Erdmans Publishing Company, 1965), 222.

¹² *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 1544.

Temple to the up building of a community matured by the life of the triumphant Saviour.¹³ Fundamentally, the New Testament concept of the priesthood is based on the ideas of “consecration and mission” that were realized in Jesus himself (Jn 10:36: The Father has consecrated and sent into the world). Jesus, is the only anointed and consecrated One; the One who is sent; the High Priest and the Eschatological High Priest.

1.3.3 The Apostles and Ministerial Priesthood

The twelve apostles had a special privileged status among the followers and disciples of Jesus. He chose them and also named them, “Apostles” (Mk 3:14; Lk 6:13). He taught them many things in private (Mk 4:34), and he loved them to the end (Jn 13:1) and he ate his last Passover meal (the last supper) in their company (Mt 17-19; Mk 14:16; Lk 22:7, 15). He also consecrated them (Jn 17:19), and entrusted them with the obligation of repeating his actions of breaking the bread and transforming it into his body and blessing the chalice to transform it into his blood and to do it in memory of him (Mt 26: 26-28; Mk 14: 22-24; Lk 17-20). Moreover, Jesus desired to continue his ministry through his Apostles. “He who receives you receives me” (Mt 9:8; 10:1; 40; 21:23; Mk 13:34; Lk. 4:6; 9:1; 10: 16, 19). He also commissioned them saying, “As the Father has sent me even so do I send you” (Jn 13:20, 17:18, 20:21). One can clearly recognize the status and the ministry of the apostles. St Paul states: “This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God” (1 Cor 4:1).

Through their ministerial priesthood, the Apostles are chosen from among the Christ’s other disciples who share in the common priesthood. They are given special privileges and responsibility for continuing the mission of Jesus in the world. They act on behalf of Jesus, develop an intimate relationship through Him to the Father. As representatives of Jesus, they are filled with divine authority for Jesus tells them: “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects

¹³ Jean Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood* (San Francisco: Ignites Press, 1985), 36.

you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects Him who sent Me” (Lk 10:16). St. Paul, also made clear that the apostles are direct successors of Jesus: “So we are ambassadors for Christ, God making His appeal through us. We beseech you on behalf of Christ, be reconciled to God” (2 Cor. 5:20) and claims that the “ministry of reconciliation” has been given to him (2 Cor. 5:18). Accordingly, the apostles do not act from their own authority, but by the authority and the power they have received from Christ as members of his Church; they stand before the Church in the name of Christ.

The Apostles handed on to their successors in the community in their writings and by their spoken word (2 Thes 2:15), the revealed truth, as seen, heard, touched by them (1 Jn. 1:1). This mission of maintaining the deposit faith (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 1:14) must be carried on by their successors who are anointed with the Spirit by the imposition of the hands (1 Tim 4:14; 2 Tim 1:6; 1 Tim 5:22). They were given the titles of “vigilants” (in Greek *episcopi*, from which the word “bishop” comes) and “elders” (in Greek *presbyteri*). This is testified in the writings of St. Paul (1 Phil 1:1), St. James (5:14) and of St. Peter (1 Pet 5:1-14) concerning the appointment of “bishops” and “presbyters” as heads of the communities of believers. Thus, the apostolic succession finds its basis in the appointment of elders and presbyters. In the early Church, these two terms are used synonymously (Acts 11:30, 15:22).

1.3.4 Ministerial Priesthood as a Ministerial Office

The ministerial priesthood is “the sacrament through which the mission entrusted by Christ to his apostles continues to be exercised in the Church until the end of time.” The sacrament of apostolic ministry is received through the sacrament of Holy Orders by the imposition of the hands. The sacrament includes three degrees which were present in the early Church: episcopate, presbyterate, and diaconate (Rm. 16:1; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:1). Among the

three, the status and task of episcopate became the most important as it was identified with the presidents of the Christian communities (1 Tim. 3: 1-3; Titus 1:7). The presbyterate became their ambassadors, sent to local communities, or pastoral leaders in charge of the celebration of Eucharist in local communities¹⁴ (Acts 14:23, 15:6; Rm. 12:8; 1 Cor. 10:16; 1 Tim. 5:17, etc.). The priest was officially appointed by ordination to preside over the sacraments, and to enable the community to live a life centered on the Eucharist, which is the most sublime expression, source and summit of Christian life.¹⁵ To build up a community centered on the Eucharist is one of the main duties of a priest. It is worth noting, that the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood.¹⁶

Concerning the concept of the common priesthood it is also important to mention that it is the priesthood of believers “to offer sacrifice of praise and to do good” (Heb 13:15-16), to offer their bodies as a living sacrifice (Rm 12:1), and as a holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices (1 Pet 2:5). Among the Christian faithful all become equal in their dignity and activity to build up the body of Christ (Rm 12:4, 1 Cor 12:13). Some of them by a special call from Christ become teachers, ministers or pastors (Eph 4:11; Jas 3:1).

In the New Testament as well in the early Church, the common priesthood was not ministry oriented nor was it ever understood in opposition to the ministerial priesthood. In fact, there is an essential unity between the two types of priesthood for it is the working of the same Holy Spirit the giver of variety of charismatic gifts in the Church.¹⁷ Moreover, the priesthood of Jesus Christ is the foundation for both the common priesthood and ministerial priesthood.

¹⁴ Olivier Artus, “Priesthood: A Biblical Perspective”, in *Indian Theological Studies* 17 (March 2010): 51.

¹⁵ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 10.

¹⁶ Eugene N. Joseph, “Priestly Identity,” in *Indian Theological Studies* 45 (2008): 176.

¹⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Lumen Gentium*, 12.

1.4 The Early Church Fathers and their Teaching on Priesthood

The Christian priesthood goes back to and is rooted in the person and the ministry of Jesus. Nevertheless, the primitive Christian preaching did not speak of priesthood in connection with Jesus as such. Neither in his person nor in his ministry nor in his death did the first Christian community leaders find any close connection between Jesus and institutional priesthood. They preached and presented the risen Jesus as the Messiah, the Son of David. They were called by certain names that went along with their mission or service or responsibility, such as *apostolos* which means “one who has been sent”, *diakonos* “one who serves”; *episkopos* “overseer”, *presbyteros* “elder”, *hegoumenos* “a leader”.¹⁸

From patristic times through the middle of the twentieth century, priesthood was spoken in connection with sacred realities. Though the NT does not apply the language of priesthood to its official leaders, the titles “priest” and “high priest” begin to appear in patristic sources (Tertullian, Hippolytus) early in the third century which was applied to the ministry of the bishops.¹⁹ There were attempts made for the sacralization of the office of the priests between the fourth and tenth centuries which led to a clear distinction between the priest and the people. The priesthood in terms of cultic action, putting the emphasis on sacrament and sacramental sacrifice, was the norm until Vatican II. The dominant functions of bishops and presbyters seen in the patristic and medieval period were priestly worship and sacramental ministry.

Thomas Aquinas taught that the principal task of priests was to consecrate the Eucharist.²⁰ We find, in the writings of the Fathers of the Church, a very exalted, inspiring and supernatural view of the priesthood. “The apex of dignities is the priesthood”, says Ignatius of

¹⁸ Joseph Lionel, *My Beloved: The Theological and Liturgical Understanding of the Christian Priesthood* (Bangalore: ATC Publications, 2010), 2.

¹⁹ A. Pancras and J. Antony, eds., *Priesthood* (Chennai: The New Leader Publication, 2010), 43.

²⁰ Pancras and Antony, *Priesthood*, 65.

Antioch while St. Ephrem the Syrian, deacon and doctor of the Church, writes, “The priesthood is an astounding miracle, great, immense, and infinite”.²¹ According to St. Polycarp, a priest ought to be a model of every virtue, particularly of kindness, understanding, and reaching out to the needy. Priests should be inclined to sympathize, to show mercy to all, to bring back those who have wandered astray, to visit the sick. They should be considerate to the widows, the orphans, and the pauper.²²

The main duties of the priest were conceived as primarily to preside over the Eucharistic celebration and to preach the Word of God.²³ According to St. Cyprian, bishop and martyr: “If Jesus Christ, our Lord and God has first offered Himself as a sacrifice to the Father, and has commanded this to be done in commemoration of Himself, certainly that priest truly discharges the office of Christ, who imitates that which Christ did when he proceeds to offer it according to what he see Christ Himself to have offered.”²⁴ The followers of Christ believe in one Christ, one Church, One Chair founded on Peter. There can be no other altar or priesthood. Whoever gathers anywhere else will scatter. Thus, Cyprian makes it quite clear that those who “gather elsewhere”, outside the Church are not gathering, but scattering.²⁵ According to St. John Chrysostom, the priest who offers sacrifice represents Christ and when he prays the words of consecration, consecration takes place: “It is not man who causes what is present to become the Body and Blood of Christ, but Christ Himself who was crucified for us.”²⁶ St. Ignatius of Antioch and St. Jerome emphasize the unity of priests, especially with their bishop.

²¹ Pancras and Antony, *Priesthood*, 18.

²² “Epistle of Polycarp to the Philippians,” New Advent, <https://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0136.htm> (accessed December 8, 2020).

²³ George Kaitholil, *The People and the Priest* (Mumbai: St Paul’s Press, 2009), 165.

²⁴ Pancras and Antony, *Priesthood*, 24.

²⁵ *Ibid.*, 30.

²⁶ Dean Hoge and Jacqueline Wenger, *Evolving Vision of the Priesthood* (Minneosta: Liturgical Press, 2003), 212.

Finally, for the Fathers of the Church, the priest is, above all, ‘a man of God’, specially chosen by God, to divinize creation. St. Gregory of Nazianzus, as a young priest exclaimed:

We must begin purifying ourselves before purifying others we must be instructed to be able to instruct become light to illuminate and draw close to God in order to bring him close to others; be sanctified to sanctify. Who then is the priest? He is the defender of truth, who stands with angels, gives glory with archangels, causes sacrifices to rise to the altar on high, shares Christ’s priesthood, refashions creation, restores it to God’s image, recreates it for the world on high, and, even greater, is divinized and divinizes.²⁷

St. John Chrysostom, in his classic discourse *On the Priesthood*, attributes the vocation to priesthood to the Holy Spirit when comments, “The priestly office is indeed discharged on earth, but ranks among heavenly ordinances; and very naturally so: for neither man, nor angel, nor archangel, nor any created power, but the Paraclete Himself, instituted this vocation and persuaded men while still abiding in the flesh to represent the ministry of angels.”²⁸

Certainly, these Fathers of the Church had a very profound spiritual understanding and appreciation of the Priesthood, in harmony with the mind of the apostles of Jesus, which the Church needs to recapture, if our priests are to be relevant in our highly modernized and secularized world.

1.5 Priestly Identity Today

The Second Vatican Council has been most influential in our understanding of ministry and priesthood today. It revised the understanding of the priestly life and ministry in the light of its origins and a renewed ecclesiology, by rejecting the traditional notion of the cultic role of the priests and by attributing to priests a threefold function in accordance to the *tria munera Christi*. They are: teacher (*munus docendi*), leader (*munus regendi*) and sanctifier (*munus sanctificandi*).

²⁷ St. Gregory of Nazianz (330-389 A.D.), Catholic Faith and Reason, <https://www.catholicfaithandreason.org/st-gregory-of-nazianz-330-389-ad.html> (accessed December 7, 2020).

²⁸ Pancras and Antony, *Priesthood*, 38.

The Catholic doctrinal tradition, thus defines the priest as one consecrated by the sacrament of Holy Orders to proclaim the Good News, to take care of the faithful, to offer worship. This triad has become the very foundation of the theology of priestly ministry.²⁹ The Second Vatican Council defines priests as those made after the example of Christ, the High Priest, by the Sacrament of Holy Orders, to work for the Church the Body of Christ along with their bishops. Thus, the identity of a priest is the identity of Jesus Christ himself. He is called to be *alter Christus* – another Christ. He is to live in this world among men; however, he is forbidden to be conformed to this world.³⁰

Since the Second Vatican Council, eminent theologians have differed in their opinions regarding the three functions of priests. Karl Rahner, Hans Urs Von Balthasar and Joseph Ratzinger have placed their emphasis on the prophetic function. Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Constitution on Priestly Formation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* recapitulates the teaching of Vatican II, that the priest has the primary duty of proclaiming the Word of God. In order to perform this service, the priest must have intimate personal knowledge of the word of God.³¹ In Jean Galot's view, the priest is a shepherd called to feed the sheep of Christ and to lay down his life for them. The office of the shepherd for Galot, includes the ministry of word and sacrament.³²

In *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, Pope John Paul II stated that the priest, by virtue of the consecration which he receives in the Sacrament of Orders, is sent forth by the Father through the mediatorship of Jesus Christ, to whom he is configured in a special way as head and shepherd

²⁹ Ventura Fernandes, "Priestly Formation Today," in *Asian Journal for Priest and Religious* 51 (2006): 8-9.

³⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, "Biblical Foundations of Priesthood," in *Communio* 17 (1990): 617-627.

³¹ Sebastin Kizhakkeyil, *The Priest: Theological Reflection on Priesthood and Priestly Spirituality in the Light of Church Teachings* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation, 2010), 387.

³² Jean Galot, *Theology of Priesthood*, 292.

of his people in order to live and work by the power of the Holy Spirit in service of the Church for the salvation of the world.³³ The priest as a minister (consecrated through the Sacrament of Orders) is a sign of the Good Shepherd: he shares his priestly existence in a special way, he extends his work and lives in harmony with his experiences of pastoral charity.³⁴ The priest, thus, attains special identity and status similar to Jesus Christ through his participation in the redemptive mission of Jesus. In fact, the redemptive mission of Jesus is the definitive foundation for priestly identity.

It follows that we can assert that the priest is a man of God who mediates between God and his people; a Man of Prayer (in deep intimacy and communion with God); another Christ (*Alter Christus*); an Icon of Christ (acts in *persona Christi*); the Minister of Christ (attends to the spiritual needs of the faithful); an Anointed One (consecration and mission); a Man of Holiness; a Man of all Virtues; a Good Shepherd and Leader; a Prophet and King; a Teacher and Preacher of God's word which is of prime importance.³⁵

1.6 Priestly Ministries and Functions

Priests derive the meaning of their ministry from Christ who is the foundation and source of all the Christian ministries. In other words, the priests are just continuing the ministries of Jesus who is the perfect model for all Christian ministers (one who serves). The ministries of the Catholic priests include the following:

1.6.1 Ministry of the Eucharist and of the Word

The priest's life is centered on the celebration of the Eucharist. It is the center of the assembly of the faithful over which the priest presides. Therefore, the priest's greatest charism is

³³ Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 12.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 11.

³⁵ Isaac J. Alencherry, *An Eastern Theology of Priesthood* (New Delhi: Intel-cultural Publishing, 1994), 129.

to stand among his community at the Lord's table and to give thanks to God.³⁶ The priest as presider at the Eucharist must bring a contemplative dimension to the celebration of the liturgy.

Proclamation of the Word of God is the principal task and responsibility of the priests. Vatican II states "Priests have their primary duty as the proclamation of the Gospel of God to all."³⁷ The priest is before all else, the minister and servant of the Word of God, that means the priests are called to explain realities of life in the light of the Word, understand and communicate God's will and His plan for the people. *Code of Canon Law* commenting on the fundamental and primary importance of proclaiming the Word states: "Theological formation, given in the light of faith and under the guidance of the Magisterium, is to be imparted in such a way that the students learn the whole of Catholic teaching, based on divine Revelation, that they make it a nourishment of their own Spiritual lives, and that in the exercise of the ministry they may be able to proclaim and defend it."³⁸

Jesus himself initiated his ministry proclaiming the Scripture; "the Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor" (Lk 4: 17-18). He also concluded his earthly ministry commanding his disciples: "Go into the world and proclaim the good news to the whole creation" (Mk 16:15). Therefore, in order to be efficient preachers of the Word of God, priests must read, listen, meditate and proclaim the Word of God daily. The only objective and end of preaching the Word of God should be "conversion and holiness" of all. *Pastores Dabo Vobis* affirms it: "In the Church and on behalf of the Church, priests are a sacramental representation of Jesus Christ, the Head and Shepherd, authoritatively proclaiming his Word."³⁹ It further states that the priest is "first of all a minister of the Word of God."⁴⁰ The

³⁶ Raymond A. Tartre, *The Priesthood is a Challenge* (New York: Albey Press, 1974), 39.

³⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

³⁸ *CIC* can. 252 §1.

³⁹ Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 15.

priest then must be an effective communicator of the Word. To preach the Word effectively, first of all, the priest must be a man, who lives the Word of God.⁴¹

1.6.2 Sanctification and Sacraments

The function of sanctification involves both the priest and the faithful. It consists in celebrating the sacraments and participating in the liturgy of the hours. The more a priest administers the sacraments especially the sacraments of the Holy Eucharist and Penance the more he gets sanctified. The Divine Office also helps in the sanctification of priests. As the prayer flows through the hearts and lips of the priest, the priest's body and spirit get sanctified and are turned towards God and linked to all people in the universe and thus the priest helps to fulfil the fundamental law of Christ, i.e., the love of one's neighbour.⁴²

1.6.3 Shepherding

The priest as a pastoral leader is a shepherd whose primary duty is to care for his flock. He is called to be the leader of the Christian community. Hence, in his ministry, a priest has to combine the roles of a pastor and a leader. His leadership is not a leadership of power; it does not dominate or control the people but centered on service (Mt. 20:25-28, Lk 22:27). Particular focus of the act of shepherding is "preferential option for the poor." Regarding shepherding, the Second Vatican Council stated: Although priests owe service to everybody, the poor and the weaker ones have been committed to their care in a special way. Finally, the priest ought to be especially devoted to the sick and the dying, visiting them and comforting them in the Lord.⁴³

⁴⁰ Pope John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 26.

⁴¹ Paul E. Dinter, *The Changing of Priesthood* (Texas: Word Book Publications, 2010), 203.

⁴² Abraham Kadaplackal, *The Spirituality of the Diocesan Priest* (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2000), 44.

⁴³ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 6.

Conclusion

From the foregoing exploration of the concept of priestly identity today, including its public perception, how it developed and was understood in the Bible and in the Catholic Tradition and its primary ministry, we can say that we have a comprehensive understanding of the concept of the priesthood. Scripturally, we saw that the concept of priesthood has its roots in OT times and was gradually developed and transformed into a new understanding in the New Testament after the model of Jesus Christ as the new and eternal high priest. Hence, the identity of a priest that emerges from our exploration is that he is a ministerial priest who shares in the unique priesthood of Christ together with his bishop and as a collaborator of the bishop who is a successor of the apostles. This collaboration of the apostolic order is realized in and through his pastoral ministry in the particular Church to which he is dedicated and through which the pastoral charity of Christ is manifested. Priestly ministry and functions are thus the privileged means of sanctification for a priest.

It follows that priests as mediators between God and man, should lead a spiritual life and help others do the same by praying for them, by administering sacraments and by reconciling people to God and sanctifying them.⁴⁴ As Fulton J. Sheen puts it correctly when he wrote that the Church is in danger when the laity are more spiritual than the clergy.⁴⁵ And the spiritually undeveloped priest has a protracted infancy.⁴⁶ Most parishioners recognize instinctively writes Thomas Rauch, the difference between spirituality and rhetoric, between liturgical prayer and theater.⁴⁷ Priests are called to have the smell of the sheep.⁴⁸ They should not be aloof from the

⁴⁴ Kizhakkeyil, *The Priest*, 374.

⁴⁵ Fulton Sheen, *The Priest is not his Own* (Bangalore: ATC Publishers, 1963), 71.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 101.

⁴⁷ Thomas P. Rauch, *Priesthood Today: An Appraisal* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992), 55.

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, *With the Smell of the Sheep* (Bangalore: Theological Publications in India, 2018), 7.

reality of their people, feel their plight, difficulties, joys and tribulations and strive to console and intercede for them.

People expect to meet priests who are down to earth, who listen with great honesty and sincerity; priests, who work in collaboration with others knowing that their pastoral ministry is a collaborative venture. They want priests, who recognize the gifts of the people they are working with; priests who are men of integrity, who are approachable, who maintain boundaries in relationships and are also inclusive without unhealthy favoritism. They want priests, who can break God's Word to them, ministers of reconciliation and communion, men of prayer, holiness of life and great availability, men who approach their ministry with generosity and great dedication even to their celibacy. Let us note that a priest today who loses the prophetic dimension of his priesthood does so at great cost to himself. His priesthood can easily become one of mere ritualism. Therefore, we can humbly conclude that the identity of a priest is the identity of Jesus Christ himself and the priesthood means imitation of Christ and imitation means self-crucifixion.⁴⁹ Hence, He is called to be *alter Christus* - another Christ (*agere in persona Christi capitis*).

⁴⁹ Fulton Sheen, *The Priest is not his Own*, 166.

The Fading Face of Priestly Identity in Contemporary Society

Otieno Isaiah Mwango

Introduction

Who is a priest? A priest, in effect, is an ordained minister of God, a mediator who connects humanity with the divinity. He offers the Eucharistic sacrifice to God on behalf of the faithful as he exercises his priestly ministry, administers the sacraments and links the faithful to God. The scriptures, especially the Letter to the Hebrews have this approach to the priesthood, “for every high priest, being taken from among men, is appointed for men in things pertaining to God, that he may offer both gifts and sacrifices for sins” (Heb. 5:1). The Holy Scriptures beautifully outline the prime features of the priestly system so as to emphasize quite graphically the absolutely holy nature of Almighty God. This is a concept repeatedly affirmed in the Scriptures (Isa. 6:3; Rev. 4:8). This fundamental truth must be grasped, as much as is humanly possible, if a priest is to be motivated to serve the Ruler of Heaven and Earth.

This reflection on priestly identity today will faithfully try to analyze critically priesthood in its entirety, priestly identity and its consequences, the faithful expectations of their priests, priesthood as a call from God, ordination marking the advent of priesthood, priestly fidelity, the prayer life of the priest, The Second Vatican Council’s understanding of priesthood, and finally the practical challenges in priestly life and ministry today. The conclusion will try to summarize all that we have discussed and give some practical ways forward in this noble response to God’s call through which many are called but few are chosen.

1. Deeper Understanding of Priesthood

According to CCC 1592, the ministerial priesthood differs in essence from the common priesthood of the faithful because it confers a sacred power for the service of the faithful. The

ordained ministers exercise their service for the people of God by teaching (*munus docendi*) divine worship (*munus liturgicum*) and pastoral governance (*munus regendi*). This is per excellence, the true identity of the priesthood.

1.1 Maximilian Kolbe Testimony

You may have read the inspirational story of St. Maximilian Kolbe, during the fateful day at Auschwitz when the Nazi prison guards assembled the concentration camp inmates in rows, and at the commandant's order, randomly chose ten helpless men for execution in retaliation for a recent escape, one of whom was a husband and father. Father Kolbe courageously and bravely without fear spoke up, "I wish to take the place of that man." The sneering voice of the commandant demanded to know who Maximilian Kolbe having heard the sorrowful and compassionate words Fr Kolbe had just uttered "Who is that Polish swine?" Asked the commandant. Interestingly, this is how he revealed his identity in reply "I am a Catholic priest". This was a humble response that revealed the true identity of Fr Kolbe: "I am a Catholic priest." In the eyes of God, in his own eyes, in the eyes of God's Church and His suffering people, Maximilian Kolbe's identity was that of a priest. At the core of his being, on his heart, was engraved a name tag which marked him forever a priest of God like Melkisedek of old. That identity could not be erased neither by neither the inhuman circumstances of a death camp nor by the godless environment of Auschwitz nor by the mere fact that Fr. Maximillian challenged the godless ideology of the Nazis.

That identity hardly depended upon the acclaim of those around him, or was it lessened by the any doubts he may personally have experienced in such a terrible setting. That identity might have come from the guarantor of vocations, God Himself, and Fr Kolbe responded

positively and safeguarded his vocation as a Catholic priest with a lot of dedication and commitment without fear or favor, willingly and knowingly in full conscience.

According to the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, a renowned document from the Second Vatican Council, the priest shares in the authority by which Christ himself builds up, sanctifies, and rules his Body, the Church. Therefore, this ministerial office is conferred by the laying on of hands by the bishop and other priests and the anointing the hands of the new priest with the oil of chrism. Through the gifts of the Holy Spirit, the newly ordained becomes an authentic and validly ordained minister of God in the order of Melkisedek of old. He can now act in the person of Christ the Head”⁵⁰

Presbyterorum Ordinis further defined priesthood as a calling, not a career; a re-definition of self, not just a new ministry; a way of life, and a long-term commitment to working in the vineyard of the Lord. His priestly ordination leaves a permanent mark on the minister it is conferred on. Joseph Cardinal Bernardin puts it nicely when outlining what priests are and what they are not: “priests are not dispensable functionaries; they are bridges to the very mystery of God and healers of the soul. When we claim this priestly identity un-apologetically, we not only find ourselves but also provide the Church and our culture with the sustenance they require.”⁵¹

In our Catholic understanding of priesthood from the simple catechism, priestly ordination is a radical, total re-ordering and a complete U-turn in a person’s life so that he becomes Christ himself. The Letter of St. Paul to the Galatians expresses it beautifully: “Yet I leave no longer I, BUT Christ lives in me...” (Gal 2:20) His priesthood affects a priest’s whole being and subsequently his actions and mannerisms in whatever steps he undertakes.

⁵⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 2.

⁵¹ Joseph Bernardin, *The Gift of Peace, Tremendous Trust in the Lord* (Image, 1998) 34.

1.1.1 Priesthood: Irreplaceable and Indispensable

In the Gospel according to Saint John, Jesus teaches that we should not work for food that perishes but rather, the food that endures for eternal life (Jn 6:27). In these words, we can see the relevance of priesthood in our ever-changing contemporary society. The priesthood is an irreplaceable and indispensable vocation in the world simply because priests exist to proclaim the truth that is in Christ and his Gospel and through it we come to eternal life. The priest works for the food that endures for eternal life, not the food that perishes with the end of this earthly life. Don Bosco reminded his Salesian priests that a priest doesn't go to heaven or hell alone, if to heaven, he goes together with the souls he journeyed with but if to hell, he is accompanied by the souls he misdirected from beatitude to the hell.

A good example of this is Saint John Vianney, the patron saint of priests. Once he was on his way to his assignment as the parish priest in the little town of Ars in France, got lost. He found himself among the fields, in a thick fog. Finding the path on which to walk back home, he encountered a young teenager of only 12-14 years old and told him that if he showed him the path leading to Ars, then he would definitely show him the path leading to heaven!" Wow! This simple priest could make such a bold statement because he was certain of his priestly identity and the importance of the priesthood. He knew that the priest exists in order to lead people to heaven and that he was called to work for what lasts for eternity.⁵²

1.1.2 A world in need of Salvation

Saint Paul in the Letter to the Romans writes: "For everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" implying the necessity of an instrument to convey the word and belief as the means for the acceptance of the word (Romans 10:13-15). The Gospel transforms and gives life

⁵² John Vianney, *The Cure D'ARS: The Sermons of the Cure of ARS: Confessions, its Fruitful Practice* (Tan Books, 2014), 194.

to those who believe and follow its teaching, but if there is no one to proclaim the Gospel, then the world will not be able to receive it. The priest exists to proclaim the life changing and life-giving Gospel. But Saint Paul also asks: “And how can people preach unless they are sent?” We too can ask ourselves this same question. The answer is that the men who are called by God to be priests are sent by God, through His Church, to proclaim to the world that if men and women call on the name of the Lord he will bring salvation. And what Saint Paul wrote years ago about those who preach is true also today: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!”

The words of Pope St. John Paul II in *Pastores Dabo Vobis* are relevant here: “The presence of Christ in the World through the Priesthood”. The Holy Father comments that the apostles, appointed by the Lord, progressively carried out their mission collaboratively, and handed over this mandate to their successors who are the current bishops and priests.”⁵³

2. Consequences of Priestly Identity

Priesthood is a divine calling from God. As a calling, it implies that the so called, has to respond and this divine response has consequences. “Some are incapable of marriage because they were born so; some because they were made by others; to some, because they have renounced marriage for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. Whoever can accept this ought to accept it.” (Cf Mathew 19:12)

2.1. Priesthood as the Icon of Eternal Priesthood

Priests are configured to Christ at the very core of their being, and their priesthood has the same characteristics as that of the Eternal High Priest. Their priesthood is forever as the psalmist beautifully wrote; “Jesus Christ is there identified as a priest forever in order of

⁵³ Vianney, *The Cure D'ARS*, 194.

Melchizedek” (Psalms 110:4) This characteristic implies faithfulness since priesthood requires faithfulness. When a man says ‘yes’ to his priesthood, it is forever. The question which many people ask is: If priesthood is forever, then what about those priests who for one reason or the other, quit the priesthood? My simple answer to this question would be that for whatever reason a priest quits ministerial priesthood, he still remains a priest forever because of the permanent grace of that sacrament. Priesthood requires a complete, lifelong commitment to Christ and His bride the Church. It is a special gift which God did not even to our beloved mother Mary, neither was it given to the angels. For this reason, I go back to what the psalmist said, “a priest forever in order of Melchizedek.” Hence priesthood should be treated with a lot of dignity and given the total respect it deserves. If a priest wants to pursue another career, he should realize that such is not the mind of the Church!

2.2 “May God who began a good work in you, bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus.”

This was the core of the message of Pope Francis during his visit to Africa when he had opportunity to meet with the clergy and seminarians, and men and women Religious St. Mary’s School in Nairobi. The Holy Father began by summarizing the theology contained in St. Paul’s famous Letter to the Philippians (1:6) “May God who began a good work in you, bring it to completion at the day of Christ Jesus.”

Pope Francis reminded his audience that all of them had been chosen by the Lord; he chose each one of them. He began a good work on the day of their baptism, and then later, he looked at them again, and said, “If you wish, come with me. Pope Francis continued: “So we lined up and began our journey but it was he who began our journey, not ourselves.” Pope Francis explicitly reminded the priests that in the priesthood or consecrated life, they have to

enter by “the door”! And the door is none other than Christ Himself. He is the one who calls, who begins the work, who completes the work.⁵⁴ Surprisingly, some people want to enter by the window...But it doesn’t work that way. Pope Francis continued, “so please, if any of you have friends who came in by the window, embrace them and tell them it would be better to live and go serve God in another way, because a work which Jesus Himself did not begin will never be brought to completion.”⁵⁵

Here, Pope Francis seemed to be targeting those who view priesthood or religious life as a career! And in response to this opinion, he said, “in our life as disciples of Jesus, there must be no room for personal ambition, for money, for worldly importance. We follow Jesus to the very last step of His earthly life: the cross. He will make sure we rise again, but we have to keep following Him to the end. I tell you this in all seriousness, because the church is not a business or an NGO. The Church is a mystery! The mystery of Jesus, who looks at each of us and says: “Follow me”⁵⁶.

2.3 The ‘Yes’ Forever

What else can we say after these words of Pope Francis? The priesthood is forever! How we live the priesthood, no matter to where we are assigned, or what we are to do, priestly identity is eternal and unchangeable. This explains the reason why priests undergo a long process of formation before ordination. The seminary exists to make sure that a priest freely, deliberately, joyfully willingly, knowingly, without any external or internal compulsion says the “yes” that lasts forever. God forbid anyone would take that lightly!

⁵⁴ Pope Francis, *Meeting with Clergy, Men and Women Religious and Seminarians at Sports Field of St. Mary’s School, Nairobi 26th November 2015*, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches/2015/november/documents/papa-francesco_20151126_kenya-religiosi.html (accessed December 20, 2020).

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibid.

It is good, therefore, to be up front about one of the great temptations of seminary life, namely, to drift into the priesthood. Priestly dedication, the conviction that the Lord is calling a priest to serve him and His Church forever as a priest, must be clear, enthusiastic, deliberate, and free. A priest does not become priest to please dad, mom, grandmother, the parish priest, the bishop, the diocese, or anybody else. A priest becomes a priest because he has prayerfully and rationally discerned God's call; he has carefully discerned that call, and now freely and joyfully embraces and responds to this divine call from God, knowing that to sustain a lifelong commitment to priestly vocation will be next to impossible if he simply floats into it. How can it happen that a man can go all through the seminary and then, a few years after ordination, decides to leave? That happens, as we know. Probably because has not seriously engaged in the long process of initial formation. The Code of Canon Law 233 outlines the tasks involved in nurturing vocations. Priests and especially diocesan bishops are to be solicitous in ensuring that men of more mature years who believe that they are called to the sacred ministries are prudently assisted by word, deeds and are duly prepared.⁵⁷

That is why seminaries have spiritual directors, psychiatrists, formation advisers on their staff, and clear community expectations, annual evaluations, retreats, supervised pastoral service, etc. This is because the call to priesthood is so total, so perpetual, that the Church must be confident and clear about what it requires.

2.4 Fidelity to the Priestly Identity

Mother Teresa's famous dictum. "The Lord doesn't ask us to be successful; He asks us to be faithful" implies that faithfulness is more important than success in the eyes of the Lord. These words remind us of what Samuel said, "Does the Lord so delight in holocausts and sacrifice as in obedience to the command of the lord?" (1 Sam 15:22). This may sound

⁵⁷ CIC can. 233.

unrealistically optimistic, but the value of priesthood does not depend on where a priest is assigned, or who his pastor is, or what type of ministry he is asked to engage in. Pastor Ignotus, the anonymous columnist for the London Tablet, has wisely commented: “The priest is blamed for many failings. He visits rarely, preaches badly. He is anti-intellectual. The sociologists detail his defects. ‘Men, not angels, ministers of the gospel,’ Newman headed one of his sermons. This is consoling; for the priest, there is no such thing as success, no gold, or silver, or bronze. He just plods on and when the going gets rough, there is very little he can do, except, possibly, have a good cry.”⁵⁸

Fidelity will be easy when priest’s is happy, interesting, invigorating, but the sorrow, loneliness, frustration will come and then can he be faithful? Yes, if he knows that his ministry is not a job, a career, a function, an assignment, but a call, an identity, a person, namely, Jesus and His Church! Priesthood is not based on achievement, reward or fulfilment.

At times the priestly road will not be smooth, well tarmacked to drive on! But rather, it will be rough and full of nails which puncture and penetrate the inner tire resulting in punctures! The priest will experience dryness, confusion, doubt, fatigue, frustration, loneliness, and anger, and that’s when fidelity is tested. The priestly spouse, the Church, may at times seem crippled and useless, a drain; and our Master, Jesus, may occasionally seem distant, aloof, absent. The priest prays to be faithful as St. Thomas Aquinas prayed: “Give us, O Lord, a steadfast heart, which no unworthy affection may drag downwards; give us an unconquered heart, which no tribulation can wear out; give us an upright heart, which no unworthy purpose may tempt aside. Bestow upon us also, O Lord our God, understanding to know you, diligence to seek you, wisdom to find you, and a faithfulness that may finally embrace you; through Jesus Christ our

⁵⁸ “Priestly Role and Identity,” <https://www.worldpriest.com/priestly-role-identity/> (accessed December 3, 2020).

Lord.”⁵⁹ These beautiful words remind the priest that there is no ‘day off’, no vacation from priestly identity, no sabbatical or retirement, no office hours, because his priesthood is not some external imposition but an internal identity that has possessed him from head to toe.

2.5 Prayer Life

What is the way forward? Pope Francis has boldly answered, “Prayer! Prayer! Prayer!”. While speaking in the library of the Apostolic Palace on November 4 2020, Pope Francis described prayer as an “art” that must be practiced insistently.⁶⁰ Prayer of course is the inner disposition to dialogue with the supreme Lord Who is the giver of grace and virtue for perseverance in all that is done in his name. If a priest is dedicated and committed to his prayer life, only then can he direct the faithful to pray and entrust their joys and sorrows to the Lord. The newly appointed Archbishop of Kisumu, his Grace Phillip Arnold Subira Anyolo, during his meeting with the clergy of Kisumu diocese at their convocation affirmed told them, “If the priest is to lead his people into contact with the presence of the mystery of God, this is an invitation for priests to be in touch with the Lord themselves; that is what holiness entails. He has to be familiar with God in the deepest part of his being. This is what we call prayer. Put bluntly, a priest without a deep prayer life is condemning himself to a career of superficiality in that aspect of his ministry which is, at the same time, the most demanding and the most satisfying.”⁶¹

On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Pope John Paul II commented that, “Prayer, in a certain sense, creates the priest.” These beautiful words from the imply that whenever a priest prays, be it the rosary, the liturgy of the hours, the angelus, or

⁵⁹ Thomas Aquinas, “Qutoable Quote,” <https://www.goodreads.com/quotes/161892-give-us-o-lord-a-steadfast-heart-which-no-unworthy> (accessed December 3, 2020).

⁶⁰ “Pope Francis: Consistent Prayer Strengthens Us in Times of Tribulation,” CAN, <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/news/46474/pope-francis-consistent-prayer-strengthens-us-in-times-of-tribulation> (accessed November 29, 2020).

⁶¹ The Catholic Mirror, The Official Newspaper of the Catholic Bishops, *Priestly Identity*, A Catholic Media Publication, ed., Rose Achiego, Nairobi, Nov 2019.

vespers, he is deeply united with the Lord in it. The greatest of all prayers, according to the simple compendium question and answer catechism is the Holy Eucharist, where the priest and the faithfully experience their priestly identity most intimately. Is there ever a more powerful moment of configuration with Christ, of his acting in *persona Christi*, as when the priest says. “This is my body; this is my blood”?

2.6 Prayer in Union with Mary

Another help for priests is prayer in union with Mary, the Mother of the first Priest. Don Bosco had a strong, deep filial devotion to Mother Mary. For Don Bosco, all that he managed to do was through the maternal intercession of Mother Mary. In his *Spiritual Testament* to his Salesians, Don Bosco, the father, teacher and friend of the youth, praised Mary so dearly. Mary was for him a living person. He felt her presence in every moment of his life. He emulated in himself her sensitivity, her obedience to the will of God, and her commitment and fidelity at the hour of the cross. From the very beginning of his life, Mother Mary showed him the way, inspired his actions, sustained his strength and helped him to obtain his purpose, even in extraordinary ways. For Don Bosco ‘Mary did it all!’ Don Bosco’s mother, Mamma Margaret cultivated in him devotion to Mother Mary from his childhood. The words of Mamma Margaret to Johnny Bosco on the occasion of his vestition: “When you were born, I consecrated you to the Blessed Virgin; when you began your studies, I advised you to have devotion to this good Mother. At this point I recommend you to be totally hers. Love companions who are devoted to her, and if you become a priest, always recommend and propagate devotion to Mary.” John, after listening to his mother, in tears, thanked his mother and said: “These words will not be said

for nothing, I will treasure them all my life.” The entire life of Don Bosco was Marian in orientation, and his Salesians have tried to remain faithful to Mother Mary.⁶²

3. The Evolving Visions of Priesthood

Lumen Gentium chapter two beautifully declares the Church with the icon “the People of God,” Christ instituted this new covenant, His Blood, calling together a people made up of Jew and gentile, making them one people, one nation, not according to the Spirit. This was to be the new People of God established as a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a purchased people of God. It goes further to elaborate on the common and ministerial priesthood. This three-fold ministry of Christ is also exercised by every baptized. Thus, in a sense, all the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ, which by the virtue of baptism, all partake in it.

From this simple understanding of common and ministerial priesthood, the church opted to teach her faithful from *Lumen Gentium* God has given each and every one a call. It is a divine call to holiness; hence all are called to embrace this holiness in their status of life either as a celibate, married and single life in the fraternal and communion serving of one another for the greater glory of God. From this outlook, a priest is called in a special way to serve the people of God in his own capacity in collaboration with the particular church headed by the local ordinary, the bishop to administer sacraments to the faithful and to teach the faithful the word of God so that it can gain roots in the hearts of the people of God. It is still a sad reality that some priests have betrayed this aspect in various ways.

To track and articulate the evolving visions of contemporary priesthood, dean Hoge’s presentation of this phenomenon. In his study of the changes of the priesthood from Vatican II to the turn of the new century, he maintains that today’s priesthood has witnessed a polarization over the theology of the priesthood and proper ecclesiology. This polarization pits older priests

⁶² Teresio Bosco, *Don Bosco* (Nairobi: Paulines Publication Africa, 2003), 12.

and younger priests against each other.⁶³ The generational differences among priests in their understanding of the priesthood are mostly witnessed in the contrasting visions of priesthood and models of ministry. The evolving visions are expressed in priests' self – understanding, their status and identity (ontological versus functional), and models of ministry (cultic model versus servant-leader model). These contrasting visions pitch the younger generation of priests against the older generation. It is against the background of these polarizations and shifts in theology of the priesthood and ecclesiology that one could understand the priesthood and ordained ministry after the Second Vatican Council.⁶⁴

By laying the foundation for a reconsideration of the role and identity of the priests and by placing an emphasis on the priesthood of the laity and the church as a people of God, Vatican II challenged the earlier model of the priesthood that was entrenched for centuries. Based on this, a new theology of priesthood was in the making, and as a consequence of this, many priests felt that their earlier role and secure status were lost. There was a widespread feeling of disappointment and confusion among priests; this is due to the lack of clear articulation of the theology of ordained priesthood by the Second Vatican Council.⁶⁵ Whereas, the Second Vatican Council made great advances in understanding the priesthood of all the faithful; what remained largely undeveloped was a corresponding theology for the priesthood of the ordained. In the midst of this confusion, many priests resigned from the priesthood, especially within the first ten years following the close of the council. Ordained ministry in the church after the Second Vatican Council operated within three distinct models of priesthood. They include Pre-Vatican II model, Vatican II model and Post-Vatican II model. Operating within these models are different generations of priests.

⁶³ Hoge and Wenger, *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood*, 13.

⁶⁴ Ibid.

⁶⁵ Ibid.

3.1 Pre-Vatican II Model of Priesthood

In order to understand some of the operational models of the priesthood, the historian James Bacik named the pre-Vatican II model as the “cultic model.”⁶⁶ By definition, in the era of the cultic model of priesthood, the priest is “mainly a provider of the sacraments, this sacred role was underlined by the priest’s distinctive lifestyle. The priest remained celibate, lived in a rectory, brought the sacraments to his parishioners as much as possible, wore distinctive clerical garb, and kept a certain distance from everyday social life (...); parishioners placed their pastor on a pedestal, as a mediator between themselves and God (...); priests saw themselves as a separate clerical caste.”⁶⁷

3.2. Vatican II Model of Priesthood

Another historian, Robert Schwartz, refers to Vatican II’s model of the priesthood as “servant-leader model.” He maintains that the era of servant –leader model which received energy from the council, “saw priests as sharing in the human condition with all the baptized, the chosen race of God (...); it de-emphasized the priest’s separateness and special status, placing himself in the twin roles of servant and leader within the community of believers (...). A priest’s distinctiveness now came from his spiritual and institutional leadership within the community (...); the line separating the priest from the laity was blurred.”⁶⁸

Not surprisingly, priests in many dioceses were divided along the lines of these two visions. The result was that many presbyterates were “divided into various factions according to

⁶⁶ James A. Bacik, “*The Practice of the Priesthood: Working through Today’s Tensions*, 1999,” in Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood*, 10.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Robert Schwartz, “*Servant Leaders of the People of God*, 1989,” in Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood*, 11.

the approach taken toward reform and the expectations of competing groups as to how far and how rapidly the reforms should proceed.”⁶⁹

3.3 Post-Vatican II Model of Priesthood

According to Dean Hoge, by the 1980’s many newly ordained priests wanted a change from the dominant servant-leader model of the priesthood that was ushered in by Vatican II. They adopted elements of the cultic model of priesthood. While some saw this approach as pre-conciliar others saw it as a new synthesis that was close to the cultic model.⁷⁰ Describing this new approach, Bacik maintains that in this era, “many recently ordained priests favor the cultic model and have adopted the traditional clerical lifestyle. They see themselves as part of a separate clerical caste and resist, the more collaborative approaches associated with the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.”⁷¹ This new development saw the emergence of fresh tensions and polarizations over the models and theology of priesthood in many dioceses. The new approach did not find favor with older priests who had already embraced the servant-leader model.

The implication of all this is that today, in many dioceses, including the dioceses in Kenya, priests in pastoral ministry, irrespective of the generation they belong to, favor one approach over the other. Each group is supported by a well-established theology of the priesthood. It is not uncommon to label a particular priest a ‘conservative’ or ‘liberal’. The polarization that has occurred over the years has some implications for priests’ self-understanding, identity, and ministry. Polarization of this nature also makes it difficult for any bishop to implement a common vision of ecclesial life for a diocesan church. It has become

⁶⁹ Scott R. Appleby, “Part 1: *The Transformation of the Roman Catholic Parish Priesthood*, 1990,” in Dean R. Hoge and Jacqueline E. Wenger, *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood: Changes from Vatican II to the Turn of the New Century* (Collegeville: Liturgical Press, 2003), 11.

⁷⁰ Hoge and Wenger, *Evolving Vision of the Priesthood*, 12.

⁷¹ Bacik, “*The Practice of the Priesthood*,” in Hoge and Wenger, *Evolving Visions of the Priesthood*, 12.

somewhat of a problem or challenge in ordained priesthood and ministry, and it deserves investigation to determine how it impacts the ministry of priests.

It is also important to consider the transitions and changes that have occurred in the priesthood in terms of demography. The evolving vision of the priesthood is not the only factor that affects the priesthood and ministry, demographic changes are also determining factors. The demographic changes in question include; the aging of the priesthood, decline in the ordination of younger men, native origin, race and ethnicity of priests, resignations, and retirements of priests.

4. Practical Challenges in Priestly Life and Ministry

It is a great paradox in the Church today that while survey results show that priests are among the most satisfied and happy set of people, many in actual experience also feel somewhat beleaguered in the exercise of their ministry. This paradoxical conclusion is based on priests' own disclosure of the challenges and problems that they face in ministry. In the order of their rating, the most common problems found by Gautier et al include: the way authority is exercised in the Church, the shortage of available priests, the difficulty of truly reaching people today, excessive workloads, unrealistic demands and expectations from lay people, being expected to represent Church teachings with which they have difficulties, the relationship with the bishop of the diocese in which one works, parish restructuring within the diocese, uncertainty about the future of the Church, celibacy or lifelong commitment to chastity, the loneliness of priestly life, relationships with superiors or pastors, theological differences in the concept of the priesthood.⁷²

Therefore, priests are satisfied even though the problems in their lives are significant. In other words, saying that priests today feel satisfied in their work and that this level of satisfaction is

⁷² Gautier, Perl, and Fichter, *Same Call, Different Men*, 50.

increasing does not mean that they are without major challenges and difficulties in their life and ministry. Happy as priests might be, it would appear that the problems they face are not far below the surface. This suggests a ‘suffering and smiling’ imagery.

4.1 Sexual Abuse Scandal and the Morale of Priests

Clergy sex abuse constitutes another factor, one which dealt a severe blow to the image of the Catholic priesthood and ordained ministry especially in this known time. Events not only exposed the crimes of some Church leaders, but also revealed the lack of transparency within the Church. Dreadful as some the actual crimes have been, the climate of secrecy and the pattern of cover-ups are even more troubling. This has greatly undermined the collective integrity of the Church and her priests. The scandal not only tainted and faded the image of the Church, but also ushered in a new wave of anti-clericalism. Today, as we speak, it is common knowledge that priests live in a climate covered by suspicion and mistrust. Why? It is simply because of the failings of some of their colleagues. The sexual, emotional and physical abuses is one significant example. It remains a major threat to the clergy class.

In a way, the sexual abuse scandal seems to have developed a morale crisis for priests who are in active ministry today. Many are considerably more wary in exercising their ministry, with the constant sexual struggles due to uncontrollable lust as they struggle to remain credible hence, they leave double life. It is obvious that the collective integrity of priests has been affected by the moral crisis triggered by sex abuse scandal. The lingering effects of this crisis have implications for ordained ministry today.⁷³

⁷³ Gautier, Perl, and Fichter, *Same Call, Different Men*, 50.

Conclusion

This well-presented paper has tried to faithfully present priestly identity with a sense of confidence and gratitude to priestly vocation. It has also tried holistically and categorically to present some ways to safeguard and foster this and finally, it has presented a word of caution to the members of clergy in this secularized and ever changing contemporary society such as clericalism in terms of privilege, prerogatives, special treatment, being served rather than serving; it prefers sacristies to streets, and public popularity just because they are priests and find joy in their liturgical vestments than to primarily care for the souls hence one is contented with the mere externals and pettiness as we have seen in this paper.

Maximilian Kolbe beautifully contemplated the difference between clericalism and priestliness, and made a substantial conclusion as we have seen that one is a vice and the other a virtue. He says that God called priests to priestliness as we have seen but not clericalism. This presupposes that when a priest says to himself, to his people, to his God as Maximilian would say, “I am a Catholic priest,” he says that gratefully, humbly, confidently, never arrogantly, and he say it, not expecting to be served, but rather to serve. This is the priestly identity and priestly calling, to serve faithfully the chosen people of God, to bring the lost back to the holy flock and to bring good news of salvation to all without fear or favor of a particular gender or group of people.

This paper therefore, concludes by reminding our priests that even though there are challenges, they shouldn’t be discouraged but rather remain focus and dedicated to their priestly calling and ever to seek God’s protection always and to remain prayerful as men of God who were anointed at baptism and furthermore at ordination. They should therefor seek the maternal intervention of mother Mary who is the protectress of all the priest. This is the only sure way to

live a convinced life amid contemporary challenges and issues which have made the priestly image to fade away.

Challenges and Renewal of Priestly Identity Today

Joseph Ngezahayo

Introduction

In today's world which is full of criticism of the Church, it is important to reflect on priestly identity. The identity of a priest in the modern world meets many challenges which may damage it. There is therefore a need to renew the image of priesthood in postmodern society whose values negatively affect both priests and the Church. We are living in an age where the virtuous life is neglected. We find ourselves in an age where money, power and sex are important values. Some priests are caught in the snares of postmodernity.

The period immediately after Vatican II witnessed a crisis in the priesthood with thousands of men abandoning their priestly vocation and others living their priesthood simply as a functionary. Indeed, there has been a loss of the sense of priesthood. The priest as a servant of God is called to perpetuate the priesthood of Christ; therefore, the priest more than anyone else is called to ignore the pleasures of the world and to give himself to the call which he received from God: "Through the sacred ordination and the mission which he received from the bishops priests are promoted to the service of Christ, teacher, priest and king; they are given a share in his ministry."⁷⁴ The priest is the ambassador of Christ; he represents Him to the people of God, and acts in the person of Christ especially during Eucharistic celebration. The Second Vatican II teaches that all the baptized share in the priesthood of Christ. But, at the same time it distinguishes between the common priesthood of all the faithful and the ministerial priesthood.⁷⁵ Our concern in this article is the ministerial priesthood.

⁷⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 1.

⁷⁵ Pope Saint John Paul II, *The Gift of Priesthood* (Nairobi-Kenya: Pauline Publications, 1996), 2.

This article attempts to present the true identity of the priesthood and it proceeds thus: first, the nature of priesthood, and second, an elaboration on some characteristics of Christian priesthood. The third section presents priesthood in the Scriptures in connection with priesthood in today's world. The fourth section is an analysis of some functions of the priest. The fifth section explores some challenges of priestly identity in today's world, and the last section focuses on the renewal of priestly identity.

1. Nature of Priesthood

Priests are chosen among God's people.⁷⁶ Priests are Christians first before being priests. That is to say that the grace of ordination would not be possible if a man was not first baptized. Priests cannot be faithful to their priestly vocation if they are not faithful to their baptismal vocation. By their ordination, the priests are set apart in some way in the midst of the people of God.⁷⁷

The call of the priest comes from the loving God who sees the needs of his people and responds to them. Priesthood is then the gift from God.⁷⁸ Thus, the priesthood is not received through the merits of the one ordained, or through human competition; rather it is a call from God. John Chrysostom stated that the priestly office is discharged on earth, but it ranks among the heavenly ordinances, for neither men, nor angels nor archangels nor any created power but the Paraclete instituted this vocation.⁷⁹ Priests are called to represent Christ to the community just as Christ was consecrated and sent into the world by the Father (Jn 10: 13):⁸⁰ "as my Father has sent me, I send you!"

⁷⁶ Raphael Ndinge Mwana'a Nzeki, "Vocation and formation of priests", in *African Ecclesial Review* 32 (Feb 1990): 17-28.

⁷⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 3.

⁷⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1.

⁷⁹ John Chrysostom on Priesthood, [https:// www.newadvent.org/Fathers /1923.htm](https://www.newadvent.org/Fathers /1923.htm) (accessed July 23, 2020).

⁸⁰ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

Priests are servants of God who minister to the faithful, offer sacrifice, forgive sins and perform the priestly office in the name of Jesus.⁸¹ The priest is called to make Christ present to his people and to bring his people to Christ. In other words, he is called to represent Christ.⁸² Thus, the nature of the priest can only be understood in reference to Christ. The priest participates in Christ's priesthood. He acts in the person of Christ, the only high priest of the new and eternal covenant. That is why Vatican II taught that through the sacrament of holy orders priests by the anointing of the Holy Spirit are signed with a special character and so are configured to Christ in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ, the head of his body the Church.⁸³ To understand the identity of priest today we have to understand the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Christ came into the world as a bridge to reconnect fallen humanity with God the Father. Through priestly ordination, the newly ordained is introduced into the divine sphere, into the Trinity. The Holy Spirit configures him to Christ. And so, the priest is reminded to make Christ's qualities and functions his own. "They perform the sacred duty of preaching the Gospel, so that the offering of the people can be acceptable and sanctified by the Holy Spirit." Through the ministry of the priests, the spiritual sacrifice of the faithful is made perfect in union with the sacrifice of Christ. The priest is the only mediator who in the name of the whole Church offers sacramentally the sacrifice of the Lord Jesus in an unbloody manner until the Lord himself comes again at the end of time. The ministry of priests is directed to this goal and is perfected in it. The ministry of priests derives its power and force from the sacrifice of Christ

⁸¹ Joseph, S. J. Rajakumar, "Ministerial priesthood and Integral formation: the gift of priestly vocation," in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection*, 38, no. 1 (January 2019): 3.

⁸² Padin Jarekuttu, "A reflection on priesthood and priestly ministry today", in *Vidyajyoti Journey of Theological Reflection* 38 (May 2019): 39.

⁸³ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 2.

2. Some Characteristics of Christian Priesthood

a) A Priest as a Friend of Jesus: Priestly identity mirrors the priestly identity of Christ.⁸⁴ In other words, Christ is the model and source of the Christian priesthood. Thus to be priest is to act like Christ, to do what Christ did and to adopt Christ's own qualities. There is a kind of mutual indwelling between God, Christ and the Priest.⁸⁵ For this mutual indwelling to become a reality the priest needs to foster his friendship with Jesus Christ who is a prophet, and who wants his priests to continue his prophetic mission. In order to be a genuine prophet, the priest must be attentive to the word of God and transmit it faithfully to others. In addition, he must cultivate a stable interior silence in order to avoid the possible distractions of the noise and demands of the world around him. This prophetic mission helps the priest daily evaluate his life. This friendship with Jesus will be possible when priests are intimately connected with him.⁸⁶

b) Priest as Mediator: The priest is the mediator between God and men, because he represents Christ who is the mediator between God and men (1 Tim 2:5). In addition, a priest is totally human, just as Christ is fully human, though at the same time, He is fully divine. We cannot separate human identity from priestly identity, because, according to Thomas Aquinas the grace of priesthood is built on human nature. For Thomas Aquinas, grace does not destroy human nature but perfects it. Indeed, during his earthly life, Christ taught what it is to be human; He showed what a man really is, his true dignity according to the will of God. To be truly human is to be a man concerned with the suffering of others and compassionate like Christ.

In his role as mediator, the priest must know that he is a person set apart (Ps 1:1) while he still lives with others, with their weaknesses and needs. He does this having "in" mind that he is

⁸⁴ Christopher Cocksworth and Rosalind Brown, *Being a Priest today: exploring priestly Identity* (London: Canterbury press, 2006), 6.

⁸⁵ Wojciech Szypula, "Patterns of discipleship in the gospels" in *Tangaza Journal of Theological Mission*, 1-2 (2017), 67.

⁸⁶ Szypula, "Patterns of discipleship in the Gospels," 67.

in the world without being “of” this world (Jn 17:14). Thus, the priest is set apart for a mission on behalf of God’s people. To be set apart does not mean that he has to be separated from other people, rather he has to be committed completely to the task to which God calls him. Being in the world, he has to show the difference between himself and the rest of the faithful through the quality of his service and his way of doing things. His style of living should challenge the world in which he is living.

c. Priest as Shepard of God’s People: Like his Master, the priest is to live in the world as a good shepherd who knows his flock. This requires a true relationship with Christ who gives him the strength to live out this vocation. This is what Jesus meant when He said: “Apart from me, you can do nothing” (Jn 15: 5). A good shepherd has the ability to communicate with, to listen to, and to feel with his flock, and he always seeks to develop his leadership skills. These skills challenge those of the modern man who is characterized by individualism. Indeed, there is risk for a priest of succumbing to individualism if he is not careful. Today’s world needs a priest who has sound judgement and common sense; someone who day and night seeks to perfect God’s gifts received in this sacrament, since these gifts are to be perfected by daily effort (cf. 2 Cor 6:3).

Jesus speaks of sacrifice as a distinctive act and quality of the shepherd: “a good shepherd lays down his life for his sheep” (Jn 10:11). The good shepherd is prepared to sacrifice his life for the sheep. The priesthood is not about the exercise of power which seeks its own advantage, but rather it seeks the good of others. Priestly ministry is about service; the minister is a servant after the model of Christ who came to serve and not to be served (Mt 20:28). The image of the shepherd is a very powerful “image” to reveal the mystery of the new priesthood in the Church.

In addition, it is worthy of note that a good shepherd loves his sheep; the priest has to be a man who loves because God is love.⁸⁷ His vocation is a gift of love. Just as during the Eucharistic celebration the water is added to wine as a sign of Christ's divinity taking on his humanity, the priest is also a sign of God's love for humanity. The priest has the task to renew the human nature distorted by the sin. Through the mystery of incarnation, Christ shows the real nature of the man's humanity. Humankind is called to do the will of God. The priest is called to show humankind the true nature of the human person. Thus, he needs to develop the qualities of Christ the high priest, which are his singular closeness to both God and humanity.⁸⁸ Christ realized his priesthood by offering his own body as the paschal Lamb. The priest has to develop these qualities of Christ, especially the attitude of self-giving. The priest must develop his intimacy with God. This transformation takes place through obedience when he agrees to conform his will to God's will.

3. Priesthood in the Scriptures

3.1. Priesthood in the Old Testament

In the Old Testament, the function of the priest was worship, offering sacrifice in the Temple. This function has not changed even today. The priest is the one whose mission is the work of worship. In the Old Testament the work of the priest is exclusively in a building, the Temple, while in the modern world the work of the priest is focused on the Church as People of God. The Priest is consecrated for the Church's mission. In this respect, Saint John Paul II has said that without the priests, the Church would not be able to live her ministries.⁸⁹ The priest is called to devote all his time and energy to the mission of the Church. This is the reason why the

⁸⁷ Brendan Leahy Michael Mulney, eds., *Priests Today: Reflection on Identity Mission and Ministry* (USA: Congress Library, 2010), 9.

⁸⁸ Joseph S.J. Rajakumar, "Ministerial priesthood and Integral formation," in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological reflection* 83, no. 1 (January 2019): 35.

⁸⁹ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1.

exercise of the sacramental priesthood requires of the priest a particular faith for a particular commitment demanding all forces of his body and mind, including a special awareness of his vocation as an exceptional vocation.⁹⁰

In the Old Testament, the Levitical priest was sanctified for and by his work.⁹¹ Though he was not called by vocation, he was to be holy in order to handle the things that belonged to God (Lev 19:2). Holiness was demanded of him because he was serving God in special way. The holiness of the priest was connected with his being separated from the secular world because of the holiness of God whom he served. Ritual purity was among the main characteristics of the priest in the Old Testament. Priesthood and purity were inseparable.

Today, to be separated from the world as we have seen does not mean that the priest does not meet people but it requires him to keep his identity: “Do not confirm yourself to the present world” (Rom 12:2). Moreover, a priesthood which does not stand apart in some way is a priesthood that is not needed. In addition, in the Old Testament, the priest was someone who stood for the people. If the priest does not pray, how can he intercede for the people?

3.2. Priesthood in the New Testament

Jesus abstained from using the title “priest”, but he did not intend to abolish priesthood as such. What he did was to distance himself from the Jewish priesthood, while manifesting his intention to establish another priesthood, a priesthood of the “order of Melchizedek”. Jesus wanted to institute and to give a new meaning to priesthood. This new meaning is the one that a priest today has to foster in himself. The priest is called to do what Jesus did and what the disciples, his predecessors did, because the priest is called by Christ as the apostles were. Like

⁹⁰ John Paul II, *A priest Forever* (Ireland: St Paul Publication, 1983), 15.

⁹¹ Raymond E. Brown, *Priest and Bishop: Biblical Reflections* (New York: Paulist Press, 1970), 8.

them, the priest is to be with Jesus and to be sent out as the apostles were sent out.⁹² In Jesus the two aspects of priesthood – consecration and mission – are realized in a new way. Consecration marks the whole self of a priest and his existence, while the priestly ministry exhibits a specifically pastoral quality. After his resurrection, Jesus sent his disciples into the world to continue his mission: “as my Father sent me, I send you” (Jn 20:21). Jesus was consecrated and sent by his Father for his mission in the world and Jesus wants his priests to continue the same mission. The priest’s mission is the continuation of the original mission of Jesus. Priesthood in the Church has no other reference point and model than the priesthood of Christ. Like Christ, the priest is called to become each day a sacrificial victim, offering his life for his people. Priestly ministry follows the pattern of love and service of Jesus Christ, the unique Shepherd. Christ foresaw that his priestly representatives in the world would continue to lead the sheep in his name.

4. The Ministry of Priests

Priests are human persons called to a divine office. God calls them to be priests from a specific context; they are called from the human community. They are human persons with their strength and weakness.⁹³ Nevertheless, they are called to imitate Christ fully. As there is one Christ, there is also one priesthood instituted by Christ. The priests are therefore called to continue living and exercising the unique and permanent priesthood of Christ⁹⁴ who has been made priest of the New Covenant.⁹⁵ They exercise the same functions as Christ.

4.1. Priests as Evangelizers

⁹² John Paul II, *Priest forever*, 64.

⁹³ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 5.

⁹⁴ *Ibid.*, 5.

⁹⁵ John Paul II, *Gift of Priesthood* (Nairobi Kenya: Paulines Publications, 1995), 3.

Priests are challenged to evangelize as Jesus did. Jesus was an effective teacher and holistic healer; he was teacher-preacher. As Christ's representatives, priests have to look for new approaches in their teaching in order to make the Gospel message meaningful to people.⁹⁶

According to Pope Pius XI, the priest's personal unworthiness does not hinder the efficacy of his ministry.⁹⁷ However, the priest is required to strive for holiness of life because the holy office he holds demands him to be holy. The priest must therefore approach as closely as possible to the perfection of the one who sent him and whom he represents. This will help him to praise God by his life and deeds since deeds speak louder than words.⁹⁸ According to Thomas Aquinas, "the priest has to teach the truth of faith but his way of living may testify what he teaches".⁹⁹ He has to practise the Word of God he preaches because evangelization and witness always go together. The modern world needs priests who try to ratify by their way of living the truth of the Gospel they preach. In this respect, Pope Pius XI said: "A priest who does not try to live what he preaches by the example of his life, pulls down with one hand what he builds up with the other."¹⁰⁰ Evangelization has a holistic dimension. Therefore, the priest has to be the promotor of moral education and social concord, and a peacemaker. He must also proclaim the word of God through the witness of his life.

⁹⁶ Ojij Bernard, 261.

⁹⁷ Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii* (on the Catholic Priesthood) Rome, 20 December 1935, nn. 32-33.

⁹⁸ Pius XI, *Ad catholici Sacerdotii*, 33.

⁹⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰⁰ Ibid., 36.

4.2. Priests as Ministers of the Sacraments

The priest represents Christ through the power of the Holy Spirit given to him at ordination. He represents Christ by performing the actions of Christ. In this way, the priesthood has one purpose; the priest shares in Christ's priesthood by carrying out his sacred functions and acts as his minister.¹⁰¹ The priestly ministry finds in the celebration of the sacraments its real meaning, namely, in the action of Christ Himself who becomes present in the sacraments.¹⁰² Through the sacrament of baptism, the priest opens the door of holiness for the people of God. In this way, his mission becomes one of accompanying people on their pilgrimage through this life to the gate of Heaven.¹⁰³ In the sacrament of Confession, as the mediator between God and his people, the priest brings people back to God by forgiving them their sin. The Eucharist becomes the center of all the sacraments because in the celebration of the Mass, the priest offers Christ's sacrifice sacramentally.¹⁰⁴ Saint Paul wants that the Christians to recognize him and others like him as servants and stewards of God's mysteries: "This is how one should regard us, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God" (1 Cor 4:1). The priest is also the steward of God's mysteries by excellence.

The priest as minister of sacraments also becomes a man of the Liturgy. We cannot separate the sacraments from the Holy Liturgy. The Liturgy is a fundamental element of priestly life. A priest must live the liturgy at every moment of his priesthood. What he does in the sacred Liturgy at the altar, in the confessional, in ministering Baptism, in anointing the sick, in administering confirmation is all about liturgy; and at the same time, the priest performs the actions of Christ. When a priest is imbued with the spirit of liturgy, he becomes a privileged

¹⁰¹ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5.

¹⁰² John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 44.

¹⁰³ Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, 19.

¹⁰⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 5.

minister and, in this way, his priestly vocation flourishes, and he finds what he has to offer to the people of God. A priest becomes merely a functionary if his heart and soul are no longer connected with these great mysteries which he is called to minister.

4.3. Priesthood and Eucharist

The Eucharist is the source and summit of priestly ministry¹⁰⁵ because “at the last supper Jesus instituted the sacrifice and the priesthood of the new Covenant.”¹⁰⁶ The ordained priesthood then finds its definitive expression in the celebration of the Eucharist. We cannot separate the priesthood from the Eucharist. Pope John Paul II, in his Letter to Priests for Holy Thursday in 1996, said:

Precisely during that Paschal Event Christ revealed to the Apostles that their vocation was to become priests like Him and in Him. This took place when, in the Upper Room, on the eve of his death on the Cross, he took bread and then the cup of wine, and spoke over them the words of consecration. The bread and the wine became his Body and Blood, given up in sacrifice for all mankind. Jesus concluded by commanding the Apostles: “Do this in memory of me” (1 Cor 11:25). With these words, Jesus entrusted to them his own sacrifice and, through their hands communicated it to the Church for all time. By entrusting to the Apostles, the memorial of his sacrifice, Christ made them sharers in his priesthood. For there is a close and inseparable bond between the offering and the priest: the one who offers the sacrifice of Christ must have a share in the priesthood of Christ. Consequently, the vocation to the priesthood is a vocation to offer *in persona Christi* his own sacrifice, by virtue of sharing in his priesthood.

Jesus takes upon himself the tasks of the prophet, the priest in the cultic sense, and the king, all at the same time.

This relationship of the priesthood to the Eucharist brings to mind the image of the Good Shepherd which characterizes and expresses the pastoral nature of Jesus’ priestly ministry which unfolds in the direction of love and service as we have seen. Like Christ, the priest has to be a person committed to a great simplicity of life and to be free of all pretense. Jesus stresses that

¹⁰⁵ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter *Ecclesia de Eucharistia* (The Eucharist: Life of the Church) (Nairobi-Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2003), 31.

¹⁰⁶ Pius XI, *Ad Catholici Sacerdotii*, 12.

humility ought to characterize authority in the Church, a humility which translates itself into service and sacrifice.

4. Some Challenges of Priest's Identity in Today's World

Today we notice that some priests have fallen into crisis even to the point of abandoning the priesthood. This is caused by the lack of understanding of their identity. The world in which we are living also exposes them to some ideologies which lead them to see their mission as priests as a mere appendage¹⁰⁷ to their life, as if it were not part of their identity. The identity of the priest who by ordination is called and set apart has been brought into question; and the assimilation of the values of the contemporary world tends to make the priest forget his sacral character, the intrinsic nature of his consecration.

Moreover, priests today are facing many challenges which jeopardize their priestly ministry such as sex, alcohol, other addictions, envy, chronic stress, neglect of their spiritual life, and conformity to the standards of the present world.¹⁰⁸ All these constitute the downside of priest's identity today. The priest lives in tension between the natural and the supernatural; he is a mediator between God and his people, but if he does not pay attention, he can be much influenced by the values of the world and forget the presence of the divine nature in him. The media can push priests to relativize their priestly identity and they can end up being unhappy with who they are and what they do.¹⁰⁹ As consequence, their mission as priests becomes forced and they concentrate little energy on their mission. Priests are called to live among their people; they are not angels. They are chosen from among the people of this world who are both good and not so good. It is then evident that some priests will be affected by the society in which they live.

¹⁰⁷ Pope Francis, *The Joy of the Gospel*, 78, 47.

¹⁰⁸ Isaac Padin Jarekuttu, "A reflection on priesthood and priestly ministry today", in *Vidyajyoti Journey of theological reflection*, 83 (May 2019): 340.

¹⁰⁹ Pope Francis, *Joy of the Gospel*, 47, 79.

The anti-clerical atmosphere is another challenge that priests are facing. Today priests are less respected in some parts of the world than before. This is caused by the social resentment and the unworthy behavior of some priests. The idolatry of money and power is also harming priests today. The emphasis on man and his freedom can also create the spirit of individualism. As consequence, the priest who is called for the service of others and for God finds himself serving himself. He must then hear the word of Jesus: “No one can serve two masters” (Mt 6:24).

Tribalism and ethnicity can also hinder the priest’s identity in some societies. Other priests are tempted by pornographic literature, films, and T.V programmes until they forget their mission. We cannot forget the tendency of some priests to professionalism which makes some of them to do the minimum and identify themselves as workers who expect to get salary at the end of every month. How many priests forget their mission during the Champions League!!! All these challenges constitute what can be called “pastoral pathology”. Priests have to remember that the world will know that they are Christ’s followers if they do what He commended them to do and to do it as He did. This is what it means to be “other Christs”. What the priest can offer to the world is the priestly testimony which involves his whole life. Priests can deceive themselves that they are serving God when they are not living according to their identity. As Pope John Paul wrote: If we wish to secularize our way of living and acting and cancel the external signs of our priestly vocation, we are making it meaningless.¹¹⁰ Therefore, the priest should not be ashamed to express his priesthood externally. His priestly identity should be clear and expressive, and he should not be ashamed of it.¹¹¹ The priest in the world but not of this world. This will help the priest to overcome the challenges he can meet in his mission.

¹¹⁰ John Paul II, *Priest forever*, 15-16.

¹¹¹ *Ibid.*, 16.

6. Towards the Renewal of Priestly Identity Today

The priest is a man of love because God who calls him is love.¹¹² To be a priest is to encounter Christ who transforms his life. To make this possible the priest has to offer his humanity to Christ who calls him so that Christ may make of him another Christ. The priest needs some qualities in order to fulfil his mission as “another Christ”. First of all, the priest should not think that his ordination will make everything easy for him and deliver him from all temptations or dangers.¹¹³ Others again may consider their ordination as the point of arrival. These are wrong assumptions. To reach the true identity of priesthood, a priest needs a sense of responsibility, fidelity and acceptance of the obligations of his priesthood. Here we want to underline some of the obligations of the priesthood.

6.1. Celibacy

Celibacy cannot be separated from priesthood because it supports the priest in his exclusive, definitive and total choice of the unique and supreme love of Christ.¹¹⁴ It also helps the priest to accomplish his mission. This is what Pope Paul VI signified when he said: “The unmarried man is anxious about the affairs of the Lord, how to please the Lord” (1 Cor 7: 32). Sacred celibacy as sign of charity, helps the priest to exercise the pastoral charity of the Good Shepherd without reservation. It also helps him to express the virginal love of Christ for the Church. As someone who acts in the person of Christ, the priest has to imitate Christ in everything as his own model and ideal because Christ wants those whom he has called to priesthood to be his coworkers by sharing them in everything. Celibacy helps the priest to realize his vocation as the minister and dispenser of God’s mysteries.

¹¹² Brendan Leahy and Michael Mulney, eds., *Priests Today: Reflections on identity mission and ministry* (USA: Library of Congress, 2010), 9.

¹¹³ Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus* (on Celibacy of the priest), 24 June 1967, 74.

¹¹⁴ Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis Caelibatus*, 14.

Moreover, the “priesthood as the new order can be understood only in the light of the newness of Christ, the supreme pontiff and eternal priest who instituted the priesthood of ministry as a real participation in his own unique priesthood.”¹¹⁵ Without Christ there is no priesthood. Celibacy is the true sign of Christ’s priesthood. However, celibacy without God’s assistance is impossible; it is not imposed, rather it has to be a free choice. It is celibacy for the kingdom; it is not about despising sexuality or the fear of women, but it is chosen by someone who feels fascinated by the Kingdom of God like Saint Paul who said that he was happy to be celibate because he was there only for the Lord (1 Cor 7:32-33). Celibacy is the sign of the total following of Christ.¹¹⁶

6.2. Obedience and Poverty

Celibacy is linked with obedience and poverty. Obedience helps the priest to listen to God’s word and respond to it freely. Obedience is lived by following the example of Christ who came to do the will of his Father (cf. Jn 4:34). Poverty must not to be reduced to external poverty, because it involves that inner attitude which invites the priest to live not for his personal interest but for others. Jesus never demonized money or riches but he encouraged the desire to share. Here poverty is linked with the pastoral care which characterizes the good pastor who cares for his flock like Christ. Priests are Jesus’ eyes and mouth and lips in continuing his mission. To be another Christ requires self-denial and detachment from material comforts and the pleasures of this world. We are living in a materialistic world where even priests are being attracted by this pathology. The materialistic spirit has become a reality among some priests. We find some priests running businesses. Such a situation challenges the priestly identity and prevents a priest from being faithful to Christ who lived the poverty of a village carpenter.

¹¹⁵ Paul VI, *Sacerdotalis caelibatus*, 19.

¹¹⁶ Isaac Padin Jarekuta, “A reflection on priesthood and priestly ministry today”, in *Vidyajyoti Journey of Theological Reflection* 83 (May 2019): 342.

From the foregoing discussion, it can be seen that the three elements - celibacy, poverty and obedience - give meaning to priesthood. We cannot separate priesthood from these three evangelical counsels. In order to live them the priest needs the support of prayer. The priest as a true follower of Christ has to be the man of prayer. In prayer he receives the encouragement and energy to carry out his missions.

6.3. Formation of Priests

The renewal of priestly identity cannot be separated from the renewal of priestly formation. Therefore, in order to promote a true priestly identity for one who represents Christ, the formation of priests should offer a space to those in formation to understand properly priestly identity and the vocation to priesthood as rooted in God.¹¹⁷ Jesus the High Priest called the twelve apostles, they learned from him by being with him and listening to him. He instructed them before sending them on the mission. Proper priestly formation is needed and this requires mature formators who have a clear understanding and who are not only academically formed but who are spiritually, psychologically and morally formed, and dedicated to their duty and willing to form the future priests who will become good shepherds after Christ.¹¹⁸

Seminarians should be helped to explore the various aspects of priestly life while having in mind the challenges of priestly identity described above. The time of formation should be the time to grow in awareness that the priestly vocation begins with the gift of divine grace and the active participation of the one who is called. Aware that the priesthood is a sign of God's love for his people, the seminarian should be helped to balance his relationships with others in order to develop in him the idea of undivided and genuine love for all. The formators should give good

¹¹⁷ Rajakumar Joseph, "Ministerial priesthood and Integral Formation: revisiting *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (the gift of priestly vocation)" in *Vidyajyoti Journal of Theological Reflection* 83, no. 1 (January 2019): 33.

¹¹⁸ Raphael S. Ndinge Mwana'a Nzeki, "Vocation and formation of priests" in *African Ecclesial review* 32 (Feb1990): 17-28.

example by the way they live their celibacy. Knowing that the priestly vocation is nourished by prayer, formation should stress on the importance of personal prayer.

According to Pope John Paul II, priestly identity has its roots in the Christian identity of the faithful (Christianus - alter Christus, Sacerdos - alter christos).¹¹⁹ Therefore, the seminarians should be helped to develop Christian values such as self-giving for love of God, and the love of the Eucharist since the Eucharist and priesthood are interconnected.

In order to develop the sense of pastoral care the seminarians as future priests need a solid formation and interior maturity and freedom. This interior freedom develops gradually. The formation of priests requires a serious accompaniment to help the candidates to grow in their vocation. This accompaniment involves a spiritual dimension which will help the candidates to develop the clear priestly identity through prayer. Human formation prepares them to be mature men because, as Saint Thomas Aquinas put it, grace does not destroy human nature but elevates it. Intellectual formation will help the candidates to develop the capacity for logical reasoning so they can understand the logic and working of the contemporary world and what it offers. Pastoral formation will help the candidates to incarnate the characteristics of the Good Shepherd, the Christ whom they have chosen to follow. It also helps them to practise pastoral discernment and use prudent judgement in making decision. During the formation process, the candidates are to be taught about the danger of misuse of mass media. The time of formation should be also a time for the candidates to strive for holiness in their own way, seeking tirelessly perfection according to the spirit of Christ (Mt 5:48). In brief, the formation of seminarians should help them to journey towards total integration with Christ. Therefore, it should be integral and holistic.¹²⁰

¹¹⁹ John Paul II, *Priest forever*, 45.

¹²⁰ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo vobis*, 16.

Conclusion

To talk about priestly identity is to remind priests that they are called by name like Jeremiah. Therefore, priests should not be afraid to confess their identity. This will also remind them that their priestly vocation is a vocation, a call and a task which requires responsibility and generosity from the one who is called. The priests are therefore invited to deepen daily the understanding of their identity. This will help them to renew every day their identity because the priestly identity is not formed once and for all: it is a life-long journey. If priests want to be faithful to their ministry, they should always bear in their heart the words of Jesus: “I chose you and appointed you that you bear fruit (Jn 15:16). The priesthood is a call to service which requires a sacrifice. Priests are called for the salvation of humanity just as Christ was sent by the Father to save humankind. The Church needs the priests of our time who incarnate the charism of the Good Shepherd.

Pastoral Zeal as Priestly Identity

Lazar Arasu

The concept of the priest is easily understood in relation to the Levitical priesthood as shown in the Old Testament. Their primary responsibility was to offer sacrifice according to the Mosaic Law. In the New Testament, the priests are identified more with their pastoral ministry, their supervisory role as elders and being ‘servants’ of the community. They were rightly called presbyters or elders, who were recognized more as administrators, leaders and assembly elders.

The Letter to the Hebrews, written in the first century by an elder of the Church, examines the salvific activity of Jesus as priestly and high-priestly, that is, in relation to the sacrifice of himself on the cross. But still the Letter places great emphasis on the aspects of his work. It should be noted that the priesthood of Jesus is declared to be in continuation with the order of Melchizedek, and, consequently, radically unlike that of the Levitical priests. It is interesting to note that during his ministry, Jesus never gave any hint that he was a priest or was carrying out any priestly duties. But he called disciples to share his mission and be apostles, servants and ministers of the Word.

The office of the priesthood developed gradually in the early Christian Church as first bishops and then elders, or “presbyters,” began to exercise certain priestly functions, mainly in connection with celebration of the Eucharist. By the end of the 2nd century, the Church’s bishops were called priests, (in Latin, *sacerdos*). But the priests of the Church were still primarily identified with their pastoral activity, which is their primary activity.

The noun ‘pastor’ means shepherd and ‘pastoral’ means the activity of shepherding: leading the flock and caring for it. In his preaching Jesus gives a vivid description of a good shepherd who loves and cares for his sheep with utmost concern and is ready even to

give his life for them. The Gospels speak of the urgency of the pastoral mission and call for zealous activity on the part of the pastor. Pastoral zeal is the hallmark and identity of the priestly ministry.

“The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few...” (Matt. 9:37) “Let us go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also, for that is why I came out” (Mk 1:38). “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing!” (Lk 12:49). “For zeal for your house has consumed me” (Jn 2:17). The Gospels are full of statements that highlight Jesus’ pastoral zeal - to incarnate the Father’s love for humanity. Jesus was filled with pastoral zeal from the moment he realized his vocation, even as a child in Nazareth. Indeed, such was his childhood desire to do his Father’s desire. In the Temple in Jerusalem, he said to his parents, “Don’t you know that I have to be busy with my Father’s business?” (Lk 2:49). Pastoral zeal is the realization and the fruitful living of the priest’s vocation. It is the best way of furthering the Kingdom of God. Moreover, it is a hallmark of the priestly life.

Priesthood and pastoral ministry grow through the exercise of and find deeper meaning in and with pastoral zeal. It defines the life and mission of church leaders, largely assumed by the ordained ministers - the priests. Certainly, it is also shared by the laity, who too shares the common priesthood in virtue of the baptism they have received. There are vowed Religious of both sexes who have deepened their baptismal life through their evangelical vows and other pastoral agents such as catechists. The vows of poverty, chastity and obedience are geared to strengthening the pastoral zeal. These Religious, just like the ordained ministers must strengthen their consecrated life through their pastoral zeal. The vowed life would become shaky or diminished without pastoral zeal.

What is “pastoral zeal”? It is pasturing the flock with wholehearted love and commitment. It is the commitment that makes a difference in our life. Synonyms of the word ‘zeal’ explain it all. Zeal is enthusiasm, passion, fervour, keenness, eagerness, devotion, wholeheartedness, vehemence and the like. These synonyms are virtues, characteristics, qualities which describe a dedicated worker in the vineyard of the Lord. These are human qualities coated with religious motivations.

Pastoral zeal is the fruit of one’s inner happiness and contentment in one’s vocation. Vocation is a task, an assumed responsibility, and a way of life one has chosen for oneself. Something becomes a vocation only when it is assumed with joy after a well thought out discernment. When a vocation is a fruit of discernment it will create in the individual a passion to assume the necessary responsibility with joy. Then it becomes bliss for oneself and for others who are the beneficiaries of one’s pastoral activities. For Jesus said, “*I know my sheep and they know me. And I am willing to die for them*” (Jn 10:14). It is a blessing to the ordained priest, who is the chief pastoral agent of the community and in turn he becomes a blessing for others.

Pastoral zeal also improves the relationship of the priest with the flock he serves. The zeal that generates love for the flock brings the shepherd close to the sheep. Pope Francis, who had been the pastor of a large urban flock in Argentina, would say, “The pastors should know the smell of the flock and the sheep should know the smell of their shepherd.” We cannot serve and love the flock that we do not know. St. John Bosco who worked for the young would tell his spiritual sons, “It is not enough you love them; but young people should know that you love them” (“Letter from Rome”, Salesian Constitutions)

Throughout her history the Church has seen numerous dedicated pastors, who were holy priests. Their words and actions remain a perennial source of inspiration for us to follow.

Reflecting on his commitment to the evangelization of Africa St. Daniel Comboni would say, “Africa or death” (Homily of Pope John Paul II on the Canonization of Daniel Comboni on October 5, 2003). When St. John Bosco came forward to work for abandoned young people he said, “For you I study, for you work, for you I live, for you I am ready to give my life” (“Letter from Rome”, Salesian Constitutions). The patron of priests, St. John Mary Vianney, would pray, “Lord grant me the conversion of my parish; I am willing to suffer whatever you wish, for my entire life,” wrote Pope Benedict on June 19, 2009 in his Letter to Every Priest in the World for the Year of Priests. The commitment of these saintly pastors is in line with the words of St. Paul, “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel!” (1 Cor 9:16).

Oftentimes these saintly pastors were so immersed in their pastoral work that they cared little for their own health and personal well-being. Pastoral zeal gave them enormous courage and strength to carry on the task to which they had committed themselves. They understood clearly that this was what the Lord wanted them to do.

Pastoral zeal gives meaning to the priesthood of a priest and the pastoral ministry he has assumed. It is a concrete way of practising the gospel values and evangelical counsels more especially for priests belonging to Religious Orders. Poverty through its counsel of detachment from earthly things helps the priest religious to concentrate on his pastoral responsibilities. Chastity helps him to renounce exclusive human affection so as to be able to love the flock entrusted to him with single mindedness. Vow of obedience helps a priest religious to be available for the flock away from his own attachment to place and earthly desires.

Pastoral zeal makes priests to be effective in their ministry and helps them to achieve more for the Lord. It demands reaching out to their flock more frequently and more meaningfully. It encourages priests working in parishes to make “safari” to meet the members of

their flocks often and to administer sacraments frequently without expecting monetary benefits. It inspires a religious health worker to dedicate more time and be more patient. It motivates the religious in schools to reach out more often to the poorest students and to find more opportunities for catechesis and evangelization within school context. Pastoral zeal motivates the priests involved in the secular activities of the world to go out to catechize, to offer sacramental assistance, to make pastoral visits to Christian homes, and to be close to the poor. Pastoral zeal can make us better priests, and more holy as well. It will help us to serve the Lord and His people without counting the cost; only the Lord and his flock count.

Pastoral zeal challenges the priest to give witness by his personal and community living - with his brother-priests and the ecclesial community to which he is committed. It makes the inculturation process easier and more enjoyable. It helps the ordained minister to love the people to whom he is sent. It brings the shepherd close to the people and people close to their shepherd by sharing their life together. It is indeed a sure way to find holiness and it also makes religious life a joyful enterprise for the Lord. Pastoral zeal is a practical way of extending the Kingdom of God and of being the leaven for the world.

Rejuvenating the Priestly Identity: A Pastoral Perspective

Mary Wambua Nzilani

Introduction

Today we are living in a world that is facing many challenges.¹²¹ We talk of political and economic injustices, coupled with corruption, the abuse of human rights, which have brought division, poverty and many diseases. Such a situation has brought many challenges to the priest of today. People have lost hope in prayer, in worship and in homilies that do not touch their lives.¹²² Such a crisis may stem from the inability of some priests to conceive rightly the nature of their call, and their role in evangelization and thus, in the mission of the Church. St John Paul II, in his Encyclical Letter, *Redemptoris Missio*, shows that “the witness of a Christian life is the first and irreplaceable form of mission.”¹²³ According to him, “Christ whose mission we continue, is the ‘witness’ par excellence (Rev. 1:5; 3:14) and the model of all Christian witness.

The Holy Spirit accompanies the Church along her way and associates her with the witness he gives to Christ (cf. Jn 15:26-27).¹²⁴ Therefore, all priests need to know that, for them to win more souls for Christ and enhance more positively the image of the Church, a caring spirit should be the heart and centre of their mission. In these situations, the priest is called upon to ignore the pleasures of the world and to commit himself to the call he has received from God. A priest needs to be constantly aware of the fact that he is in the world but not of the world. Therefore, this article discusses ways that may help the priest rediscover his identity. Our

¹²¹ Bernard Musondoli, “What Kind of Priest Do We Need in Africa,” in *The Priestly Ministry in Africa*, Ignatius Tambudzai and Chikere Ugwuanyi, eds., (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 110.

¹²² Ibid., 110.

¹²³ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Mission of the Church (*Redemptoris Missio*) (7 December 1990), no. 48, in AAS 83 (1991): 295.

¹²⁴ Ibid.

argument stresses continuous ongoing formation to help the priest to continue responding to his call. We begin our discussion by observing the challenges faced by the priest today. Before the conclusion, in light of faith and guided by the praxis of liberation and the link between the praxis of Jesus and the praxis of the Church¹²⁵, we will propose ways that can help priests in their ministry.

1.1 Description of Terms in Line with Priestly Identity

The following are terms that we are going to use in our article. They will help us to connect to the meaning of the research carried out in favour of the identity of the priests. Though many words are used, we focus on three of them such as: rejuvenating, priest/priesthood and identity.

1.1.1 Rejuvenating

The Cambridge Dictionary defines the term “rejuvenating” as giving new energy or vigor to someone or to revitalize. It is to make someone look or feel young and energetic again.¹²⁶ Rejuvenation in Webster’s Dictionary is defined as “to restore to youthful vigor, appearance, etc.; make young again; to restore to a former state; make fresh or new again.”¹²⁷ There seem to be at least three parts to rejuvenating something, each being crucial to true restoration: the structure, the organism and the support for the organism. If we use a person as an example, we would say there is the body, its life or soul, and the provision made to keep that life alive. They depend upon each other. Thus, in line with our research, it is about restoring the body, the life or

¹²⁵ Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Mission Activity of the Church (*Ad Gentes Divinitus*) (7 December 7 1965), no. 5, in AAS 58 (1966): 952.

¹²⁶ “Rejuvenating,” <https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/rejuvenating> (accessed December 2, 2020).

¹²⁷ “Rejuvenation,” https://wwwFOUNDATIONSforFREEDOM.net/References/OT/Historical/Nehemiah/Nehemiah07.1_73Restore.14.html (accessed December 6, 2020).

the soul of a priest, and the provision made to keep that life alive so to be effective, efficient and relevant in the mission of Christ in the Church.

1.1.2 A Priest/Priesthood

According to the Cambridge Dictionary and in Christian usage, a priest is a person whose office is to perform religious rites, and especially to make sacrificial offerings. He is a person ordained to the sacerdotal or pastoral office; a member of the clergy; a minister of any religion.¹²⁸ The priest is always a priest; he is not a simple functionary who performs ritual actions, but rather he is configured to Christ in the depths of his being by what is called an ontological change. Christ works through him at the altar, “This is my Body,” and in the confessional, “I absolve you of your sins,” but also in his daily actions outside the church. The character that the priest receives is a comfort to the faithful inasmuch as they realize that their faith is not based on the personality of the priest, but rather the Person of Christ working through the priest. The priest is called, like all of the faithful, to a life of holiness. The character received at ordination is actually a dynamism for priestly holiness. The more he can model his life on Christ and submit to the gift he received at ordination, the more he will be a credible witness to the faithful and edify the Body of Christ.¹²⁹

On the other hand, priesthood is a call, not a career, a redefinition of self, not just a new ministry, a way of life, not a job, a state of being, not just a function, a permanent lifelong commitment, not a temporary style of service, an identity, not just a role. It is a special call to give glory to God, to render Him an *officium laudis* (a work or office of praise).¹³⁰ The

¹²⁸ “Priest,” <https://www.dictionary.com/browse/priest> (accessed December 2, 2020). See also Charles Connor, *Meditations on the Catholic Priesthood* (New York: The Society of St. Paul, 2005), 1.

¹²⁹ A Zenit Daily Dispatch, “Priestly Identity: Crisis and Renewal,” <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/priestly-identity-crisis-and-renewal-9241> (accessed December 2, 2020).

¹³⁰ Bernard Musondoli, “What Kind of Priest Do We Need in Africa” in *The Priestly Ministry in Africa*, Ignatius Tambudzai and Chikere Ugwuanyi, eds., (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 104.

priesthood is a vocation and no one can claim this dignity for himself, but only those who are called by God. This is affirmed by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews saying: “the divine vocation to the priesthood does not only concern priests of the Old Testament, but first and foremost, Christ himself the Son who is consubstantial with the Father, made a priest according to the order of Melchizedek, the one priest “forever” of the new and eternal Covenant”.¹³¹ It is in the Son’s vocation to the priesthood a dimension of the Trinitarian mystery is expressed. The priesthood is at the heart of the Church’s whole life and mission. Its roots go back to Judaism in their historical development, and in that development, we find two forms of the reality of the priesthood as the exercise of priestly functions and an emphasis on priestly holiness.¹³² This is realized when the priest celebrates the Eucharist or the other sacraments.¹³³

Priests may know that they are priests by the virtue of what they are doing for the ministry; this is very important, but it has to flow from their being. They can act like priests, minister as priests, function as priests, serve as priests, and preach as priests, because in the first place, they are priests. This tells us that being comes before acting.¹³⁴ If the priest is to lead his people into contact with the presence of the mystery of God, which is what holiness is, then, the priest himself has to be in touch with the presence and mystery of God. He has to be familiar with God in the deepest part of his being. This is what we call prayer. A more practical example of prayer that is so essential to bolstering priestly identity is the divine office, which is a prayer particularly priestly. On the occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, Pope John Paul II said, “Prayer, in a certain sense, creates the priest. At the same time, every priest

¹³¹ “Address Given by Pope John Paul II during the Course of the Symposium” (from the English text of the address given on Friday, October 27, 1995 taken from *L’Osservatore Romano*, Weekly English Edition), (accessed December 6, 2020).

¹³² Charles Connor, *Meditations on the Catholic Priesthood*, 1.

¹³³ Thomas McGovern, *Priestly Identity: A Study in the Theology of Priesthood* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2002), 72.

¹³⁴ Charles Connor, *Meditations on the Catholic Priesthood*, 5.

creates himself constantly through prayer. I am thinking of the marvelous prayer of the breviary, the divine office, in which the whole Church, through the lips of her ministers, prays together with Christ ...”¹³⁵

The greatest of all prayers, the Eucharist, is where priests experience their priestly identity most intimately. The question comes: Is there ever a more powerful moment of configuration with Christ, of acting in *persona Christi*, than when the priests say; ‘This is my body; this is my blood’?¹³⁶ Notice they do not say, ‘This is his body’; no, they say, ‘This is my body! This is my blood!’ Therefore, they are Christ!¹³⁷ This tells us that, a priest without a deep life of prayer is condemning himself to a career of superficiality in that aspect of his ministry, which is, at the same time, the most demanding and the most satisfying. All the above tells us of the beauty of priesthood that is in line with his identity.

1.1.3 Identity

Identity is derived from the Latin word ‘*idem*’, which means ‘the same’.¹³⁸ Here, the problem may be that, what forms “sameness” may not be always clear. Identity is mostly defined by criteria of continuity and differentiation where the former brings a sense of coherence and unity to the personality and the latter implies an awareness of what makes a person a unique individual. The identity of a priest is not a matter of personality traits, but of self-perception of others in a social dynamic context, but it is examining the relationship of a priest with the wider world or society, which is the purpose of our study. It is his social teamwork with others

¹³⁵ Timothy Dolan, “Priestly Role & Identity,” <https://www.worldpriest.com/priestly-role-identity/> (accessed February 3, 2020).

¹³⁶ Ibid.

¹³⁷ Ibid.

¹³⁸ Timothy Costello, *Forming A Priestly Identity* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia University Gregoriana, 2002), 9.

especially non-clergy and his life commitment as a priest.¹³⁹ Identity denotes equality with what one is or ought to be. Accordingly, the word “identity” evokes a content very similar to what is implied by the words ‘nature’ or ‘essence’. When speaking of identity, one is referring to the image a person has of himself or herself - in particular if one feels satisfied or identified with what one is, or with one’s place in society and what others expect of one. A crisis of identity arises when one ceases to feel at ease with what one is or does, or when there is a rupture or discontinuity between reality and the image a person has of himself or herself.¹⁴⁰

In the genesis of a crisis of identity, exterior factors generally play a part in a change in life or environment, leaving a person having to cope with greater difficulties than normal, problems of adaptation among others. However, the decisive factor is always an interior one - a debility or weakness which, prevents the subject facing up to a situation in order to recover his own proper identity. Overcoming the difficulty implies a perception of the factors, which provoked it so that the subject can squarely confront reality by means of a deeper self-knowledge. Awareness of identity and, where necessary, overcoming a crisis of identity has, then, its roots at the level of affectivity or, more precisely, at the very core of the person. It has to be clear that, where the priestly life is concerned, there is a close interaction between theology and psychology.¹⁴¹ *Pastores Dabo Vobis* begins its analysis of the nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood with an exposition of the demands, which the contemporary culture and social context enforce on the priest.¹⁴²

¹³⁹ Boniface Mbewe, “Challenging Experiences of African Priests in the 21st Century” in *The Priestly Ministry in Africa*, eds., Ignatius Tambudzai and Chikere Ugwuanyi (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 17.

¹⁴⁰ Thomas McGovern, *Priestly Identity: A Study in the Theology of Priesthood*, 69. Also John Fogarty, *The Catholic Priest: Its Identity and Values* (Kansas: Sheed and Ward, 1988), 8.

¹⁴¹ Ibid.

¹⁴² John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*) (25 March 1992), no.11, in AAS 84 (1992): 673.

In summary, the above terms will help us to understand the life and identity of a priest, and issues, such as: how one is restored to life, the importance of priesthood as a special call to give glory to God, and identity as the image a person has of himself or herself. All the three issues are important when it comes to rejuvenating the identity of a priest today.

1.2 Current Situation

In connection with the identity of a priest, we may say that, today things have changed. What we observe is different from what it should be. We are living in a very complex world where very little value is attached to the virtues of a committed and faithful life. Again, we are living in an age where the primary values are money and power among others. Thus, without denying the numerous efforts and positive contributions which many priests make to the mission of the Church in their different areas of apostolate, it is pertinent to observe that, in a way, Catholic ministerial priesthood today seems to be experiencing a crisis of identity. We see the misplacement of values, the eroding incursion of Pentecostalism in liturgy and preaching, the thirst for worldly success, over-emphasis on financial contributions received and on physical structures at the expense of building communities of faith and love. These failures are leading priests to the Eucharist as if it is just an instrument for fundraising and receiving financial contribution.

The insertion of fundraising in the Mass between the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist is occurring often in some parishes. This is an encroachment on the identity and character of the priesthood. This crisis may stem from the inability of some priests to conceive rightly the nature of their call and role, and their expectation concerning evangelization and their role in the mission of the Church. It is worth noting here that between the liturgy of the Word and the liturgy of the Eucharist, there is a continuum, as both parts of the Mass constitute one

single act of worship.¹⁴³ The former should flow naturally and seamlessly into the latter as the two parts are inseparable. It is, therefore, wrong to separate them by inserting fundraising in between them. We now look at the causes for the above.

2. Challenges facing the priests today

In life, there are joys and challenges no matter how stratified its values may be. Our focus here is the challenges that priests are experiencing today. These challenges may be experienced in different contexts. Knowing that there are many challenges that affect the life of a priest, we discuss them under the following headings: religio-cultural, political, psychological and pastoral.

2.1 Religio-cultural perspectives

Here we are looking at a priest in his life as someone bound to certain cultural beliefs and at the same time as a person who is called to live his faith. One of these religio-cultural challenges is poverty as in economic and religious contexts. We understand the economic context here to mean when one is in a state of being poor by not being able to support oneself in terms of human needs that is, lacking the necessary materials that one needs to sustain oneself. With regard to the religious context, this reminds us that our vow of poverty is a way of imitating Christ as He lived. We all know that no one would want to live a poor life. This is a challenge that is affecting the priests today. Looking at poverty as a religio-cultural challenge, this affects priests in some cultures where they are expected to have children. This makes people consider priests as poor because they are seen as ending the family line. In the midst of such a challenge, a priest may feel rejected in terms of his participation in society. This may lead his society to look at him as a child, that he is not yet mature. In fact, the priest may be seen as abnormal.¹⁴⁴ Thus, it becomes a challenge that can affect him in his ministry.

¹⁴³ Second Vatican Council, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, no. 56, in AAS 56 (1964): 115.

¹⁴⁴ Mbewe, "Challenging Experiences of African Priests in the 21st Century," 15.

2.2 Political Perspective

This perspective calls for defining of the role of a priest as a peace and justice maker. It is in this role, that a priest may be threatened for standing for the truth by being a voice to the voiceless. This may lead to fear and the priest may be forced to live a life of fear. It is a challenge many priests have faced to be eventually set free by death.¹⁴⁵ What the priest must know is that, as a teacher and a prophet like Christ, he is called to preach the Gospel of liberation. His teaching role incarnates the prophetic calling. He identifies those structural evils which destroy the social and political fabric of society. He should without fear of persecution evangelize politics, bring God to politics so that the Spirit of God can animate the political agenda of the State. A priest must know that he is ordained also to be the voice of the voiceless and defender of the defenseless. This he may do it in imitation of Christ who was never silent before injustices in the Jewish society but boldly challenged those who made unjust laws.¹⁴⁶ We say that not all priests are affected by this imperative. Some may try their best to stand for truth while others may be said to be partisan, that is, taking sides in politics. This may lead Christian and other people to begin looking at them as not good leaders but as politicians, which affects their life and identity.

2.3 Psychological context

This context helps us to explore dimensions that affect the psyche of a priest through complexities in his life. As a rational being, he is entitled to think and react towards issues that come on his way in life. If this is impossible, then it can lead to displeasing actions, which may lead to psychological challenges. Some of these challenges are:

¹⁴⁵ Mbewe, "Challenging Experiences of African Priests in the 21st Century," 16.

¹⁴⁶ Mathew Bomki, "The Ole of Priests in Politics" in *The Priestly Ministry in Africa*, eds., Ignatius Tambudzai and Chikere Ugwuanyi (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 89.

2.3.1 The Feelings of Loneliness

A priest is called to live either with others as a family or a community or alone. It is not the same for religious priests and diocesan priests. Sometimes a priest may be alone in a parish. This may lead to loneliness and other challenges. Not all Christians understand what, ‘marrying the Church’ means for a priest. It is not easy for them to understand that, they are the family of the priest in the Church. They become his parents, his brothers/sisters and children. Despite all this theology, the priest is always alone. Therefore, loneliness can be a challenge that affects priests in their ministry.¹⁴⁷

2.3.2 Struggles for Achievement

Achievement in life is very important. If a person fails to achieve what he/she desires, it may lead to low self-esteem and reversion. After his priestly ordination, a priest may feel that he has achieved his goal. The Christians who know him may congratulate him for his achievement, which is more realized in his pastoral work. However, a challenge comes when a priest begins to compare himself with others, especially his age mates who might be progressing. Some priests may even come from very well-placed families, which may be a challenge especially for those priests posted to rural areas where they have to struggle to get the fuel that they need to minister to the people of God. This reminds us that priests are human and anything can come their way. They are chosen from among the same people of God.¹⁴⁸ Sometimes they go home and find their siblings are doing very well to the point of regretting becoming a priest as well as not being able to see their progress in terms of material things. This may be worse as one grows older and if it is not dealt with, it may become a psychological challenge all through life.

¹⁴⁷ Mbewe, “Challenging Experiences of African Priests in the 21st Century”, 18.

¹⁴⁸ Mbewe, “Challenging Experiences of African Priests in the 21st Century”, 19.

2.4 Pastoral perspectives

We must understand that a priest is called to minister the people of God through his pastoral work. This may be affected by inter-religious conflicts when Christians who are not on good terms with other religious groups. If the priest is not in agreement with some of the leaders of these other religious groups especially some religious practices, this may also become a challenge in ministering. Internal conflicts and misunderstanding among priests themselves may also be a challenge in ministry especially in cases where some priests are living a luxurious life style while others are not, and are ministering in very poor areas in the society. Another challenge may arise between the priests and the lay people especially when a priest is interacting with women. People do not understand what it means to be called to live a celibate life. Therefore, when a priest is interacting with women and especially outside pastoral activities, it may lead to misunderstandings. Men may think that to have a woman friend and especially someone unmarried, implies their having a sexual relationship. This becomes as a challenge to the innocent priest. It may bring difficulties in his service because not all his parishioners understand. Some may even stop assisting in the parish because they think the priest is giving their money to the woman. There are also women who see the priest as someone with whom to have an intimate relationship. They look at the priest as someone to fill the gaps left by their husbands in their lives. These are challenging situations for a priest today, which can really affect his identity while in ministry.

At the same time, priests must know that their priesthood is not a call for them to be successful but “to be faithful” - to use the words of Mother Theresa of Calcutta.¹⁴⁹ Priesthood is

¹⁴⁹ Faithful, not successful,” <https://www.catholicnewsagency.com/cw/post.php?id=564> (accessed April 9, 2020). See also Kathryn Spink “Only All for God and Jesus: A look at Mother Teresa’s life and calling,” https://wau.org/archives/article/only_all_for_god_and_jesus_1/ (accessed April 9, 2020).

about being, not about doing. It is about being another Christ, taking on the ways of being of God. It is about being faithful to God, being holy, exemplary, a model and an example of sanctity. Although the life and ministry of the priest must adapt to every era and circumstance of life owing to the differing human and ecclesial contexts, there is an essential aspect of the priesthood that does not change: the priest of tomorrow, no less than the priest of today, must resemble Christ. He is expected to internalize the spirit of the Gospel through constant prayer.

Looking at the above challenges, we find that they may be or are affecting the life and identity of priests today. Thus, there may be a need for ongoing formation for the priests to be helped and to remind themselves of the beauty of their identity especially in their ministry.

3. Church Teaching on Priestly Identity

All priesthood in the Church is based on the priesthood of Jesus Christ. Its functions are found in the tradition of the Apostles and the practices of the early Church. To understand priestly identity, better we base our reflections on both biblical and theological insights.

3.1 Biblical Insights

Under biblical insights, we are going to be guided by Sacred Scripture, namely, the Old and New Testament teaching on priestly identity so as to help the priest to value his life and act according to God's law and His plan of love in view of liberating the priestly identity. We value the praxis of liberation for it consists of the human divine undertakings in building the kingdom of the Church itself, which is action *ad intra*, and the transformation of the world according to God's plan as manifested in Revelation and as it continues to be unfolded through the signs of the times, action *ad extra*.

3.1.1 Priests of the Old Testament

From the very dawn of its history, the human race has always recognized a need for those individuals, who having received a mission in very different ways, act as God's mediators and converse with him on behalf of men and women. Certain men were made responsible for offering prayers of supplication, sacrifice and expiation to God in the name of the whole people. The obligation to render public worship to God, to recognize him as the supreme Lord and first principle, to be directed towards him as the ultimate goal, to give God thanks and to win over his benevolence has never been lost sight of although in many periods and places the consciousness of this obligation has been darkened to a great extent by the worship of false deities instead of the true God. Nevertheless, it has always been present.

The priesthood is a gift. The Bible states: "One does not take upon himself, but he is called by God" (Heb. 5:4). With the first intimation of divine revelation, the mysterious and venerable personage of Melchizedek (cf. Gn. 14:18), priest and king, appeared whom the author of the Letter to the Hebrews sees as a prefiguring of Jesus Christ (cf. Heb. 5:10; 6:20; 7:1-11, 15). The comparison between Jesus and Melchizedek is based principally on the eternity of their priesthood, which in the case of Melchizedek is established by a device of rabbinic exegesis that the author utilizes without taking it seriously, for he knows there is no priest who remains forever, except Jesus.¹⁵⁰

During the Exodus and the crossing through the desert of Sinai, God built up the people of Israel as "a kingdom of priests and a consecrated nation" (Ex 19:6). Yet within this people, God chose one of the twelve tribes, to be completely priestly in nature, that of Levi, for the purpose of liturgical service. These priests were consecrated by means of unique rite (cf. Ex.

¹⁵⁰ Myles Bourke, "Jesus, Priest According to the Order of Melchizedek," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds., Raymond Brown, et al. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 393.

29:1-30)¹⁵¹ and their functions, duties and rites were established in a detailed way, above all in the book of Leviticus. The members of this tribe, priestly by excellence, did not receive any land as an inheritance when the people settled in the Promised Land. God himself was their inheritance (cf. Josh. 13:33). Having been appointed to proclaim the word of God (cf. Mal. 2:7-9) and to build up communion and peace with God by means of sacrifice and prayer, the priest was always a source of hope, of glory, of strength, and of liberation within the people of Israel and helped maintain its faith in the future messiah. Solomon's admirable temple was a symbol and an image of that priesthood so full of majesty and mystery.

At Mt. Sinai God proclaimed that, He had delivered Israel from bondage and set her apart to be a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6). Most interesting is the fact that there was an order of priests before the Aaronic Priesthood was officially instituted. When God first appeared on Mt. Sinai, but before instructions had been given concerning the priesthood (cf. Ex. 28, 29), God gave this warning:

Even the priests, who do have access to Yahweh, must sanctify themselves, or Yahweh may burst out against them. Moses said to Yahweh, 'The people cannot come up Mount Sinai, since you yourself warned us to mark out the limits of the mountain and declare it sacred. Yahweh said, 'Away with you! Go down! Then come back bringing Aaron with you. But do not allow the priests and people to break through to come up to Yahweh, or he may burst out against them.' (Ex. 19:22-24)

As in other instances, it would seem that the Mosaic Covenant formalized and regulated institutions and practices, which already existed prior to the making of this covenant.¹⁵² It is in chapter 28 of Exodus that legislation concerning the Aaronic priesthood begins with a description of the garments, which will set Aaron and his sons apart as a priesthood:

¹⁵¹ John Huesman, "The Consecration of the Priests" in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds., Raymond Brown, et al. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 63.

¹⁵² John Huesman, "The Theophany of Sinai" in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, eds., Raymond Brown, et al. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 57.

From among the Israelites, summon your brother Aaron and his sons to be priests in my service: Aaron and Aaron's sons Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar. For your brother Aaron you will make sacred vestments to give dignity and magnificence. You will instruct all the skilled men, whom I have endowed with skill, to make Aaron's vestments for his consecration to my priesthood. These are the vestments, which they must make: a pectoral, an ephod, a robe, an embroidered tunic, a turban and a belt. They must make sacred vestments for your brother Aaron and his sons, for them to be priests in my service (Ex. 28:1-4).

In Exodus chapter 28, God instructed Moses concerning the priestly garments, which would set Aaron and his sons apart. At the same time, the divine institution of the priesthood is proclaimed.¹⁵³ In chapter 29, instructions for the consecration and ordination of Aaron and his sons are meticulously outlined. This chapter virtually mirrors the account of the ordination of Aaron and his sons in Leviticus chapter 8.¹⁵⁴

3.1.2 Priests of the New Testament

The New Testament rarely mentions the term 'priest' except in the Letter to the Hebrews which developed a theology of the priesthood of Jesus Christ and some passages of the epistles of Paul.¹⁵⁵ Thus, it is traditional to begin with this Letter when speaking of priesthood in the New Testament.¹⁵⁶ What we should know is that, all priesthood in the Church is based on the priesthood of Our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the great high priest, the Son of God (Heb. 4:4). Christ's priesthood is one of identification both with weak human beings through his incarnation and with God through his divine nature. His priesthood is the priesthood of the order of *Melchizedek* (Heb. 5:6; Ps. 110: 4). Jesus' priesthood, unlike that of Aaron and the sons of Levi, was not based on The Law but on a total offering of himself to God. It is an eternal priesthood,

¹⁵³ John Huesman, "The Priesthood" in Raymond Brown and others eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970, 63.

¹⁵⁴ "Priests of the Old Covenant," http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_24111998_pandold_en.htm (accessed December 5, 2020).

¹⁵⁵ Ignatius Tambudzai, "The Priesthood of the New Testament Time" in *The Priestly Ministry in Africa*, Ignatius Tambudzai and Chikere Ugwuanyi, eds., (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 39.

¹⁵⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

generated by God (Heb. 7:3). The Letter to the Hebrews helps us understand this when it states: “The Lord has sworn, and he will not repent: You are a priest forever” (Heb. 7:21). Its functions are found in the tradition of the Apostles and practices of the early Church. Priesthood is a mystery, which is greater than man. Before such a reality, it is necessary to repeat with St. Paul: “how unsearchable are his judgments and how inscrutable his ways!” (cf. Rom. 11:33).¹⁵⁷ We now look at the insights from the Gospels and from the Acts of the Apostles.

3.1.2.1 Insights on Priesthood from the Gospel of Mark

Though not explicitly, the Gospel of Mark help us to understand that Christ instituted the sacrament of priesthood. The Markan tradition of the Last Supper records that: “As they were eating he took bread, and when he had said the blessing he broke it and gave it to them. ‘Take it,’ he said, ‘this is my body.’ Then he took a cup, and when he had given thanks he handed it to them, and all drank from it, and he said to them, ‘This is my blood, the blood of the covenant, poured out for many” (Mark 14: 22-24).

The word “covenant” here indicates that Jesus Christ was aiming at something not known in the Jewish Passover. A new covenant that would also require a new dispensation of offering and a new priesthood, is only inferred.¹⁵⁸ Here Mark’s concern is not simply “to relate what Jesus did and said on that occasion, but to recount it in the interest of Christian faith and worship”.¹⁵⁹ Mark also indicates the desire of Christ to prepare the people upon whom the holy ministry of priesthood would be conferred. Jesus at the beginning of his ministry prayed and gathered around him twelve men whom he called: “As he was walking along by the Lake of Galilee, he saw Simon and Simon’s brother Andrew casting a net in the lake - for they were

¹⁵⁷ Ibid., 43.

¹⁵⁸ Ibid.

¹⁵⁹ Edward Mally, “The Eucharist” Raymond Brown, et al., eds., *The Jerome Biblical Commentary* (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 54.

fishermen. And Jesus said to them, ‘Come after me and I will make you into fishers of people’” (Mark 1: 16-17). This divine manifestation indicates Jesus’ messianic power to create disciples. Jesus makes an imperative claim upon his disciples and gives new direction to their lives.¹⁶⁰ Mark also brings to our attention that the purpose of the ministry of the Apostles was also a priestly one. We read:

And he instructed them to take nothing for the journey except a staff - no bread, no haversack, no coppers for their purses. They were to wear sandals but, he added, ‘Don’t take a spare tunic.’ And he said to them, ‘If you enter a house anywhere, stay there until you leave the district. And if any place does not welcome you and people refuse to listen to you, as you walk away shake off the dust under your feet as evidence to them.’ So they set off to proclaim repentance; and they cast out many devils, and anointed many sick people with oil and cured them. (Mark: 6: 8-13).

We find here that the commissioning is more meaningful for it took place when all the twelve tribes were represented by the figure of the twelve Apostles. The instructions also stipulate some of the ministries of a priest: to exorcise, to preach the Word of God and to anoint the sick. This leads us to talk of priesthood implicitly revealed in this Gospel of Mark.¹⁶¹

3.1.2.2 Insights of Priesthood from the Gospel of Matthew

The Gospel of Matthew ends with a commissioning statement: “Jesus came up and spoke to them. He said, ‘All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Go, therefore, make disciples of all nations; baptize them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to observe all the commands I gave you. And look, I am with you always; yes, to the end of time’” (Matthew 28: 18-20). The apostolic commission here is couched in the terms of the experience of the early Church. The Church acts in virtue of the commission that Jesus has received - a commission that is without limit. This tells us that, Jesus

¹⁶⁰ Edward Mally, “Call of the First Disciples,” in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Raymond Brown, et al., eds., (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 25.

¹⁶¹ Tambudzai, “The Priesthood of the New Testament Time”, 42-43.

commissioned the Apostles to go to all nations, to administer Baptism using the Trinitarian formula, and to teach them what Christ taught. These was to lead them to become successors of Christ on earth and it gave them a share in his priesthood.¹⁶²

3.1.2.3 Insights of Priesthood from the Gospel of Luke

Luke in his Gospel has two important details that can help us understand priesthood especially in his account of the Lord's Supper. We read in Luke 22: 19: "Then he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, 'This is my body given for you; do this in remembrance of me'". The command here "do this in remembrance of me" contains the mandate to the Apostles to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice which Jesus himself offered as the unique High Priest and in which he is the victim offered to the Father in the sacrifice. God's remembering, like his words and symbolic actions, amounts to something much more than mere recollection; he effects what he recalls.¹⁶³ The Apostles then are to take up the same function of Christ so as to offer the same sacrifice to God.¹⁶⁴

The second detail is in Luke 22: 20. It states: "He did the same with the cup after supper, and said, 'This cup is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you.'" By adding the adjective 'new' to the noun 'covenant' Jesus refers to the cup as *the new covenant in my blood*. This tells us that by the use of the adjective 'new', Jesus was aware that his action was inaugurating a new covenant with a new dispensation of ministers. With this, we can say that, Jesus initiated a new priesthood distinguished by the offering of his Body and Blood.¹⁶⁵

¹⁶² John McKenzie, "The apostolic commission," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Raymond Brown, et al., eds., (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 113.

¹⁶³ Carroll Stuhlmueller, "The Passover Meal and the Eucharist," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Raymond Brown, et al., eds. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 158.

¹⁶⁴ Tambudzai, "The Priesthood of the New Testament Time", 45.

¹⁶⁵ Ibid.

3.1.2.4 Insights of Priesthood from the Gospel of John

In the prayer of Jesus in John chapter 17, Jesus prays for the eleven that they may be set apart, sanctified and consecrated in truth as Jesus was consecrated to God his Father (John 17:16-19). Through this consecration, the disciples were meant to be like Jesus, and share in his priesthood and his Spirit. Jesus' words to the Apostles after appearing to them also mean that he was giving them a mission. He says: "... 'Peace be with you. As the Father sent me, so am I sending you.' After saying this, he breathed on them and said: Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive anyone's sins, they are forgiven; if you retain anyone's sins, they are retained" (John 20:21-23). Jesus breathed on them. We may say that this is a parable in action, a sign, a sacrament, to indicate the conferring of the Spirit. The giving of the Spirit is here specifically related to the power given to the Church to continue the juridical ministry of Christ in the matter of sin.¹⁶⁶ Bruce Vawter states that, "Catholic tradition has rightly seen in this act the origin of the Sacrament of Penance, even though it is equally true that, the Church's power over sin is also exercised in baptism and the preaching of the redemptive word".¹⁶⁷ We may also relate this with the Old Testament where the duty of a priest was to offer sacrifice for his own sin and the sins of others. Thus, Jesus might have identified them as priests by asking them to forgive sins.¹⁶⁸

3.1.2.5 Insights of Priesthood from the Acts of the Apostles

The ministry of the Apostles of witnessing to the life, ministry, passion, death and resurrection of Christ, bears evidence that they played roles of the High Priest, Jesus, even though they did not refer themselves as priests. They responded to their responsibility by devoting themselves *to prayer and to the ministry of the word* (Acts 6: 4). The spread of the

¹⁶⁶ Bruce Vawter, "Appearance to the Disciples," in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Raymond Brown, et al., eds. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 464.

¹⁶⁷ Ibid.

¹⁶⁸ Tambudzai, "The Priesthood of the New Testament Time," 46.

Word or of the Christian message is thus, depicted as a service.¹⁶⁹ Thus, by the virtue of carrying out these functions, we may say that they were priests. We see them using different languages to speak out and using the gifts of the Holy Spirit to show that the new priesthood of Christ was not to be confined to one household, but to all, for Jesus welcomes everyone to the new dispensation of the priesthood. We learn that the early community of believers used to gather every first day of the week to break bread during liturgical worship (Acts 20:11). This is in line with the ministry of the New Testament priest who united his flock by gathering them together for the liturgy of the Eucharist at which the Word was and is proclaimed and the Body and Blood of Jesus Christ was shared in thanksgiving to God.¹⁷⁰

The two Testaments helps us to understand that the ministry of priests is sacred because in the Old Testament, it was God who appointed priests from the house of Aaron and that of Levi, and in the New Testament, because the priesthood is founded on the priesthood of Jesus who is the Son of God.¹⁷¹ Therefore, priests should live in imitation of the teachings of the two Testaments so as to live better lives and strengthen their identity for a better ministry.

3.2 Theological Insights on priestly identity

The aim of this section is to show how the Church supports and guides priests on their journey of faith. We draw our inspirations from the Church Fathers, the documents of Vatican Council II, the teaching of the Popes and the teaching of selected theologians.

3.2.1 Church Fathers

St. Irenaeus of Lyon wrote in his book *Against the Heresies* that the entire Christian community is to pay careful heed to those presbyters who have their succession from the

¹⁶⁹ Richard Dillon and Joseph Fitzmyer, "Prayer" in *The Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Raymond Brown et al., eds. (London: Geoffrey Chapman, 1970), 182.

¹⁷⁰ Tambudzai, "The Priesthood of the New Testament Time," 47.

¹⁷¹ *Ibid.*, 48.

Apostles. He wrote that they have received the infallible charism of truth. He referred them as presbyters for the name would eventually be applied only to priests. The use of this terminology is made clear after the death of the Apostle John the Evangelist; priests were the successors to the Lord's closest collaborators: We read:

Their office, status, power was unique. No one ever put in a claim to be an Apostle of the second generation. Because of the fact, which constituted the Apostles, they were necessarily irreplaceable. Their authority succeeded the new hierarchy of *episcopoi* and *presbyteroi*, and as it took their place, this new hierarchy itself underwent a change. The college of *episcopoi* or *presbyteroi*, who, under the Apostles, had ruled the local church, gave place to an arrangement where in each local church there was but one *episcopus* whom a number of subordinated, now termed *presbyteroi*, assisted.¹⁷²

When Irenaeus wrote of the Apostles' successor possessing infallible charism of truth, he was writing against the background of the Gnostic and Montanist heresies. To emphasize the importance of priesthood, Irenaeus demonstrated that the bishops were the only recognized authority concerning doctrine because they were the successors of the Apostles and ultimately of Christ Himself.¹⁷³ As the Christian 'high priest', the bishop baptized and confirmed new Christians, ordained presbyters, and presided over the Eucharist. He was seen as the one who united the local Christian community around himself. At the same time, he also united his diocese with all other Christian communities since he himself was united to his brother bishops in the apostolic succession. It is here, with this in mind, that St. Cyprian of Carthage in his book on *Unity of the Church*, described this unity of the clergy and laity as a reflection of the unity of the three divine persons in one God. This analogy of St. Cyprian underscored the belief that a bishop was the one and only authority, the one priest, the one preacher, the one leader of a diocese, and the one administrator. The bishop's 'cathedra' or the throne located in his cathedral

¹⁷² Philip Hughes, *A History of the Church* (London: Sheed and Ward, 1934), 1, 50. See also Connor, *Meditation on the Catholic Priesthood*, 34.

¹⁷³ *Ibid.*, 35.

church, became a symbol of the throne of God and a symbol of the bishop's doctrinal authority.¹⁷⁴

St. Augustine of Hippo also contributed to the understanding of priesthood. At his time, many heresies had abounded in the early Church including Donatism, which Augustine refuted. It is at this time that over two hundred seventy African bishops had agreed that sacraments administered by unworthy priests were invalid. St. Augustine forcefully maintained that the spiritual indisposition of those administering the sacraments in no way invalidated their efficacy. He declared that they were administered validly, though not licitly. Thus, if anything was lacking, he felt that, it was the full effect of the sacrament for all potential graces might not flow to the recipient if the priest were living sinfully.¹⁷⁵

Basil the Great and Gregory Nazianzen, who were referred to by the Council Fathers at the Council of Nicea in 325 A.D as Fathers of the Church, contributed significantly to the Church's understanding of Holy Orders: the episcopacy, the priesthood, and the diaconate.

St. John Chrysostom should also not be left out. In his work, *On the Priesthood*, in 388 A.D, he considered the many practical points a priest should consider about his life. He said that a priest must be well educated enough to refute heretics, calm enough not to lose control of his emotions because of the many people with different temperaments he had to deal with, temperate enough that his own life was not be given to overindulgence.¹⁷⁶ Chrysostom also stressed the priestly office by saying that the sacrifice the priest offered was the very death of Christ, and in no way conformed to the sacrifices of Old Testament priests. He affirmed this by saying that though the office of the priesthood is exercised on earth, it ranks among the order of heavenly things. It was neither man nor an angel nor an archangel nor any other created power, but the

¹⁷⁴ Connor, *Meditation on the Catholic Priesthood*, 36.

¹⁷⁵ *Ibid.*, 40.

¹⁷⁶ *Ibid.*, 41.

Holy Spirit himself who established this ministry, and who ordained those men bidding in the flesh should imitate the ministry of the angels. For that reason, it is appropriate that the bearer of the priesthood to be as pure as if he stood in the very heavens amidst those powers.¹⁷⁷

The above shows that the Fathers of the Church valued the identity of the priest. They contributed much to the understanding of the life of a priest and they guided priests on how to live as ministers in the Church, which would help them renew their identity. Thus, a total, lifelong self-giving is necessary to safeguard the identity of priests today. This can be helped through on-going formation.

3.2.2 Vatican II on Priesthood

To understand the second Vatican Council's view on priestly identity, we have the Decree on Priestly Training, which was issued in October 1965. On December 7th 1965, the Council returned to this subject so dear to its heart and issued its fifteenth document, the Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. This document begins with the statement: "Priests by sacred ordination and mission which they receive from the bishops are promoted to the service of Christ the Teacher, Priest and King. They share in His ministry, a ministry whereby the Church here on earth is unceasingly built up into the People of God, the Body of Christ and the Temple of the Holy Spirit".¹⁷⁸

Priests have the primary duty of proclaiming the Gospel. The document continues:

To all men, therefore, priests are debtors that the truth of the Gospel, which they have, may be given to others. And so, whether by entering into profitable dialogue, they bring people to the worship of God, whether by openly preaching they proclaim the mystery of Christ, or whether in the light of Christ they treat contemporary problems, they are relying not on their own wisdom for it is the word of Christ they teach, and it is to conversion and holiness that they exhort all men."¹⁷⁹

¹⁷⁷ Ibid.

¹⁷⁸ Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests (*Presbyterorum Ordinis*) (7 December 1965), no.1 in AAS 58 (1966): 991.

¹⁷⁹ Vatican Council II, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4.

The document brings to our attention that, in anything the priests do, they perform sacred functions. This is because, by their special share in the priesthood of Christ, they are to act as His ministers. This is seen especially in the celebration of Mass where they offer sacramentally the Sacrifice of Christ to which all the other sacraments and all apostolic work are directed. In these sacred functions, they are to lead their people to pray, confess their sins, live the evangelical counsels, and offer their own lives with the Eucharist.¹⁸⁰

Priests have a responsibility for gathering the family of God together for they are given a spiritual power for the building up of the Church.¹⁸¹ It is here, “they should act towards men, not as seeking to please them, but in accord with the demands of Christian doctrine and life”.¹⁸² They also have a special obligation to the poor and, in seeking to minister to every person and group; they must foster a spirit of community, which embraces “not only the local church but also the universal Church”.¹⁸³

3.2.3 Post-Vatican II on Priesthood

Under the heading post-Vatican II developments, we will look at what Pope John Paul II today a Saint said on priesthood. He wrote extensively on the priesthood and his personal example also helped him to develop the thinking of many in the Church on the purpose and nature of Holy Orders.¹⁸⁴ According to him, a priest is above all to be a steward of the mysteries of God. We are to understand that the steward is not the owner, but the one to whom the owner entrusts his goods so that he will manage them justly and responsibly. It is in line with this that a priest receives from Christ the treasures of salvation in order to distribute them among the

¹⁸⁰ Ibid., 5.

¹⁸¹ Ibid., 6.

¹⁸² Ibid.

¹⁸³ Ibid.

¹⁸⁴ Connor, *Meditation on the Catholic Priesthood*, 117.

people, among whom he is sent. He has a task of administering these treasures.¹⁸⁵ As to priesthood, Pope John Paul II lays great emphasis on priestly configuration to Christ who is the High Priest. He says that priest is ontologically changed and given an indelible character in Holy Orders.¹⁸⁶ He adds that the spiritual life of a priest is marked, molded and characterized by their way of thinking and acting in imitation of Christ who is the Head and Shepherd of the Church. He also affirms that: “He who is head of the people must in the first place realize that he is to be the servant of many. And he should not disdain being such; I say it once again, he should not disdain being the servant of many, because the Lord of lords did not disdain to make Himself our servants”.¹⁸⁷ This reminds us that each priest resembles Christ the Head and Shepherd for a particular purpose, a special configuration that sets him apart from other believers.

In keeping with this, a priest is to remain a member of the community as a believer beside his brothers and sisters, representing Christ, being placed not only in the Church, but also in the forefront of the Church. He does all these things in his pastoral work with the help of the Holy Spirit, by giving himself totally to the Church with no divided allegiances, but following Christ who loved the Church and gave Himself up for her (Ephesians 5:25).¹⁸⁸ This is because the priesthood is the priesthood of Christ. Through it, He offers Himself, His body and blood in sacrifice to God the Father, a sacrifice that makes righteous all humankind. In the celebration of the Eucharist, the priest goes to the very heart of the mystery whereby, he has to take it as the most important moment of his day - the center of his life.¹⁸⁹ Pope John Paul also encourages priests to live their identity by reminding them that a priestly life must be one of personal prayer,

¹⁸⁵ Connor, *Meditation on the Catholic Priesthood*, 117 - 118. See also John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 71-72.

¹⁸⁶ Ibid., 118.

¹⁸⁷ John Paul II, *I Will Give You Shepherds* (Boston: Pauline Books and Media, 1992), 41-42. See also Connor, *Meditation on the Catholic Priesthood*, 119.

¹⁸⁸ Connor, *Meditation on the Catholic Priesthood*, 120.

¹⁸⁹ Ibid., 121.

which may lead to their daily conversion. He gives several pieces of advice on how the priest to live his priestly identity. He asserts:

Each is called on to give an account of his heart, his service, his zeal and fidelity to Christ, since each has been entrusted with Christ's mysteries. In addition, like all fellow sinners, the priest must account for his own negligence, sins, acts of timidity, lack of faith and hope, and of thinking in only a human way. The priest must seek forgiveness of God over and over again in the Sacrament of Reconciliation, and he must ever realize that prayer is the first and last condition for conversion, for spiritual progress and for holiness of life.¹⁹⁰

Priests must know that it is through them that men and women of today receive Christ. They also do this through the Eucharist and the sacrament of Reconciliation. He (Pope John Paul II) reiterates:

The priest has a mysterious, awesome power over the Eucharistic body of Christ. By reason of this power he becomes the steward of the greatest treasure of the Redemption, for he gives people the Redeemer in person. Celebrating the Eucharist is the most sublime and the most sacred function of every priest. As for me, from the very Eucharist has been not only my most sacred duty, but above all, my soul's deepest need.¹⁹¹

The above reminds us that the priest is not just the human instrument for bringing the Lord's Body and Blood to the faithful, but, in the name and person of Christ, he also has the power to forgive sin, that is, to bring Christ's reconciling love, peace and strength to others. It is in the confessional that his spiritual fatherhood is realized in the fullest way.¹⁹² Therefore, if the priest is to be effective, efficient and relevant as a confessor, he must make frequent use of the sacrament of reconciliation himself, going often, and receiving regular spiritual direction, for the goal of confession is the sanctification of all life.¹⁹³ A priest is also called to be a man of the word, to proclaim the word, and especially to live by the word. At the same time, he must be a

¹⁹⁰ *Letter of the Supreme Pontiff John Paul II to all Bishops of the Church and to all Priests of the Church* (Boston: Daughters of St. Paul, 1979), 24. See also Connor, *Meditation on the Catholic Priesthood*, 121.

¹⁹¹ John Paul II, *Gift and Mystery* (New York: Doubleday, 1996), 85.

¹⁹² *Ibid.*, 86.

¹⁹³ Connor, *Meditation on the Catholic Priesthood*, 127.

man intellectually prepared to know the word in depth, and to proclaim it effectively.¹⁹⁴ By doing so, he will be in a position to stand up for his identity and be able to bear much fruit in his ministry.

3.2.4 Theologians on Priesthood

Many theologians have written and shared their reflections on the identity of a priest. For example, Thomas McGovern in his book *Priestly Identity* asserts: “The priesthood is a special call to give glory to God, to render him an *officium laudis* (a work or office of praise).”¹⁹⁵ This is realized when the priest is celebrating the Eucharist or the other sacraments, where he always gives praise to God. The office of praise includes the daily recital of the breviary of what is true, good and beautiful, which the world receives as a gift from the creator. It is only by living in depth the truth of the redemption of the world and of humanity that the priest can come close to the suffering and problems of individuals and families and fearlessly face as well the reality of evil and sin with the spiritual strength necessary to overcome them.¹⁹⁶ At the same time, the priest must understand himself as the one who is called, above all, to serve his people. This is his central function and must be the compass of his life. Like Jesus, the priest is one who serves. Service marks him out from and at the same time inserts him completely into the community. He ought to be, like Paul the Apostle, “all things to all” (1 Cor. 9:22).¹⁹⁷

4. Way Forward in Rejuvenating the Priestly Identity

The identity of a priest is very important especially in his ministry. To prevent unnecessary crises in priestly identity, we recommend seminary training and priestly on-going formation to promote awareness and a healthy interaction between the candidates and women in

¹⁹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁹⁵ McGovern, *Priestly Identity*, 72.

¹⁹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁹⁷ Laurenti Magesa, “Forming Diocesan Priests in Contemporary Africa” in *The Priestly Ministry in Africa*, Ignatius Tambudzai and Chikere Ugwuanyi, eds. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 51.

ministry. This is because a clear sense of identity will enable the priest to engage effectively, efficiently and relevantly in Church's mission and to remain faithful to his vocation as he copes with different lifestyle choices, for example, establishing relationships that are not ambiguous.¹⁹⁸ We stress ongoing formation for it is essential for every Christian vocation. In the middle of a full liturgical schedules, parish council meetings, dealing with leaking roofs and hospital visits, the priest must continually open his heart and mind to Christ in prayer and study, especially during annual retreats and seminars. He must also arrange times of recreation and vacation, if he is to thrive as an individual and as a man of faith. Through ongoing formation, the priest will deepen his interiority and foster a close relationship with Jesus Christ. What is necessary is an ongoing conversion that reminds the priest who he is as a minister of the Gospel and who he is as a son of God. We cannot claim that this is the only answer, but it is certainly a part of the solution to ensuring a happier and healthier life for the priest. Pope John Paul II wrote, "Ongoing formation helps the priest to be and act as a priest in the spirit and style of Jesus the Good Shepherd".¹⁹⁹ In *Familiaris Consortio* he states: "Christian couple have the right to expect from celibate persons good example and a witness of fidelity to their vocation until death."²⁰⁰ This should remind priests that they must give good example in the way they live, in the way they interact with others, their religious piety and how they perceive themselves among other areas.²⁰¹

On political challenges, there is a need for the Church to continue promoting awareness among priests as well as to those in formation through relevant training on politics and of the importance of democratic organizations in the societies they serve. For the priests to be able to

¹⁹⁸ Timothy Costello, *Forming A Priestly Identity* (Roma: Editrice Pontificia University Gregoriana, 2002), 9.

¹⁹⁹ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no.73 in AAS 84 (1992): 787.

²⁰⁰ Apostolic Exhortation on the Role of the Christian Family in the Modern World (*Familiaris Consortio*) (22 November 1981), no. 16, in AAS 74 (1982): 98.

²⁰¹ Ibid.

challenge political injustices they need a good knowledge of those moral principles that can help them to help the people of God. This will help priests to follow Christ as their model and their guide, just as he was a friend even to tax collectors, Pharisees and Sadducees of his time without any contradiction.²⁰²

We may take St John Mary Vianney as an icon for priests in their priestly journey. John Mary Vianney is the patron saint of parish priests, and his example can help all priests especially in living a life that can help them to withstand persecution, trials, and difficulties and lead them to desire to spend themselves for the glory of God and for the salvation of souls.²⁰³ Study will help them to be nourished both spiritually and intellectually. This study will also help them to respond to the situations they find in their ministries. It will also help them to contextualize their theology as well as to integrate ecclesial knowledge with the challenges of the other contexts they find themselves in as they continue to serve. It might also help them in preparing good and relevant homilies/instruction for the people.²⁰⁴

On prayer, priests should take St John Mary Vianney as their model for he valued prayer as the rule of his life. He identified prayer as his intimate way of life with God, the source and summit of his priestly ministry. Without prayer, a priest will fail to bring the people of God together. He will not be able to heal the wounds of others if he has not healed his own.²⁰⁵ Thus, there is a need for a life of deep interior prayer and union with Christ. The life of the priest should be founded upon true and solid piety; it should be lived with zeal for the glory of God and for his Kingdom which must grow among his people.²⁰⁶ In his prayerful moments, the priest

²⁰² Mbewe, "Challenging Experiences of African Priests in the 21st Century", 21.

²⁰³ Augustine Tazisong, "Saint John Mary Vianney and the African Priest" in *The Priestly Ministry in Africa*, Ignatius Tambudzai and Chikere Ugwuanyi, eds. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 23.

²⁰⁴ Ibid., 27.

²⁰⁵ Tazisong, "Saint John Mary Vianney and the African Priest", 27.

²⁰⁶ Ibid.

should remember that prayer must be integrated with work. He must become all things to all (1 Cor. 9:22). This will help him to labour for the salvation and welfare of all not mindful of its risks.²⁰⁷

St John Mary Vianney lived a life of sacrifice, which is a life of giving up something to gain something better for the community. The motivation for sacrifice is to perpetuate, intensify or re-establish a connection between the human and the divine.²⁰⁸ Thus, in following the example of St John Mary, the priests are invited to offer themselves and their labour to God in union with their people. This will help them to be of service to souls in Christ and in the Church. This service is inspired by love of the members of the Church in imitation of Christ who gave His life for them.²⁰⁹ It is a call to all the faithful to pray for their priests for the grace, which they need to be able to serve them faithfully.

Furthermore, judgment on a priest's success or on his contribution to the growth of his parish ought to be primarily based on the efforts he makes through his life, his actions and personal example to build up his local community to become a true fellowship of faith, love and service. Basing this judgment primarily on creating physical structures and soliciting financial contributions, might give the false impression that the Church's focus and mission on earth is on how to achieve or attain worldly success. The Church was not established by Christ to be successful, but to be faithful and holy as his spotless bride. Christ established her as in the words of Pope John Paul II, "to reveal and communicate the love of God to all people and nations."²¹⁰ This is her primary mission to which she must bear witness, while regarding other things as secondary. How can this mission of God be realized today through the priesthood?

²⁰⁷ Ibid., 29.

²⁰⁸ Ibid.

²⁰⁹ Ibid.

²¹⁰ John Paul II, Encyclical Letter on the Mission of the Church (*Redemptoris Missio*) (7 December 1990), no.31, in AAS 83 (1991): 276.

Pope John Paul's focus on witness as the first form of evangelization is borne out of the recognition that "people today put more trust in witnesses than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than in theories."²¹¹ If witness is the first form of evangelization, the first form of witness as the Pope authoritatively writes is:

The very life of the missionary, of the Christian family, and of the ecclesial community, which reveal a new way of living. The missionary, who, despite all his or her human limitations and defects, lives a simple life, taking Christ as the model, is a sign of God and of transcendent realities. But everyone in the Church, striving to imitate the Divine Master, can and must bear this kind of witness; in many cases, it is the only possible way of being a missionary.²¹²

From the foregoing it can be seen that what truly serves the mission of the Church in its pastoral ministry is not the competitive pursuit of worldly success or material goods, but the very life of the priest-missionary, which must reveal and communicate the love of God and a new way of living. Anything different to this is not worthy of Christ and his Church.

Priests should be formed so that they can help their flock to take note of the injustices of which they are victims. Thus, together they can see how they can work towards a better society in which all people have equal rights and can live lives worthy of human beings. They are to be equipped with all skills needed to make them to be effective, efficient and relevant to the people they serve such as are found in sociology, anthropology, psychology, and cultural anthropology among others.²¹³

The above recommendations if followed up will help in rejuvenating the identity of a priest. These include on-going formation, dedication to prayer, continuous study, witness of life not forgetting their initial formation as a way to help in maintaining their character even after formation.

²¹¹ Ibid., 42.

²¹² John Paul II, *Redemptoris Missio*, 31.

²¹³ Bomki, "The Role of Priests in Politics", 91.

Conclusion

As stated in *Gaudium et Spes*, the proper mission entrusted by the Church to the priest, as that entrusted to the Church herself, is not of the political, economic or social order, but of the religious order.²¹⁴ In the pursuit of his ministry, a priest can contribute greatly to the establishment of a more just secular order, especially in the places where the human problems of injustices and oppression are more serious. It is there the priest has to preserve ecclesial communion and reject violence in words or deeds as not being in accordance with the Gospel.²¹⁵ A priest has to remember that he has a role which is not that of the partisan politician but a prophetic one. He must denounce the injustices that are around him, play a vital role in the formation of conscience of his people both in words and in deed.²¹⁶ As St John Mary Vianney did, so the priest is not to live for himself, but for others, for the people of God. He is to be of service of the welfare of souls in Christ and in the Church, a service that is inspired by love of souls in imitation of Christ who gave his life for them.²¹⁷ Thus, he must understand himself as one who is called, above all, to serve people.²¹⁸ Fr Magesa affirms this when he identifies service as the key mark of priestly identity.²¹⁹

The aim of this article was to explore how to renew the identity of a priest throughout his priestly life, so that he can bring the people of God together. It will also help him to bear better witness as he continues to serve God. At the same time, he will be able to help many to understand the meaning of priesthood in the Church by the way he lives his life. It is our prayer

²¹⁴ Second Vatican Council, Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (*Gaudium et Spes*) (7th December 1965), no. 42 in AAS 58 (1966): 1060.

²¹⁵ Bomki, "The Role of Priests in Politics", 91.

²¹⁶ Ibid.

²¹⁷ Tazisong, "Saint John Mary Vianney and the African Priest", 29-30.

²¹⁸ Laurenti Magesa, "Forming Diocesan Priests in Contemporary Africa" in *The Priestly Ministry in Africa*, Ignatius Tambudzai and Chikere Ugwuanyi, eds. (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 51.

²¹⁹ Ibid., 50.

that, if the above is lived out, it will make necessary changes and the identity of the priest will be safeguarded.

Priesthood: A Gift and a Task.
The Place and Relevance of a Catholic Priest in the Contemporary Milieu
Ndoda Francis

Introduction

We cannot speak about priesthood apart from the figure of the priest. It is when the notion of priesthood is discussed that we can easily and clearly identify what and who a priest is. Our main concern in this article will be the person of a priest, and all it entails to be a priest in relation to the crucial issues around priesthood today. The terms priest(s) and priesthood will be used interchangeably, whenever suitable with prior or subsequent adequate explanations. Priesthood comes in different forms, though whenever priesthood is mentioned, the understanding that takes precedence in most minds is of a Catholic priest.

Since the dawn of Christianity, priesthood has been central. In reality, the idea priesthood was around long before the Catholic Church. The Bible in the Old Testament describes a priest as one who is anointed and consecrated for the service of God (Ex. 40:13). Other understandings of a priest as the one who is authorized to perform the sacred rites as a mediatory agent between humankind and God, can be found among Anglicans, Eastern Orthodox, or Roman Catholics.²²⁰ Many definitions have been brought forward and all stress the notion of consecration (which means to be set apart) and service of the divine and the people of God.

1. Who is a Catholic Priest?

A Catholic priest is an ordained minister in the Catholic Church, one who by virtue of his baptism and ordination, assumes the ministerial duties of a shepherd in the name of Jesus Christ who instituted the priesthood. All baptized Catholics share and participate in the priesthood of

²²⁰ Merriam Webster dictionary (Springfield: Merriam-Webster, Inc.), s.v. “priesthood”.

Christ and this is referred to as the common priesthood, while the ordained priest shares in the ministerial priesthood. The ministerial priesthood is therefore a means by which Christ unceasingly builds up and leads his Church and it is, therefore, handed on by its own sacrament, which is the sacrament of Holy Orders.²²¹ Christ established this priesthood with which the apostles were the first to be invested. This priesthood is destined to last in endless succession throughout history,²²² and the nature of his office identifies a priest as one who though human in all aspects, represents Christ fully in the Church. His priesthood, makes a priest a mysterious being. Bishop Fulton J. Sheen affirmed that a priest is mysterious, he lives in two worlds. He is at his best when he lives a dual life in the sense of both human and divine.²²³

2. The Hallmark of Priesthood

Both the common and ministerial priesthood have three functions (*tria munera*) which come by virtue of a Christian's baptism: *munus docendi* – teaching (prophetic function), *munus regendi* – governing (kingly function), *munus sanctificandi* - sanctifying (priestly function). According to the Church's teaching: "Christ's faithful are those who, since they are incorporated into Christ through baptism, are constituted the people of God. For this reason, they participate in their own way in the priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ" (CIC can. 204 §1). Christ was chaste and pure: "For it was fitting that we should have such a high priest, holy, blameless, undefiled, separated from sinners, and exalted above the heavens" (Heb. 26:7). He was obedient; "...who, though he was in the form of God, did not regard equality with God as something to be exploited, but emptied himself..." (Phil 2:6-8), and poor; "...but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). The priest by virtue of his representing Christ, through the

²²¹ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2019), 386.

²²² *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation to the Bishops, Clergy and Faithful on the Formation of Priests in the Circumstances of the Present Day by Pope John Paul II, March 15, 1992.

²²³ Fulton Sheen, *Those Mysterious Priests* (New York: Alba House, 2013), 9.

sacrament of Holy Orders, acts in the very person of Christ [*in persona Christi*, or *virtute ac persona ipsius Christi*].²²⁴ This imposes an obligation on the ordained minister to abide by whatever it entails to be a priest in the Church. A priest makes this his fundamental option by the very act of his acceptance to be part of this ministry and service. It is thus when a priest fails to abide by the requirements of this ministry that sin comes into play. It is to the very person of Christ that a priest conforms himself and thereby perpetuates the mission of Christ today and afterwards.

A priest's vocation, which is derived from Christ himself, comes with its conditions and expectations. He (the priest) must in all ways be the visible representation of what the world seeks to get from its Redeemer, hence the obligation to be Christ-like. A priest in this case is called to be an emblem of humility, sacrifice, simplicity, and above all sanctity. Priesthood is a teaching office, a responsibility to educate by example, which is in word and deed, a life of witness.

Witness is the hallmark of priesthood and in practical terms this witness is seen in the *tria munera* especially the teaching ministry. In the rite for diaconate ordination the bishop presents the book of the gospels to the one to be ordained deacon and he tells him to receive the Gospel of Christ, whose herald he will be, to believe what he reads, to teach what he believes, and to practice what he teaches. Christ taught humility not simply by his words but rather through his visible actions. As saying puts it: actions speak louder than words. In the gospel of John, Chapter 13:13-14, Christ washed the feet of his disciples regardless of his position as the Lord and

²²⁴ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2nd Ed. (Bengaluru: Theological Publications in India, 2019), 387.

teacher. This is an example that priests ought to radically follow, for as Scott Hahn puts it: Jesus was a teacher not only of doctrine but also of virtue.²²⁵

It should be evident enough that a priest is not merely a sacramental functionary and that priesthood is not just a ceremonial or an administrative role. Priests are teachers and this is because they are conformed to Christ who is a teacher by virtue of his being a perfect image of the Father.²²⁶ The radical following of Christ comes along with authority, as English saying expresses it: You cannot give what you don't have. A priest gets authority to teach if he possesses what it takes to be a teacher in his capacity as a representative of Christ. In the gospel of Mark, Jesus manifests the authority of his teaching because he owns it and is not just appealing to tradition like the scribes did (Cf. Mk 1:22, 27). This is the authority expected of our priests by virtue of their being imitators of Christ, his ambassadors, and people who own what they say. Priestly reputation is a result of this. This is the authority that the priest should possess; but he can lose it if the foregoing qualities are missing.²²⁷ It is very easy for a priest to assume the sanctifying and governing functions of the priesthood because they can be performed quite easily, but it is more challenging and demanding to carry out the teaching function of priesthood which require a real 'witness'. The fundamental hallmark of priesthood is therefore 'witness' since it has more influence on what affects priesthood today.

3. Faced with the Circumstances of the Present Day

We are in a world that "demands" and "is demanding". To clarify the two expressions: by saying that it is a world that "demands" is to say that there is a lot that the world expects of and from the priest. A priest is on the "giving" side; this a giving which has nothing to do with

²²⁵ Scott Hahn, *Many are called: Discovering the Glory of the Priesthood* (New York: Random House: 2010), 80.

²²⁶ Ibid., 82.

²²⁷ Ibid., 83.

anything material but rather with something spiritual. Christian believers, Catholic and non-Catholic alike, non-Christians who belong to other creeds, as well as those who may be neutral with regards to matters of religion, all these groups expect to see a priest witnessing to what he has chosen to be. The truth is that even those who are not Catholics expect to see priests living according to their fundamental choices.

Secondly, when we say that the world is “demanding”, we are focusing on the self-adjustments a priest has to make so achieve what society demands from him. Knowing that the world demands much from him, the priest appreciates the demanding nature of the choices he must make his and way of life. A priest today must strive to live up to the highest standards of holiness that will testify to the holiness of the Church to both Christians as well as those members of other creeds. Anything charitable or scandalous on the part of a priest becomes a topic for public discussion. Hence the priest is ever on public display and up for assessment. The words that a priest utters, the actions he performs, are closely analyzed. Thus, a priest must know how to organize his daily affairs. Emmanuel Kadankavil presents this notion well when he observes that today the main task of the priest is to prove his holiness, not only before the Christian community, before the members of other religions as well, even as the errors of the Church become increasingly public knowledge.²²⁸

4. Within a Wounded Society

It is a fact that we are now living in a society that is far from perfect. It is a society deeply wounded and in need of healing. Being a priest in such a society makes its own demands. Often a priest is regarded as having all answers to the problems and challenges of the world of today, challenges such as the promotion of human rights and demand for equality. The general

²²⁸ Emmanuel M. Kadankavil, *The Priesthood: A Path to Holiness* (Mumbai: St. Paul's Publications, 2019), 199.

understanding of equality multifaceted with some people taking it to the level that they forget their position in the society and in the family. Some women, for example, have lost the sense of motherhood and would want to be equal to their husbands in everything, which is impossible and against the flow of nature. These unrealistic demands have led to the break-up of marriages and the raising of children by single parents among many other things. The sacredness of marriage and family are in danger of being lost as a result of wanting to be equal. A priest is faced with the task of striking a balance between what the civil society has approved and what the Church teaches and upholds; "...for those joined in matrimony God has ordained a perpetual companionship for life and a knot of necessity which cannot be loosed except by death,"²²⁹ (Pope Gregory XVI). This is a scenario in which the Church is teaching against divorce while at the same time the civil society is defending the rights of every person, including the right to divorce.

There are other issues that have the civil society opposed to the moral teaching of and the Church. This places priests in a do or die situation and coping with serious dilemmas, for example, the legalization on same sex relationships and marriages in some parts of the world, and the legalization of abortion. Every member of a particular society wants the law to protect their interests but at the same time the Church cannot compromise on the truth of the Gospels and has to stand up for the honour and value of human life and dignity. The Church condemns abortion, and teaches that the foetus cannot be killed even for therapeutic reasons. This is because the embryo is potentially a human person with rights especially the right to life and this must be respected.²³⁰ With regard to homosexuality, the Church takes a strong stance against it. There are those who base themselves on psychological observations and try to excuse

²²⁹ Antony J. Mioni, Jr., ed., *The Popes against Modern Errors: 16 Papal Documents: Hard-Hitting Condemnations of Many of Today's Most Noxious Errors* (Charlotte: TAN Books.2012), 6.

²³⁰ Heinrich Denzinger, *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations of Matters of Faith and Morals*, Robert Fastiggi and Anne Englund Nash eds., 43rd ed. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 1225, 1327, 1333.

homosexual relationships between certain individuals. The Church does not condone homosexual actions arguing that these acts lack an essential and indispensable finality and therefore cannot be approved (cf. PH #8). These are some of the practical issues priests are faced with today and defending the truths of the Catholic faith requires real courage in today's world.

5. Faced with Today's Political Climate

The Church was not given any specific mission in the political, economic or social order, but rather the religious mission which Christ entrusted to it. It is therefore from this religious mission a light and an energy which proceed to serve as a means to structure and consolidate the human community according to the divine law. For this reason, when circumstances of time and place demand, the Church can and indeed should initiate activities on behalf of all men and women, especially those designed for the needy, such as the works of mercy and similar undertakings (cf. GS #42).

The mission of the Church is therefore not primarily a political one, and priests are encouraged to step out of partisan politics and focus on their ministry as shepherds of the flock entrusted to them and to make their contribution, when necessary, in a neutral way. Due to the fact that many of the people of God are involved in politics, even though some may not take any active part in political affairs, the politics of the country will directly affect everyone either in a positive or negative way. Priests will therefore be required from time to time to be the voice of their people especially in situations of injustice, oppression and corruption by the state authorities. There are many practical examples of such situations where the priests have had to stand up and speak out against political authorities. Normally the ordinary people are paralyzed with fear and cannot challenge the civil authorities. This fear is of course often a result of experiences they may already have gone through.

Many countries in the world have governments that suppress the citizenry, and the citizens cannot openly challenge the leadership. This is the men of God must be the voice for those who because of their status in the society cannot speak out for their rights lest they face persecutions. Like any other citizen, priests also fear for their lives and want to secure their livelihood and their good name to accomplish the mission they have been called for. But it is part of their calling at times to be sacrificial victims for the glory of God. Their lives are an altar of daily sacrifice; their life is a daily Calvary which is accompanied by bruises and pain and like Jesus, a priest must not fear the pain that comes with his daily sacrifices. Like Mary our mother who was a victim at Calvary with her son, priests too must learn to go to Calvary with their heart pierced with the sword as Mary's was. And woe to a priest if he comes down from Calvary with hands unscarred and white, because glorious is the priest who will be seen with marks of Christ's passion.²³¹

To take a practical example: recently in Zimbabwe, the Zimbabwe Catholic Bishops' Conference (ZCBC), issued a pastoral letter entitled *The March Is Not Ended*. This was issued on August 14, 2020 following the suppression of a democratic march which was scheduled for July 31st by the citizens who wished to express their grievances to the government by marching peacefully. The march was suppressed by the government; measures included a 6pm – 6am curfew, arrests and the torture of perpetrators. The pastoral letter was issued to address the current political and economic situation in the country, and to justify why citizens should be allowed to march. The letter brought relief to the citizens because it clearly outlined matters of real concern that every Zimbabwean is facing today, matters such as corruption, the suppression of freedom of expression, abductions, incarcerations, economic meltdown, hyper-inflation, social hardships, mismanagement of resources and many others. The Government however responded

²³¹ Fulton Sheen, *The Priest is not His Own* (Bengaluru: ATC Publishers, 2005), 22.

negatively to the letter and threatened the bishops whom they accused of being evil-minded and trying to incite violence and lead the country into a Rwanda-like genocide. But the truth which no-one had ever said before to the Government, was now said by the fearless men of God, and was heard by every citizen. The ZCBC was ready for any attack because they strongly believed that their vocation is a Calvary where sacrifice for redemption must take place. Today the letter has become a point of reference within the country. It has become an encouragement for the citizens to move towards their freedom. Political activists can now stand on their two feet to criticize the government for their misconduct, using factual points made in the ZCBC letter.

Likewise in Malawi, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Malawi (ECM) on 24 May 2020, issued a pastoral letter calling for new leadership in the country, *A Further Call for a New Era in Malawi, Leadership at the Service of Citizens*. The letter served to denounce the illegitimacy of the then current government, which in response to the outcry of the citizens across the country and to the Bishops' pastoral letter, had to concede their illegitimacy. This led to the stepping down of the president and the election of a new president.

The story is not the same across the globe. There are places where priests strongly support the status quo, with reasons differing from one place to another. For some of them, it could be as a result of the benefits they receive from the politicians, for others it could be because of fear of the exposure of their scandals, or just avoiding getting involved and playing it safe since they may not be directly affected by economic and political challenges in that particular country. We should also not overlook the fact that there are many countries in which the economy and politics are quite stable, hence the priests do not need to focus very much on civil affairs.

There is a call to our priests to be champions of social justice no matter what the results. In many cases it may be very risky to challenge the government but it is an obligation of the priests to be the voice for the voiceless and to stand for the oppressed. It is worth crediting those men of God who understand their position in the society to be representatives of Christ the incorruptible judge who in many ways stood for righteousness and challenged the political leaders of his time. At times, the truth may not be comfortable to receive or even to utter, but it is very necessary for human freedom. The Church's purpose is to serve man's true freedom, because there can be no freedom apart from or in opposition to the truth, the categorical, unyielding and uncompromising defense of the absolutely essential demands of man's personal dignity must be considered the way and the condition for the very existence of freedom (cf. VS #96).

6. Today's Common Threats to Priesthood

As has been previously affirmed, even though a priest represents Christ, he is also human; that is to say that his priesthood does not in any way take away the human nature of the priest. This is where the spirit of sacrifice becomes part and parcel of the life of a priest; these two realities (priesthood and sacrifice) are inseparable. A priest will encounter physical and emotional experiences just like other people encounter them. A priest is therefore not safe from the temptations of self-gratification, pride, popularity, fame and even immoral actions. There is a plethora of reasons why priests often fall into these faults; these may include individualism, worldliness, and materialism.

6.1 Individualism

Due to pride, the seeking for popularity and fame, and selfishness, priests sometimes divert from the common mission of the presbyterate into an individualistic ideology, focused

more on their own identity and ideologies, in other words, their values, beliefs and principles. This leads to the polarization within the dimension of spiritual and religious commitment to their priestly and pastoral identity. Individualism goes hand in hand with subjectivity and these two ideologies make meaningful human relationships impossible because they prompt a priest to withdraw more into his own subjectivism.²³²

6.2 Worldliness

The mother of all disordered behaviours among priests today is worldliness. This is a strong devotion to this world and its pursuits while foregoing a priest's fundamental choices. Worldliness involves a phoney manner of speaking, dressing, and behavioural patterns and approach to the gospel. The world has its own language and behaviours today, which may not be compatible with priestly identity. There are things a priest is not expected to say out loud. There are some modern expressions and terminologies that acceptable coming from priests as well as actions and behaviours which are hostile to the office and person of a priest.

The world is taking on a different form, and behavioural patterns and fashion trends are also putting on a different face. Today we are in the era of the so called "slim fits"; these are generally tight-fitting clothes that adopt the shape of the human body. This type of dressing in itself is not bad; the problem comes when the shepherd (a priest) becomes fond of this kind of dressing and then start to move around in tight-fitting clothes. Such a style of dressing can lead to sexual arousal in members of the opposite sex who can in turn feel sexually attracted to the man of God. This has led some priests into sexual scandals for which they are largely responsible. Priests must be encouraged to dress in decent manner that will not encourage sexual interest of members of the opposite sex.

²³² Emmanuel M. Kadankavil, *The Priesthood: A Path to Holiness* (Mumbai: St Paul's Publications), 200.

Apart from the sexual immorality and scandals that modern fashion can lead to, the sacredness of priesthood may also be lost along the way. Priests have the duty and obligation to lead by example and to challenge everyone especially the upcoming generation (young people), to honour their bodies and understand that they are the temples of the living God. This respect is manifested in many ways including the manner in which these bodies are covered. It is therefore shameful to learn that some priests are competing with young people in following these modern fashion trends. Wearing clothes or shoes from lucrative brands like *Nike*, *Adidas*, *Gucci*, does not help identify priests with the poverty and simplicity they profess, and are supposed to live as ambassadors of the poor Christ. The *Code of Canon Law* uses the term ‘cleric’ and it categorically states that; “Clerics are to follow a simple way of life and avoid anything which smacks of worldliness” (CIC can. 282 §1).

Priests should bear in mind that people are affected much more by what they do than what they say. A priest must live a life of witness and should be exemplary in whatever he does. “Modern man listens more willingly to witnesses than to teachers, and if he does listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses” (EN #41). Priests are called to a life of simplicity. The manner in which they conduct themselves in every aspect, matters a lot to their own spiritual well-being which in turn has direct effects towards the people out there.

Sadly, the hunt for cheap popularity has infiltrated among priests. Some of the ‘men of the cloth’ as modern English would put it, would compromise their moral values so as to please their admirers. The manner of dressing which we discussed above, their behavioural patterns and their ways of speaking will for some priests be adapted to the popular culture of the particular area in which they live. Cheap popularity is also accompanied by a paralyzing fear of rejection which makes some priests dance to the tune of the day, and falling prey to what is not expected

of them. Some of priests want to be regarded as celebrities, and they would want everyone to regard them as people of a higher social class. Struggling to achieve this leads to the continuous need for money, which they may obtain through dubious means.

6.3 Materialism

It is a fact that worldliness is inseparable from materialism, and that a worldly individual would usually also want to possess more and more in terms of material possessions. Materialism leads to self-sufficiency which in turn lead to the obstruction of God. The more a materialistic spirit enters into the priest the more he will be tempted to associate himself with the materially powerful and economically well-to-do of society. Thus, the poor will have no place in his life so that ‘regard and care for all’ which is among the core values of a priest will remain absent. This could lead to disturbances and unrest among the members of the community under that priest’s pastoral care.

Squandering money from church institutions is also unavoidable under such circumstances. Pope Francis has spoken about vanity in priests, which he said is very difficult to remove. He said the people of God will forgive a priest for emotional slip ups and they understand very well the weaknesses of their priests, however they will never forgive a priest who is attached to money or who is vain and proud does not treat them well, and shows partiality. “...They do not forgive attachment to money in a pastor. And if they aren’t treated well, they don’t forgive this. ...We must battle against these two defects.”²³³ This serves to affirm that when a priest is addicted to the accumulation of possessions and money, there is no way he can be effective in his ministry. At the same time his treatment of the people will make worse the social and economic differences of those he serves. Pope Francis asserts that

²³³ Giuseppe Merola, ed., *With the Smell of the Sheep* (Orbis Books: New York), 167-168.

leadership must enter into service but with a personal love for the people, and this places service and love for the people at the centre of priestly calling.²³⁴

7. Spiritual Life

The priesthood must be inseparable from prayer; the quest for holiness is an obligation for all priests. “Clerics have a special obligation to seek holiness in their lives, because they are consecrated to God by a new title through the reception of orders, and are stewards of the mysteries of God in the service of His people” (*CIC* can. 276 §1). It is a sad reality to hear that some priests treat their priesthood as a mere duty which has limited responsibilities outside which nothing else matters. Some people would refer to them as ‘Sunday priests’, priests who limit themselves to the Sunday celebration of Masses and some other Masses within the Christian community which they have an obligation to celebrate. But the priesthood must actually go beyond Sunday and demands a life filled with prayer and charity.

Some priests do not take proper care of their spiritual life. They have become allergic to prayer, hence jeopardising their priesthood. By virtue of his being a minister of Jesus Christ through his sacramental consecration and configuration to Christ, the head and shepherd of the Church, the priest should continually be renewing and deepening his awareness of his ministry.²³⁵ Pope Benedict XVI emphasised the ‘witness’ that awakens vocations. He spoke mainly on vocations to religious life but his conclusions touch on the relationship between priests and Christ. The risk is that, while less is done to nourish the priest spiritually, much is expected by the same individual from the people of God. What is demanded of him is what the himself cannot offer. Pope Francis in his address to the Roman Curia on 22 December 2014 referred to this kind of behaviour as ‘existential schizophrenia’ where the priest does not live according to

²³⁴ Merola, ed., *With the Smell of the Sheep*, 168.

²³⁵ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 25.

what he demands from the people of God. The Pope continued: “In this way they create their own parallel world, where they set aside all that they teach with severity to others and begin to live a hidden and often dissolute life”.

As it stands, sanctity of priests is the perpetuation of God’s holiness. God is holy, and his holiness comes to the people through Christ who bestows it on his priests who by cooperation with him, contribute to making the people of God holy.²³⁶ Once a priest is more attached to the world than he is attached to spiritual matters, the love and imitation of the gospel are compromised. He cannot be an authentic witness to the Christ who was wounded for our salvation. The love for a good and luxurious life does not allow self-sacrifice; it can create priests who are separated from their people, shepherds who are detached from their sheep. In the Levitical priesthood, the priest was separate from the victim, the animal that would be used to represent and take the place of the guilty people, and whose blood was shed for the atonement of human sin. Priests today, like Christ who knew no sin but was made into sin for our sake (cf. 2 Cor. 5:21), must be both priests and victims, that is, to say they must be sacrificial lambs for the salvation of the people of God, ready to be offered for the sake of God’s people; “...Unless the hands of the priest are scarred hands, Christ’s mercies do not so readily pass through them. Blessings, power, healing and influence get clogged by worldliness.”²³⁷ Getting scarred hands for their people, sacrificing themselves for the people is a lived experience that testifies to the life of Christ alive in his priests.

Conclusion

The priesthood is a daily struggle. For a priest to attain sanctity, he has to go through the daily martyrdom of many sacrifices. No priest will ever reach a point in his life when he will be

²³⁶ Fulton Sheen, *The Priest is not His Own*, 73.

²³⁷ Fulton Sheen, *The Priest is not His Own*, 77.

finally free from temptations, from the pain of fidelity to daily devotions and the sacrifices involved in his priestly ministry. Priesthood as presented in the foregoing analysis, is far from being a superhuman task; it is basically a duty, an office and responsibility given to God-chosen individuals, who strive to live according to the standards of the Christ they represent in his Church and to be his living witnesses today. There are so many commendable works done by the priests in our days. Apart from the celebration of Masses for the people of God and the administration of the sacraments, there are priests who are living testimonies of the love God has for humanity, priests who desire nothing but the salvation of God's people. It is highly commendable that priests become and remain ambassadors of Christ in all aspects: God fearing men who are loving, caring, and pure; men who are advocates of justice and who lives the word, not just preaching it and living something else. From the above analysis, the major threats to priesthood can be summarised as follows: the crisis of identity, visibility and authenticity. Once a priest doubt who he is, the temptations to materialism, individualism, and worldliness come into play. Priesthood is a way of the cross (*via dolorosa*), a way of suffering, suffering not for mere the priest himself – but also immolation for the atonement and redemption of God's people. A priest who is scared of carrying his cross along this way of suffering, cannot save the sheep entrusted to his care for it is through daily sacrifice that his victimhood is achieved and hence sanctity and salvation attained. For Christ has said, "Whoever loves father or mother, son or daughter more than him is not worthy of him, and whoever does not take up the cross and follow him is not worthy of him" (cf. Matt. 10: 27-28).

Priesthood in the Contemporary World

Nkandu Paul

Introduction

It is important to understand the concept of Catholic priesthood in order to know who the priest is as a man, and to know exactly his ministry. A priest is an icon, a “living icon of the eternal priesthood of Jesus Christ.”²³⁸ The question is, “What does it mean to be a priest today?” The Church through documents of Vatican II takes us back to Christ and the Scriptures. It is necessary to consider priesthood in the Scriptures and its late development.

The question about the identity of the priest has been a concern for many since the Second Vatican Council. The Catholic priesthood has Christ as the source of its identity. The true definition can only come from Christ. Scripture and Church Tradition give the identity of a priest. In the priesthood of Christ, a man responds with a ‘yes’ to the invitation he has received and lives by the grace of God faithful to this identity drawn from Christ.

1. Concept of the Priesthood and its Identity

The concept of priesthood comes from the life and teaching of Christ. It also finds meaning in the tradition of the Church. As Pope Paul VI told the clergy of Rome, the 2nd Vatican Council offers priests its teaching that cannot be treasured in vain.²³⁹ The Fathers of the Church and the Councils have always defined priesthood in the reference to Scripture and Tradition and taken the ancient icon of the vine and branches to show the link between the Lord and the ‘apostolic college’ and the priesthood.

²³⁸ ZENIT, *Priestly Identity: Crisis and Renewal*. March 19, 2008. <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/priestly-identity-crisis-and-renewal-9241> (accessed December 11, 2020).

²³⁹ Cf. Paul VI. *Priestly Identity Today: Address of Paul VI to the Clergy of the Rome Diocese*. (February 20, 1971). <http://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2000-10/11-999999/Adrs71.html> (accessed December 7, 2020).

Priests, just like the first disciples, through listening and obedience to Christ, shape their lives and make them like his; their identity is based on that of Christ the High Priest. We can say “simply by taking on features of the master, the disciple becomes capable of writing with his life the riches of the Gospel.”²⁴⁰ Priestly identity does not ignore the human community in which the priest lives.

1.1 Biblical Foundation

In the Old Testament, Moses, inspired by God, set up the priesthood. The authority and dignity of the Old Testament priesthood is seen as a preparatory priesthood for that of the New Testament. In the book of Exodus, the Israelites are called a chosen people, a kingdom of priests and a holy nation (Ex 19:6). The Old Testament presents us with a ministerial priesthood with a priestly identity. Among the Israelites there was a group of people set apart to perform rituals and sacrifices (Ex 19:22). There were two kinds of priesthood: the priesthood of the people and that of those chosen for a special ministry.

Just as Aaron was the only high priest (Ex 30:30), Christ is the unique high priest of his new people (Heb 3:1). Christ the high priest, the Letter to the Hebrews tells us, was taken from the midst of humanity (Heb 5: 1-5). Christ later established a kingdom of priests called to be witnesses (1 Pt 3:15). These witnesses were called disciples and lived together regardless of their background and their race. The institution of a ministerial priesthood and its identity were established by Christ himself. Jesus transferred his power for the forgiveness of sins to his disciples (Jn. 20:20) just as in the Old Testament the priest offered a sacrifice to atone for the sins of those who confessed (Lev. 5: 5-6). Christ gave the duty to offer sacrifice for sin to his disciples as recorded in the Gospel of Luke (Lk 22:19). The power and command to exercise it is

²⁴⁰ XXVII, Salesians of Don Bosco General Chapter. “*Witnesses to the radical approach of the gospel*” *Work Temperance*. (Rome: Edizione extra commerciale, 2014), 18.

evident in other passages of the New Testament which reveal the apostles to be priests. Jesus gave them their identity and mission. In the New Testament we discover that Christians are called a 'royal priesthood' (1 Pt 2:9).

St. Paul in a few words underlines the "greatness, dignity and duty of a priest: *Sic nos existimet homo ut ministros Christi et dispensatores mysteriorum Dei* – "Let a man so account of us as the ministers of Christ and dispensers of the mysteries of God."²⁴¹

In the early Church, there seems to have been no distinction between the laity or clergy. The word priest (Gk. *hiereus*) was applied to Christ or to the people of God, the Christian community, a holy priesthood.²⁴² The early Church recognized bishops, the successors of the apostles, as "high priests". These two types of the priesthood are visible in the Old Testament and the New Testament.²⁴³

1.2 The Fathers of the Church

The Church Fathers believed that Christ acts in his priests. Christ is the source of grace for the priest. The priests' duty to preach and administer sacraments gives priests their identity. The personal qualities of the priest do not impact on his priestly identity. St. Augustine reminds the faithful not to pay attention to the qualities of their priests because Christ himself acts in them.²⁴⁴ St. Irenaeus and St. Augustine wrote about priesthood as a kind of pedagogy through

²⁴¹ Pius XI, "Foundation of Prayer for Priests." *Foundationforpriests.org*. 2013-2020. http://www.vatican.va/content/pius-xi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-xi_enc_19351220_ad-catholici-sacerdotii.html (accessed December 14, 2020), 11 -12.

²⁴² Cf. Gaillardetz Richard R., Clifford Catherine E., *Keys to the Council: Introducing the Teaching of Vatican II* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 2012), 77.

²⁴³ Cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Revised Edition (Kenya: Pauline Publication Africa, 2018), § 1586.

²⁴⁴ Cf. Brian, ed., *Practical Apologetics*, July 8, 2013, <https://practicalapologetics.blogspot.com/p/255-pages-of-early-church-fathers.html> (accessed December 27, 2020).

which we are schooled in a paschal pattern, and presented with the priestly shape of the Christian life.”²⁴⁵ Priestly identity according St. Augustine is realized in the ministry of the priest.

A chaste life and celibacy have always been essential elements of priestly identity in the Church. Bishops, priests, and deacons were expected to be chaste in the living out of their vocation. As the Church grew in numbers, the requirement for the clergy to live a celibate life came in. For example, the synod of Elvira decided to issue instructions for bishops, priests, and deacons concerning the celibate life.²⁴⁶ The question today is: “Can we consider celibacy as an element of priestly identity?” St. Jerome in one of his letters makes reference to the traditions that have been handed down to us by the apostles from the Old Testament. The occupation of the bishops, priests, and deacons in the church is similar to that of Aaron, his sons, and the Levites in the Temple.²⁴⁷

1.3 The Councils of the Church

The early councils without doubt defined priestly identity in the light of the life and teaching of Christ. Even celibate life which is seen as an element of priestly identity today developed gradually by following the Gospel for various reasons (Matt 19: 10-12).

The Council of Trent taught that our Lord Jesus Christ instituted the priesthood of the New Testament through “His death on the altar of the cross” to “accomplish eternal redemption.” This priesthood continues through the successors of the Apostles in the commemoration of the last supper. Christ continues to offer himself through the ministerial priesthood in a different manner.²⁴⁸ According to the Council of Trent, priesthood exists in an ecclesiastical ministry that

²⁴⁵ Gaillardetz and Clifford, *Keys to the Council: Introducing the Teaching of Vatican II*, 84.

²⁴⁶ Cf. Synod of Elvira (Spain: 300 - 303) §119 in *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals*, Peter Hunermann, Robert Fastiggi, and Anne Englund Nash, eds. (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 49.

²⁴⁷ Cf. Brian, ed. *Practical Apologetics*.

²⁴⁸ Cf. Gaillardetz and Clifford, 13-15.

Jesus Christ created. Priesthood is bound to the Eucharist. It is in the Eucharist that the basis of priestly identity is provided.²⁴⁹

The universal priesthood as defined by the Second Vatican Council involves the laity who are directly active in the secular world, whereas ministerial priesthood in the light of the Council is a special calling as affirmed by the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*. It is also a call to serve all the baptized. Priests are called to be nourished and inspired by the word of God.²⁵⁰ The clear identity of the priest is only realized fully and appreciated by studying and finding within the ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council an understanding of the ministry and duties of evangelization of the priest. The Second Vatican Council documents *Christus Dominus*, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* and *Perfectae Caritatis* provide us with a rich understanding of the image of the priest in our time.

2. Priesthood as identity

Priesthood is a reality for the whole Church for we are a “priestly people” as the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches. As baptized people we, the faithful, share in the priesthood of Christ. This is the common priesthood. This is an identity of the children of God who belong to the one body of Christ. Different from the “common priesthood of the faithful” is the ministerial priesthood which has its own unique identity. This ministerial priesthood has a different essence from the common priesthood. It bestows sacred power for the service of the faithful. This gives it an identity proper to its ministry. The minister involved in his service

²⁴⁹ Cf. Doctrine and Canons on the *Sacrament of Orders* (July 15, 1563) §1764 - 1778 in *Compendium of Creeds, Definitions, and Declarations on Matters of Faith and Morals* ed. Peter Hunermann, Robert Fastiggi, and Anne Englund Nash (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2012), 422-424.

²⁵⁰ Cf. Gaillardetz and Clifford, 83.

participates in teaching (*munus docendi*), divine worship (*munus liturgicum*) and pastoral governance (*munus regendi*).²⁵¹

The ‘ministerial priesthood’ serves the ‘priesthood of the faithful’ as Cardinal Avery Dulles explained. Understanding the balance between the two priesthoods, helps us to define the identity of the ministerial priesthood and to see priesthood as an identity in itself. Pope John Paul II reminded priests telling them “not to be afraid to be who they are, not to hide the identity as a servant set aside by Christ and the Church to stand ‘in persona Christi’.”²⁵²

The answer of Maximilian Kolbe in Auschwitz, ‘I am a Catholic Priest’ is an affirmation of all that he did, giving up his life that another could live. Maximilian Kolbe’s identity as a priest remains an example even in the difficult circumstances of today. A Catholic priest has an identity regardless of when and where he is. The phrase ‘I am a Catholic priest’ said with gratefulness, and humility, confidently and without exaggerations is a communication of any priest’s unique identity today.²⁵³

3. Essential Characteristics of priestly identity

Priestly identity has two essential characteristics. The first is responding to the call by a “yes” and the second living this “yes” in fidelity. Priests participate in the priesthood of Christ not only as baptized but from the center of their being. This priesthood is a priesthood forever, just as the Bible describes the priesthood of Melchizedek. As Pope St John Paul II, expressed it: the “yes” is “yes” forever. After accepting the call to be a priest, it has to be lived in fidelity. A priest who acts “in persona Christi” is called to be faithful to his call just as Jesus remained faithful to the Father.

²⁵¹ CCC, 1591-1593.

²⁵² ZENIT, *Priestly Identity: Crisis and Renewal*. March 19, 2008.
<https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/priestly-identity-crisis-and-renewal-9241> (accessed December 11, 2020).

²⁵³ Timothy Dolan, *Priestly Role and Identity*. *Worldpriest.com*. 2000.
<https://www.worldpriest.com/priestly-role-identity/> (accessed December 7, 2020).

Despite the challenges, priestly identity is facing within and outside the Church today, no matter how many priests fail to live up to their identity and ministry, the priesthood retains that eternal dimension. Once a priest says “yes”, he is a priest forever according to his commitment to the high priest, Jesus Christ and the Church. The priesthood of Christ has two great characteristics, they are the ‘yes’ and ‘fidelity’. Sometimes priests experience dryness, confusion, doubt, fatigue, frustration, loneliness, and anger – and that is when fidelity is tested and be proved. The Church, may at times seem crippled and useless, a drain on energy; our Master, Jesus, may occasionally seem distant, aloof, and absent; it is then that “fidelity” is tested.

The priesthood is a call by means of which Christ loves the person called. The priestly identity cannot be reduced to mere external circumstances. It is “an identity that is entered in heaven” as Cardinal Krol has expressed it.²⁵⁴ Saying “yes”, for the priest involves believing in Christ, the high priest, and his teaching. Trusting in God’s word is the best way to live a true priestly identity today. Priests continue living their identity by continuing to say “yes”, and by being in a close relationship with God. This relationship requires being faithful.

4. Practical Ways of Living Priestly Identity Today

In the upcoming paragraphs the practical ways of living priestly identity today are highlighted.

4.1 Features of the Priestly life and Identity

The life of a priest today has certain features as described in the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*. These features reflect the identity of a priest of today. Learning a life of familiarity and in continuous company with the Father through His Son, Jesus Christ, in the

²⁵⁴ John Krol, *The Dimensions of Priesthood* (USA: Daughters of St. Paul, 1973), 32.

Holy Spirit is an important aspect of priestly life and identity. This leads a priest to come to Christ repeatedly in the intimate sharing in prayer. The *Ratio* states that a priest should always keep the word of God by his side in Sacred Scripture, with that affection rooted in faith, and the readiness to share it with others.²⁵⁵ A priest should cultivate an attitude of willingness and happiness in visitations and adoration of Christ who exist sacramentally in the Eucharist. Another advisable aspect is having a deep love for the Virgin Mary, the Mother of Christ, who in a special way was associated with his work of the redemption. To live and appreciate his identity, the priest should willingly consult the documents of sacred Tradition, the Fathers of the Church, and the life of the saints. The priest “must know how to examine and judge himself, his conscience and his motives, with honesty and sincerity.”²⁵⁶

4.2 Principles for Reclaiming Priestly Character

Fr. David Toups talks about six principles necessary to renew the priesthood and the priestly identity. He starts with the permanent character of the priesthood. This character reminds the priest of his continuous relationship with Christ and the Church through his ordination. When a priest is ordained, he acquires a permanent ‘ontological character’ which will colour his preparations to become a pastor, his self-understanding about the Church, and his spiritual role as father to the faithful.

Secondly, the priest acts ‘*in persona Christi*’ and he knows that sacramental efficacy is ‘*ex opere operato*’. With this in mind, the sacerdotal character of the priest continues to grow and he strives to be holy. Another important principle is that priest knows that he does everything ‘*in persona Ecclesiae*’. In this way, the priest keeps the promises he made during his ordination for the good of the Church. This is a challenge to some priests in the contemporary

²⁵⁵ Cf. Congregation for the Clergy, *The Gift of the Priestly Vocation: Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (Nairobi: Pauline Publication Africa, 2017).

²⁵⁶ John Krol, *The Dimensions of Priesthood*, 89.

world. Some priests might not feel the necessity of remaining faithful to some of the devotional practices, for example, praying Liturgy of the Hours. In the same way, the priest should take up the stewardship of truth in the Church. Regaining his identity requires the priest to be proud of who he is, and to be perceived as a priest who is able, as a sign and symbol, to point to Christ.

Priestly presence reflects a rich identity. This fourth principle shows the priestly hand in everything he does. The priest continues to be a preacher, shepherd, healer of God's people, and a spiritual father. Also, a priest carries out his ministry, cautious to avoid any trap of forgetting his identity, ministry, and the people entrusted to his care. To overcome this challenge prayer, meditation, and the desire for God are vital. It helps the priest to be supernaturally sensitive.

The last principle is ongoing formation. Ongoing formation helps the priest to appreciate his priesthood and his identity.²⁵⁷ It helps him to be a priest and to act as a priest, as Pope John Paul II wrote, "in the Spirit and style of Jesus the good shepherd."²⁵⁸

5. Crisis of the Priestly Identity in today's Society

5.1 Is priestly identity unauthentic today?

Priestly identity today is facing challenges; it is subjected to misleading analysis that declares it unauthentic. The fact is that priestly identity is not only subjected to these analyses but is certainly in crisis. We can identify three crises in the priesthood: the identity crisis, the visibility crisis, and the authenticity crisis. These challenges raise the question of the authenticity of priestly identity today. Even some priests seem to be struggling to understand their own identity due to these challenges and crises.

²⁵⁷ ZENIT. *Priestly Identity: Crisis and Renewal*.

²⁵⁸ John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* (March 15, 1992) http://www.vatican.va/content/john-paul-ii/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_jp-ii_exh_25031992_pastores-dabo-vobis.html (accessed December 7, 2020), 7.

5.2 Clericalism and Priestliness

Clericalism is central to the debate about the priesthood. It is a vice that does not focus on service but privileges. Clericalism remains at the level of power rather than service. The concern of the priest who embraces clericalism is focused more on distinguished appearance than the care for the souls. What clericalism shows is a “lack of confidence in self, God, and vocation that one must prop up one’s weak identity with externals and pettiness.”²⁵⁹ Priestliness is a virtue. It does not include arrogance but rather gratefulness, humility, and confidence in priestly identity by one who is ready to serve not to be served.

5.3 Identity crisis

Today if the interior life of a priest is not cared for, there is a danger of his hiding the truth of his priestly identity which should be a pillar of his ministry. Studies have revealed that there is confusion among many religious and clergy regarding the understanding of the “exact nature of the ontological character of the priesthood.”²⁶⁰ This problem increases the identity crisis. Some priests and the religious seem not to be convinced about who they are. According to Weigel George after the second Vatican council, “the crisis of priestly identity and the breakdown of clerical discipline that accompanied it has come at a very steep price.”²⁶¹

According to St. Thomas Aquinas, ‘doing follows being’, ‘*Agere sequitur esse.*’ Understanding priestly identity helps foster the priestly vocation. In contemporary society “marked by culture, religious and ethnic pluralism, relativism, indifferentism, irenism, and syncretism”,²⁶² it appears some of the priests and Catholics have become used to a priesthood

²⁵⁹ Timothy Dolan, Priestly Role and Identity. Worldpriest.com. 2000.
<https://www.worldpriest.com/priestly-role-identity/> (accessed on July 12, 2020).

²⁶⁰ Ibid.

²⁶¹ George Weigel, *The Courage to be Catholic* (New York: Basic Books, 2002), 28.

²⁶² Timothy Dolan, Priestly Role and Identity. Worldpriest.com. 2000.
<https://www.worldpriest.com/priestly-role-identity/> (accessed on July 12, 2020).

that does not give a clear identity, reducing priesthood to a mere vocation as understood in the secular world.

5.4 Visibility crisis

Some priests and religious are not comfortable with how they look in front of others. Society has a different culture of appearances, which encourages many religious and the clergy to fit in like anyone else, with the danger of forgetting that the priest is set apart in the world. There is a need to step beyond the fear of being different, politically correct, of being recognized as a priest, and being called a priest. Pope John Paul II encouraged priests not to be afraid to be who they are. The priest “should not be embarrassed to wear the Roman collar and be called ‘father’, for this is not clericalism, but he is to accept it in charity and humility as a true disciple of Jesus Christ.”²⁶³

5.5 Authentic crisis

The priesthood requires an ongoing formation. This is a process in which maturity takes place. In this process, the ontology of priesthood catches up with psychology and the priest slowly comes to his full identity. The challenge today is testifying in society through a life of consistency to a proper priestly identity based on Christian doctrine as it has been lived and taught by the saints.

6. Resuming Dialogue with the Contemporary World

Dialogue with the contemporary world to define priestly identity means that the priest must not give up what he lives for and what he believes. It is not changing what we believe in but to be priests belonging to a world that is evolving. Priests are part of the world they belong to, though at the same time are set apart from the same world. They are set apart to live with and

²⁶³ Timothy Dolan, Priestly Role and Identity, <https://www.worldpriest.com/priestly-role-identity/> (accessed on July 12, 2020).

be like Christ who is the minister of salvation. “The priest is, indeed, both by vocation and divine commission, the chief apostle and tireless furtherer of the Christian education of the faith. In the name of God, the priest blesses Christian marriage and defends it.”²⁶⁴

On the fiftieth anniversary of his priesthood, Pope John Paul II wrote: “Certainly the priest, together with the Church, is part of the times in which he lives; he needs to be attentive and sympathetic, but also critical and watchful, concerning historical developments.”²⁶⁵ The Pope continued: ‘the priest, committed as he is to his necessary pastoral renewal, should at the same time have no fear of being ‘behind the times’ because the human ‘today’ of every priest is included in the ‘today’ of Christ the Redeemer,...For every priest, in every age, the greatest task is to discover each day to his own priestly ‘today’ in the today of Christ.”²⁶⁶ Dialogue is only possible if the priest lives as a priest of today, in Christ’s ‘today’.

7. Regaining a Firm and Confident Awareness of Vocation and Priestly Identity

Priestly identity is a matter of interest in the contemporary world among the laity, seminarians, and the clergy themselves. Pope Paul VI saw the topic of the identity of the priest as an issue to comment on in his address to the clergy. When there is an uncertainty “towards a definition of the future”, the Pope said, “nothing is more necessary for our clergy right now than that they regain a firm and confident awareness of their vocation.”²⁶⁷ This would be already a step forward towards greater awareness.

²⁶⁴ Timothy Dolan, Priestly Role and Identity, <https://www.worldpriest.com/priestly-role-identity/> (accessed July 12, 2020).

²⁶⁵ John Paul II, *Gift and Ministry* (Nairobi: Pauline Publication Africa, 1996), 99.

²⁶⁶ John Paul II, *Gift and Ministry*, 99.

²⁶⁷ Paul VI, *Priestly Identity Today: Address of Paul VI to the Clergy of the Rome Diocese*. February 20, 1971. <http://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2000-10/11-999999/Adrs71.html> (accessed December 7, 2020).

A priest must “spend time every day acknowledging his priestly identity, rejoicing in it, nourishing it, thanking God for it.”²⁶⁸ Then what a priest does will be all the more effective and rewarding, because it flows from who he is.”²⁶⁹ Pope Paul VI told newly ordained priests that those priests with a clear idea of how they are supposed to be and the responsibility they should have to Christ and the people, realize their great responsibility and accept the challenges.²⁷⁰

The Second Vatican Council clearly distinguished between universal priesthood and ministerial priesthood and this can lead to a renewal of the priesthood and priestly identity. Pope St John Paul II in his apostolic exaltation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, explored priestly identity crisis and the life of a priest. The exploration of this topic allows the priest as a man to regain his identity and confidence in his vocation.

8. Confronting Today’s World and Rediscovering the Priestly Identity

8.1 A Place to find Priestly Identity today

Priestly identity today is sought in different places and in ways that are far from the ‘house of faith’. So many uncertain theological understandings of the priesthood and its identity, have been a source of the challenges affecting the identity of the priest. Various contemporary philosophies are used to challenge the role of the priest. Humanism for example has an assumption that “the priest is above all a man, a whole man, like all others.”²⁷¹ The definition of the priestly identity cannot be rediscovered elsewhere but in the idea of Christ.

²⁶⁸ Paul VI, Priestly Identity Today: Address of Paul VI to the Clergy of the Rome Diocese. February 20, 1971. <http://www.clerus.org/clerus/dati/2000-10/11-999999/Adrs71.html> (accessed December 7, 2020).

²⁶⁹ Timothy Dolan, Priestly Role and Identity, <https://www.worldpriest.com/priestly-role-identity/> (accessed on July 12, 2020).

²⁷⁰ John Krol, *The Dimensions of Priesthood*, 35.

²⁷¹ Ibid.

8.2 Spirituality

There is a need to build up a clear and honest priestly identity today. The priest today needs to be faithful to his prayer as defined by the Church, to be faithful to daily mental prayer, to regular visits to the Blessed Sacrament, to entrust himself to the help of the Blessed Virgin Mary in the rosary, and to make a daily examination of conscience. A priestly spirituality will help the priest to go within himself and adapt to the signs of times. To confront the world with a firm identity also requires a connection with the world. The priest is to reflect, express, and challenge himself to a life of holiness that other people are asked to live and have lived in and outside the Church. The saints are examples of those who have achieved a true identity.

8.3 Relationships

Relationships are important in every person's life. To maintain a true identity requires healthy relationships. A priest belongs to a family, to brothers in the community, to friends and the people around him. Living fraternal life, sharing a communal prayer life and reciprocal friendships with his fellow priests and his Bishop are essential practices for rediscovering priestly identity in the world of today. These healthy relationships inspire a life of honesty and joy.

8.4 Effectivity

Effectiveness in the mission as a priest calls for a deep understanding of priestly identity in this complex world. This can be done through personal commitment to the Gospel and its evangelical power. Loss of priestly identity affects evangelization. "The evangelization of the contemporary world can only happen with the rediscovery of the personal, social and cultural identity of the Christians."²⁷² To confront the world today priests, as well as the religious, must

²⁷² Congregation for the Clergy, *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community* (August 4, 2002) § 29, "vatican documents" in www.vatican.documents.

live a life with an identity that awakens the world of today. As Pope Francis has said, living one's identity faithfully is have a reason to be joyful.²⁷³

Conclusion

Priestly identity is an identity that does not change because of time and culture, even though it does not ignore the signs of times and the challenges contemporary culture. Misinterpretation and lack of understanding of the Second Vatican Council have affected the way of looking at the identity of the priest. But that identity continues to be expressed in the celebration of Mass and in a priestly lifestyle and the priest's way of associating with others. Priestly identity today is still a concern. This is why Pope John Paul II devoted himself to fostering the positive understanding of the priestly vocation and the identity of the priest. As Howard Gray has written, "There is no dominant theology on priesthood in the Church. Today's priestly identity is the same identity that is rooted in Christ."²⁷⁴

http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_20020804_istruzione-presbitero_en.html (accessed December 15, 2020).

²⁷³ Francis, *Rejoice* (Vatican: Congregation for Institute of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, 2014).

²⁷⁴ Cf. Howard J Gray, "Priestly Ministry: A Search for Identity and Purpose," in *The Catholic Church in the Twentieth Century*, John Deedy, ed. (USA: The Liturgical Pree, 2000), 21-36.

**The Ideal Image of a Priest
as Traced in the Scripture and Church Tradition**
Akinyele Sunday Cyril

Introduction

To every actuality or reality, there is an existence, and to this existence there is an essence which defines the existential qualities of the reality. Like an egg, thin albumen, thick albumen, chalaza, yolk, vitelline membrane, the shell, the germinal disc, air cell and the cubacula come together as the one little egg we eat. Each component is a reality of its own but is part of the larger egg which in turn gives proteins, lipids, carbohydrates and minerals to the body when it is consumed; it may also develop to become a chick if allowed to hatch.

The Catholic priesthood is a complete reality conferred by the sacrament of holy orders which has three degrees: the diaconate, priesthood and the episcopal order, all based on the Scriptures, through the Fathers of the Church and down to our present age and time. Their function and responsibility in the world, designed by God is to effect the continuity of the redemptive work of God.

The priestly life is a divine vocation. Therefore, the scriptures will be a very good starting point for defining the goal of this essay. Evidence from the two Testaments, the views of the Fathers will be considered and how these views were later developed at the Councils of Trent and Vatican I and II and the later Papal teachings. The sacramental status of the priestly office and its administrative demands will also be explored. This will help us to understand the nature of the priestly vocation as outlined by Jean Galot. All this will be considered in the context of the priesthood in a changing world, and some of the factors militating against priesthood will be

discussed. We shall conclude with a call to return to the source of every priestly vocation – Christ.

2. Clarifications of Terms

The hierarchical structure created by the sacrament of Holy Orders, namely, the Diaconate, the Priesthood and the Episcopate has a distinct and unique character. The three degrees differ from one another. But for the sake of this work, I shall take the priesthood to include the entirety of the Holy Orders. A working definition of the priesthood is therefore essential to help guide us through this work.

Although there are various definitions of the Catholic Priesthood provided by various theologians, St. Augustine's understanding of a priest best suits the purpose of this work. Augustine sees the priest as a sinner who journeys through life trying hard to learn the way of righteousness through the grace of God (actual, sanctifying, habitual and sacramental). For him, this is why there is nothing a priest can do that diminishes the efficacy of his office as a priest when he is acting on behalf of the Church in the celebration of the sacraments. For Augustine, the idea of sin, sinner and sanctification is very important in understanding the whole concept of the Catholic priesthood, because the Catholic priesthood is in a sense the fulfilment of the Old Testament priesthood. We shall now turn our attention briefly to the Sacred Scriptures to lay bare the chain of development in the idea of priesthood.

3. Sacred Scriptures and the Priesthood

Our journey through the Sacred Scriptures will be divided into two periods: the Old and the new Testaments. After the fall of man, God in his infinite mercy planned to reunite man to himself and as an essential part of his plans, he chose those who would become the stock from which a new race would emerge, but the Chosen People never stayed true to their calling, and

from the very beginning they were always going astray. Hence there was the need for a constant re-conversion whenever they strayed from what they were called to be. The need for someone who would make sacrifices for repentance became an essential for the Chosen People, and this led to the establishment of the priesthood as recorded in Ex. 24 (Moses and Aaron), all this in view of preserving covenantal relationship. Chief amongst the functions of a priest was to help the people avert the wrath of God which they often incurred through their sin and this was achieved by making appropriate sacrifices to God. Leviticus 8-10 describes the appointment of the first priests following the instruction of God to Moses. This underlines the fact that the Catholic priesthood is also the initiative of a God who longs for the perfect unity of his people with Himself. The Old Testament priesthood played the role of promise and prefiguration.²⁷⁵

Sebastian Kizhakkeyil divided the Old Testament priesthood into three different periods: the desert period, the tribal period and the monarchical period. Although these three periods differ, the idea of sacrifices was never distant from them. Though sacrifice was an essential part of the duty of a Jewish priest, he also bestowed the blessing of God on his Chosen People. This is very important in the understanding of the dual function of every priest,²⁷⁶ the link between man and God, and God and man (Mal 2:6-19). One unique reality of the Jewish Priesthood was the reoccurrence of the sacrificial duty of every priest. This is not the case in the New Testament because the sacrifice of Jesus in the New Testament was offered once and for all, though there will be a call for re-enactment.

None of the gospels refers to Jesus as a priest (though his prayer in the fourth gospel is referred to as the high priestly prayer by theologians). In Judaism only the Levites enjoyed such

²⁷⁵ Jean Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2005), 21.

²⁷⁶ Reference in the later discussion of this essay on the celebration of the Sacraments.

a privilege and Jesus was clearly not from this tribe. He was a layman.²⁷⁷ But the Letter to the Hebrews describes the activity of Jesus in relation to that of the eternal high priest²⁷⁸ as one who enters the “Devir” once and for all with his own blood (Heb 3-10). This recalls the sacrificial practices of the Chosen People of the Old Testament through which the wrath of God was often pacified. Jesus then becomes the replacement for the Jewish sacrifice, only that his sacrifice is more pristine, complete and sublime. In the one sacrifice of Jesus as described by the author of the Letter to the Hebrews, the three Old Testament understandings of priesthood are mentioned: the era of prophets, that of the kings and that of the priests. In Jesus therefore are the three means in which God has been communicating his mercy, love and direction to his chosen people. This is why his sacrifice is said to be one complete and final sacrifice which does not need repetition. In this way Jesus becomes the one perfect priest. It is in this sense that the Catholic Priesthood is understood. All baptised Christians share in the priesthood of Christ, namely, the common priesthood of all the faithful (1 Pet 2:9 and Rev 1:6) but they do not share in the ministerial priesthood that leads the divine worship of the Christian community.²⁷⁹

Jesus proclaimed the kingdom, what came into being after Pentecost was the Church.²⁸⁰ This is the very key to understanding the New Testament priesthood. With the coming of the Spirit, the disciples began to see themselves as separate and different from Judaism²⁸¹ and again the institution of the Eucharist contributed immensely to this change of understanding. The New Testament priesthood was born out of obedience to the instruction of Jesus that the Eucharist should be done in memorial of him. This is why the New Testament priesthood is characterised more by sacrificial thanksgiving for the gift of the life and death of Jesus than by averting the

²⁷⁷ Sebastian Kizhakkeyil, *The Priest* (Bangalore: Asian Trading Corporation Publication, 2010), 332.

²⁷⁸ Kizhakkeyil, *The Priest*, 333.

²⁷⁹ Kizhakkeyil, *The Priest*, 333.

²⁸⁰ Joseph Ratzinger, *Called to Communion* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1996), 21.

²⁸¹ Kizhakkeyil, *The Priest*, 334.

wrath of God which is the main pre-occupation of the Old Testament priesthood. The New Testament priesthood flows from the sacrifice of Jesus and takes its meaning in that same sacrifice: taken out of this milieu, the New Testament priesthood becomes a shadow of itself.²⁸² When defining the Christian priesthood, we should not start with just a general notion of the priesthood, whether derived from sociology or furnished by the history of religions, and then go on to show how this notion is verified in the Church. Nor can we infer from the priesthood of the Old Testament what the priesthood of the new covenant is likely to be. It is in Christ himself that we must try to discern the traits of the new and definitive priesthood.²⁸³ This is exactly what the Fathers of the Church did in their bid to define and explain the Catholic priesthood, and it is to them that we shall now turn our attention.

4. The Age of the Fathers Down to the Scholastic Era

The period of the ante-Nicene Church was of more a time of defining the terminology of Order, how it ought to be celebrated, the grace embedded in this sacrament and even if it could be called a sacrament, who can celebrate the Order and who can be admitted to the Order were the major concern of the Church Fathers. Things began to take a definite turn with the post Nicene era, whence attention was turned to the office of those in Holy Orders. That is, their duties and responsibilities, as proper to their status within the Church. Still, we have greater expectation which seemed not to have been met with these two periods, though in our later discussion when we take up the idea of priesthood in the changing world, we shall still turn to these holy men of God for guidance and to sip from their spiritual wells, their purview of who a priest should be in the world. For now, we shall look up to the medieval epoch for a better or should I say a detailed identity of the priesthood.

²⁸² Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 27-32.

²⁸³ Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 23.

The fact that Jesus was never called explicitly a priest in the New Testament and that Jesus himself never referred to any form of priesthood,²⁸⁴ makes the title “priest” a little complicated for the people of the new dispensation, especially in terms of language as Galot puts it. This is coupled with the fact that some see Jesus as standing aloof the idea of priesthood or any cultic institution which seems to handicap the proper reform and growth of the people of his time.²⁸⁵ But the absence of a particular terminology from the New Testament does not therefore mean the absence of the idea altogether. Jesus never referred to himself with the titles given to him by the later Christian Community.²⁸⁶ They gave these titles to Jesus according to the nature of his activities while he was still physically with them. This idea is during the scholastic period.

From the Augustinian formula of priesthood drawn up to combat the Donatists, things developed and the priesthood took a definite shape during the medieval period. It was during this period that the Church insisted that there must be a strong connection with the sacred functions of the priesthood and the life of the priest. The priesthood is now seen as having a human and divine dimension (in the sense of the sacred function which the priest carries out). Though the quality of the priest’s life is said not to affect the efficacy of the sacraments he celebrates, nevertheless, the priest must be holy so that he is more than a machine dispensing the sacraments. And the sole means of achieving this holiness is through the grace of the Eucharist which pours out the gift of God’s mercy on his chosen ones. The medieval theologians created a strong connection between the priesthood and the celebration of the sacraments, especially the Eucharist, and it is in this context that the Catholic priesthood must be understood. The Council

²⁸⁴ Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 31.

²⁸⁵ Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 17-18.

²⁸⁶ Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 32.

of Trent developed the understanding of the Catholic Priesthood, seeing the priesthood is a Sacrament within Sacraments.²⁸⁷

5. Council of Trent

For the Fathers of Trent, the priesthood of the New Testament was defined by the power of consecrating and offering the true body and blood of the Lord and of forgiving and retaining sins. The Council taught the principle that sacrifice and priesthood are by divine ordinance united.²⁸⁸ Trent states that the sole essence of the priesthood is found in the ability of the priest to celebrate the Eucharist and to forgive sins. These two sacraments nourish the faith of the chosen people of God and continually renew them through the mercy of God by means of the forgiveness of their sins, made possible by the sacrament of reconciliation. The Holy Eucharist and Reconciliation are the two hinges on which the essence of the priesthood turns; without them, the ministerial priesthood stands the risk of becoming the common priesthood. The Fathers of the Council refused to limit the priesthood to the preaching the word of God alone. This was basically in response to *Luther's sola scriptura*. The Council of Trent maintained that the Eucharist is so intimately connected to the Sacrament of Orders, that one cannot be understood without the other.²⁸⁹ To ensure the continuation of the Eucharist, Christ instituted the sacramental priesthood in the person of the apostles, and ensured that it left an indelible character of permanence on those who receive it.

The Catholic priesthood as the successor of the role of the Jewish high priest. Though the Catholic priesthood is based solely on Christ's priesthood, it shares some of its ancient characteristics: election, calling, divine affiliation, inheritance and glory. This makes the Catholic priesthood in some ways a fulfilment of the Old Testament Priesthood. "Election"

²⁸⁷ Aidan Nichols, *Holy Order* (Eugene: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2011), 76.

²⁸⁸ Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 129.

²⁸⁹ Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 129.

refers to the fact that every Catholic priest is selected from among his people to represent them before God and is appointed by the Church, having gone through a rigorous training. And a priest is “called” because God sanctifies this choice through the grace of ordination. Once ordained, the Catholic priest becomes an ‘alter Christus’, one who is ontologically affiliated to God so that he may bring God close to his people and the people closer to their God. The grace to do this abides in his life as a priest of God. Hence a Catholic priest is not only the fulfilment of the Old Testament priesthood, but the perfect image of what priesthood is all about; this makes the Catholic priesthood an order, and the order a sacrament in itself. This is a sure evidence for the inheritance awaiting every priest as a chosen instrument of God’s salvation to his people.

6. Vatican Council II and Various Papal Teachings

The Vatican II Fathers were concerned with the formation for the Catholic priesthood and with clarifying the way by which every priest could attain holiness. Their teaching focuses on the sanctity of the priest in the world of today and how a priest can carry out his responsibilities a world that keeps changing. This is why for the Council Fathers the seminary is a key place that needs a great deal of attention so that the quality of formation received by future priests is of the highest quality. They recommend a culture of prayer and spiritual reading as a way of nourishing the priest who wishes to build a strong connection with the divine and to remain relevant in the world while still not becoming a “worldly” man. Meditation is seen as the key to fostering a strong priestly character and the necessary virtues proper to the priestly life. All this can be achieved in the faithful service of the word and daily celebration of the Eucharist.

For the Council Fathers celibacy was considered as a necessary discipline for those aspiring to the Catholic priesthood because it would enable them to keep themselves free from

the cares of family and makes them totally dedicated to their responsibilities as chosen instruments of God in bringing God's salvation to the ends of the earth. For the Fathers of the Vatican II, on-going priestly formation was a "must" for every priest. A priest is not to stop learning. If a candidate's formation is given the adequate attention from the outset this will dispose him to accept the challenges ahead in his ministry. This was the conviction of the Council Fathers. Properly trained and supported a priest will be able to give himself to his priestly office while discharging his responsibilities, not simply as a duty but as a way of life and with the awareness that he is the visible Christ amongst the laity.

We now turn our attention to the identity of the priest, using the nature of the responsibilities expected of a priest.

7. Priestly Identity in Responsibilities

The Council of Trent developed a strong connection between sacrifice and priesthood, saying that "sacrifice and priesthood are by divine ordinance united."²⁹⁰ For the Council Fathers, sacrifice was an integral part of both the priestly function and identity, for it is through sacrifice that a priest is able to further the salvific mission of Christ handed over to the Church, especially the sacrifice of the Eucharist. But the Council Fathers refrained from drawing up a definition of the priesthood in terms of sacrificial function or equating the priesthood with the empowerment of consecrating the Eucharist.²⁹¹

Yves Congar, in relation to the definition of the function and responsibilities of a priest, held that mediation does not do justice to the concept of the function of a priest. He believed that if there was ever meditation, it is because it has been preceded by a sacrificial quality.²⁹² He was not the only theologian to buy into this notion; St Thomas Aquinas did the same in the *Summa*

²⁹⁰ Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 129.

²⁹¹ Ibid., 130.

²⁹² Ibid., 131.

when he stated that the office of the priesthood is to offer sacrifice, and St Augustine also linked the priesthood with the offering of sacrifice. For they both viewed the priesthood from the perspective of the actions of Jesus on the cross. The entire activity of Jesus is said to be sacrificial and this he extended to his bride the Church. It is carried on through the ministry of the priests in line with the mission of the Church which is to continue to spread salvation to the ends of the earth. This mission of establishing the kingdom of God lives in the Church under the auspices of the sacramental celebration of the Church. And this what we shall now turn our attention to.

8. Celebration of the Sacraments

The entire life of Christ can be sub-divided into the three missions through which he achieved his goal of saving humanity from eternal destruction; the priestly, the kingly and the prophetic. As a king, Jesus came to establish a new kingdom, a kingdom that will not be of flesh and blood but on the will of God (cf. John 1: 12-13). Jesus was always proclaiming a new kingdom, the kingdom of God, which eventually through the action of the Spirit, gave birth to the Church.²⁹³ The Kingdom of God has been established by the will of God. The expression, “the kingdom of God” does not mean some place or thing, but rather the present action of God.²⁹⁴ Hence, the continuous action of Christ who is truly God is the basis for this kingdom. The establishment of the kingdom therefore necessitates the action of Christ. If this is so, it will be proper to say that a priest who is an *Alter Christus*, that is, another Christ, continues the work of inaugurating God’s reign amongst men when he acts in the name of Christ. This is what happens each time a priest celebrates the sacrament of Baptism. He, like Christ, through his actions, establishes the Kingdom of God amongst men. This is why Baptism is essential for all

²⁹³ Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 21.

²⁹⁴ Ratzinger, *Called to Communion*, 22.

those who wish to belong to the Kingdom of God, for it is the very establishment of the Kingdom in the first place.

Jesus gave the strength needed to sustain the citizens of this kingdom, the gift of his very self. He says: “I am the living bread which came down from heaven; if anyone eats of this bread, he will live for ever; and the bread which I shall give for the life of the world is my flesh” (Jn 6:51). Here Jesus already summarises his goal; that he shall give his own flesh, his own life for the life of the world. This promise he fulfilled and this goal he achieved on the cross, a perfect sacrifice, the means of our salvation. This sacrifice is repeated daily as a re-enactment at the Eucharistic celebration in obedience to his injunction; “do this in memory of me”. This sacrifice points to the priestly office of Jesus, who offers himself as the perfect sacrifice that washes away our sins. From this single sacrifice that does not need to be repeated like that of the Old Testament priesthood, the cultic and priestly ministry of every priest flows. Each time he celebrates the Eucharist, the priest unites himself with Christ to become the gift offered and the one offering the gift as well. This unity according to Karl Rahner is an inner one which allows the priest to act within the Church in a cultic and prophetic manner and to feed the people with the word of God and the body of Christ. Ratzinger calls this act *Ablatio*. For him, this is the only way in which a priest daily becomes more like Christ and dead to this world of sin, a means which the priest constantly uses so as to become more like Christ. Hence, in the Eucharist a priest becomes with Christ the means of salvation for the entire world.

As a prophet, Jesus was always teaching the people the way of the Father, bringing them face to face with their sins and providing for them the ways of repentance. This teaching office of Christ is continued daily by the priest when he preaches. He too like Christ confronts the evil of his time and brings the people face to face with their sins and giving them the opportunity to

turn to the Lord in the sacrament of reconciliation in which every citizen of the kingdom encounters the mercy of God. This for theologians like Rahner is the existential quality of every priest. The breaking of the Word is very important in the ministry of a priest because through this medium the voice of Christ speaking against hypocrisy and injustice and other vices lingers on.

The other sacraments like that of the anointing of the sick show the care that is constantly given by the Church so that those who wait on the Lord may never get tired while they wait (cf. Is 40:41). And the sacraments of holy order and matrimony also continue the work of salvation.

Walter Kasper says that a priest should be a leader with special charisma that which will enable him to amalgamate all his functions into a reciprocal community service of charity. In other words, a priest should create a visible unity within the Church. From this standpoint, the administrative role of a priest is essential, and this is what we shall now be discussing.

9. Administrative Demands in Priesthood

Christopher Bellitto in his work, “The Ten Ways the Church has changed”, uses the term “administration” as an integral part of the “organization” of the Church, and places the priest as the vital part of this organization. To understand the concept of administrator in connection with the priesthood of the New Covenant, we can ask: What does administrator mean with regard to the priesthood? Who are “administrators”? Of what importance or are they?

Paul in his second letter to the Corinthians (2 Cor 4) spoke about the “administrators” of New Covenant. Here Paul was concerned with the kind of administration that shows or reveals Christ. He went on to speak of stewardship with regard to this kind of administration, the business of communicating God’s grace to the people. Hence those who do the preaching of the Word of God are called “administrators” in this sense for they work for the unity of the people of

God. And the importance of this is the orderliness of the house of God. But my interest is in another level of administration, that which Carlo Bertola calls the care towards the common wealth of the Church.²⁹⁵

In sense different from the Pauline's concept of stewards of the New Convent are the stewards of the temporary goods of the Church, what Cosmas Ojemen calls socio-economic and religious life of the Church.²⁹⁶ This points to the ability of the priest to direct and govern the ecclesiastical goods. The very nature of the priesthood means that the priest has to care for himself and the people of God entrusted to his care. This is the service of reciprocal charity towards himself and others. It enables the priest to make himself available not only spiritually within the world of the faithful to whom he has been called to serve but also physically, ministering to their needs and so becoming like them in every sense just as Christ became like us in all things apart from sin. The priest in this way stands at the fore front of the demand for justice and equity in the world.

The question of importance arises: How does a priest achieve all this in the world bearing in mind his own weakness and limitation as a priest? This question shall be addressed, when we begin to discuss the priest in the changing world.

10. Priesthood and the World

The priest is a man called out of this world but he is not meant to be of the world. The very fact of his calling shows him to be a sign of contradiction, living in the world but someone meant to transcend the world. How can a priest achieve this seeming herculean task?

²⁹⁵ Carlo Bertola, *I have Called you Friends* (Staten Island, New York: Pauline Publication, 1989), 34.

²⁹⁶ Cosmas Ojemen, *The Catholic Parish* (Benin City, Nigeria: Floreat System Publications), 26.

11. Priestly Way

So far, we have argued that the priest, though human, is called to be another Christ, following the call of the apostles in which the call of every priest finds its roots. So, the question of the priestly way of life corresponds to the way and manner in which the apostles were called to imitate Christ. The call of the apostles was not a call to a partial or incomplete task, for Jesus did not call them just to accept his teaching or simply to learn what they were taught, but to a unity of life that would make them become one with him in the total gift of themselves.²⁹⁷ Hence the way of life of any priest is that of total abandonment and surrender to the person of Jesus. This is because the call to the priesthood finds its meaning in the ontological change that every priest experiences at his ordination, when through grace he becomes another man, Jesus. This means that a priest does not live his own life, rather his life finds its meaning in living daily like Christ (just as Paul wrote: “it is now Christ who lives in me”). This is the spirituality of the priest; this is his way of life and his true vocation. This is the special way of life that Christ has called all priests to live. This way of life is not meant for everyone, but only for those who have the grace and strength to accept such way of life (Matt 19:12).

This priestly way seems to be a burden for some priests and a very hard doctrine to accept even amongst those who have embraced the priesthood. They want the priesthood but not the discipline of the way of life that goes with it. This have given rise to debates and assertions which we shall look at in our next point of consideration: factors militating the idealness of the priesthood.

²⁹⁷ Galot, *Theology of the Priesthood*, 220.

12. Factors Militating Against the Idealness of the Priesthood

The Church has provided significant help to curtail the factors militating against the ideal of the priesthood. In her wisdom over the years the Church, in her bid to curtail all influences, she has been waging war against those who challenge the perfect image of Christ has presented living the “evangelical counsels” as the answer. These counsels which attack the rearing heads of all those vices fighting against the ideal of the priesthood, are: Obedience, Poverty and Chastity. Their opposites are the vices of avarice, pride and lust. Some argue that a priest should be allowed to take part in politics. They maintain that since every priest is a philosopher and Plato opines that only philosophers are capable of ruling world in the way it should be ruled, a priest should be allowed to participate in politics, and be given the freedom to engage in secular occupations. This so that the priest won’t have to bow to any forces from outside. This will enable him to also be able to remedy some of the problems of the people he works for. A priest should also be giving the freedom to choose between celibacy or marriage and at the same time still be able to discharge his priestly ministry.

For that great American churchman, Bishop Fulton Sheen, the vow of chastity, more than anything else, curtails the vice of lust, while that of obedience checkmates the pride in the priest and the vow of poverty controls the avarice in the priest. For him, these three vices generate all the other vices. Hence it is important and proper that anyone who wishes to escape this world must continually fight these same vices. And as a priest called out of this world, these three vows are non-negotiable.

Sadly, so many persons and even some priests want to remain at the level of materialism which they enjoy spiritual dividends, this is not possible, for we have to as a priest continue to set our focus on Christ, who is the giver of the vocation and the origin.

Conclusion

Every priest who wishes to excel in this changing world, who wishes to stay relevant amongst the changing values and morals of this world, will always need to unite himself with Christ who is the source of the priesthood. We need to learn from Christ, how he lived his life even in the midst of opposition. He always stood for the right and spoke the truth; he gave himself completely for the mission which the Father had given him and he even gave his very life. Every priest must be ready to give himself completely like Christ. He must be ready to take the mission of Christ seriously and be ready to seal his mission with his life if necessary. He has to learn to stand up for what is right, even if his feelings are going to be hurt, and, if necessary, to make the sacrifice of his life. For this is his dignity and his one true responsibility. Every priest just like a river must stay true to its source and course, he must stay true to Christ in total self-effacing, self-giving and complete abandonment. Only then will there be priests be able to live a life with meaning and effect in the world those changes that are needed.

Priestly Identity as Envisioned in the 1983 Code of Canon Law

Seby Kidangan Ouseph

Introduction

“A correct and in-depth awareness of the nature and mission of the ministerial priesthood is the path which must be taken ... in order to emerge from the crisis of priestly identity” (*PDV* 11).²⁹⁸ These words of Pope John Paul II from his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo vobis*, promulgated almost three decades ago, are still relevant today, undoubtedly identify the crisis in priestly identity and indicate an adequate remedy for this crisis.

Priestly identity today is marred by clergy sexual abuse, clericalism, spiritual sloth (cf. *EG* 81-83),²⁹⁹ worldliness, misgovernance, lack of credibility, etc. This crisis can be confronted successfully only if priests have an extensive knowledge of the nature and mission of their ministerial priesthood. The identity crisis that priests face in this changing world is an invitation to them to reflect on their priestly identity. This will help priests and candidates to priesthood not to lose sight of the final objective of their priestly call. There is no Church without the Eucharist and no Eucharist without the priest. This highlights the paramount importance that the Church attaches to the formation of priests. During the years of their formation the candidates need to be well instructed regarding their priestly identity and what the ministerial priesthood entails.

²⁹⁸ Cf. Ioannes Paulus PP. II, Adhortatio Apostolica Post-Synodalis *Pastores dabo vobis*, De Sacerdotum formatione in aetatis nostrae rerum condicione, 25 martii 1992, in *AAS* 84/8 (1992): 674 (= *PDV*).

²⁹⁹ Cf. Franciscus PP., Adhortatio Apostolica *Evangelii gaudium*, De Evangelio Nuntiando nostra aetate, 24 novembris 2013, in *AAS* 105/12 (2013): 1019-1137 (= *EG*).

This article briefly outlines the priestly identity as envisaged in the 1983 Code of Canon Law. To achieve this, the study will look predominantly at the preaching, sanctifying, and governing role of the priests from a canonical and ecclesial perspective.

1. *Tria munera* of the Priests

Following the Roman Jurist Gaius, the 1917 Pio-benedictine Code took up a division based on the distinction between people, things, and actions. The 1983 Code of Canon Law, however, followed the division based essentially on a distinction between the *tria munera Christi*, the threefold office – prophetic, sanctifying and governing.³⁰⁰ They are the actions of Christ and subsequently the basis for the Church’s mission.³⁰¹ The ministerial priesthood is closely related to these threefold functions.

Priests are called and commissioned to fulfill the Church’s mission of governing, teaching and sanctifying. A priest, first and foremost, is a baptized male (cf. can. 1024 *CIC*/1983) who must enjoy requisite freedom (cf. can. 1026 *CIC*/1983). The Church teaches that it is absolutely wrong to coerce anyone to receive Holy Orders or to prevent someone who is canonically suitable from receiving the sacrament (cf. can. 1026 *CIC*/1983).

A priest is configured to Christ and therefore, whenever he exercises his ministerial priesthood, he acts *in persona Christi*. According to Fulton J. Sheen, “The priest does not belong to himself; he belongs to Christ.”³⁰² He is chosen among the People of God and ordained for the People of God. “The spiritual gift which priests received at their ordination prepared them not for

³⁰⁰ Cf. José Luis Illanes, *Introduction to cc. 747-833*, in *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, Ángel Marzoa – Jorge Miras – Rafael Rodríguez’Ocaña, eds., Vol. 3/1 (Montreal Canada: Wilson & Lafleur, 2004), 1.

³⁰¹ Cf. *Ibid.*

³⁰² Fulton J. Sheen, *Those Mysterious Priests* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2013), 235.

a sort of limited and narrow mission but for the widest possible and universal mission of salvation ‘even to the very ends of the earth’ (Acts 1:8)” (PO 10).³⁰³

The Pope and bishops are primarily responsible for the Church’s triple function. The priests and deacons participate in these *munera* to a lesser extent. These sacred ministers nourish the People of God by teaching, sanctifying and governing.³⁰⁴ It is a sharing in Christ’s mission who is a prophet, priest, and king.³⁰⁵

1.1. Priest as the Teacher of the Divine Word (*munus docendi*)

“De Ecclesiae munere docendi” is the title of the third book of the Code of Canon Law. In the 1917 Code the corresponding materials were contained in Part IV (*De magisterio ecclesiastico*) of the third book (*De rebus*).³⁰⁶ Therefore, the choice of the title of the third book of the 1983 Code discloses very vividly the juridical implications of the teaching function of the Church.

The mission of teaching the Christian faith is entrusted to the Church (cf. can. 747 §1 *CIC/1983*). The teaching office of the Church is a task as well as a responsibility of the whole Christian community since the Church is a community of members who participate in the common mission to which they are called to contribute effectively (cf. can. 208 *CIC/1983*).³⁰⁷ Moreover, it is also an ecclesial task to safeguard, expound at depth, and to teach faithfully Christian doctrine (cf. Can. 747 §1).

The teaching function of the Church is intimately related to the work of evangelization in which priests have a distinctive role to play. Priests who act *in Persona Christi Capitis* are

³⁰³ Cf. Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Decretum *Presbyterorum ordinis*, De presbyterorum ministerio et vita, 7 decembris 1965, in AAS 58/14 (1966): 991-1024 (= PO).

³⁰⁴ Cf. James A. Coriden, *An Introduction to Canon Law* (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 2004), 49.

³⁰⁵ Cf. Joseph T. Martín de Agar, *A Handbook on Canon Law*. Second Updated Edition (Montréal: Wilson & Lafleur Ltée, 2007), 154.

³⁰⁶ Cf. Carlos J. Errázuriz M., *Il “munus docendi Ecclesiae”: diritti e doveri dei fedeli* (Milano: Giuffrè Editore, 1999), 1-2.

³⁰⁷ Cf. José Luis Illanes, *Introduction to cc. 747-833*, 5.

responsible for the ministry of evangelization along with the bishops (cf. *LG* 10, 23 37; *AG* 39; *PO* 2, 12, 13; *EN* 68).³⁰⁸ They are ministers of essential salvific acts, transmitting the truth necessary for salvation, feeding the People of God, and leading them towards holiness (cf. *DMLP* 8; *PDV* 15).

In the conciliar decree on the ministry and life of priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, there is a harmonious blending between the priestly functions and the call of the priests to be evangelizers of the Gospel (cf. *PO* 4-5; *PDV* 24). The evangelizing presence of the priests is essential in building up the Church of Christ.³⁰⁹ The spiritual gift that they receive through their ordination prepares them for the universal mission of salvation (cf. *PO* 10). Can. 822 §1 outlines the duty of the sacred pastors to use the instruments of social communication in carrying out more effectively their pastoral mission. Priests have a special obligation towards the poor and the weak entrusted to their care, and their work of evangelization is considered to be a sign of messianic activity (cf. *PO* 6). They are to promote a missionary outreach that can help others to draw the courage in order to be witnesses of the Good News.³¹⁰

As the minister of evangelization and the teacher of Christian faith, *munus docendi* is the ministerial priority for a priest. The two chief means employed in the exercise of the ministry of the word are preaching and catechetical instruction. The “pride of place must always be given to

³⁰⁸ Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Constitutio Dogmatica *Lumen gentium*, De Ecclesia, 21 novembris 1964, in AAS 57/1 (1965): 5-75 (= *LG*). Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Decretum *Ad gentes*, De activitate missionali Ecclesiae, 7 decembris 1965, in AAS 58/14 (1966): 947-990 (= *AG*). Paulus PP. VI, Adhortatio Apostolica *Evangelii nuntiandi*, De Evangelizzazione in mundo huius temporis, 8 decembris 1975, in AAS 68/1 (1976): 5-76 (= *EN*). Congregation for the Clergy. *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Priests*, 11 February 2013 (Città del Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013) (= *DMLP*).

³⁰⁹ “The role of priests as evangelizers is not to preach their own wisdom but the word of God and to issue an urgent invitation to all people to conversion and holiness”. Giovanni Paolo II, Udienza generale *Nella Chiesa*, La missione evangelizzatrice dei presbiteri, 21 aprile 1993, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, 16/1 (1993): 938. Cf. Thomas J. McGovern, *Priestly Identity. A Study in the Theology of Priesthood* (Oregon: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2010), 193-195. Cf. Giovanni Paolo II, Discorso *Sono Particolarmente*, Ai partecipanti alla plenaria della Congregazione per il clero, 22 ottobre 1993, in *Insegnamenti di Giovanni Paolo II*, 16/1 (1993): 1086.

³¹⁰ Cf. George Augustin, *Celebrating Priesthood*, Foreword by Cardinal Walter Kasper (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2019), 78.

preaching and catechetical instruction” (Can. 761 CIC/1983).³¹¹ The following paragraphs will explore these two important means of fulfilling the teaching function of the priest.

1.1.1 Preaching the Gospel

The teaching function includes preaching the Gospel to people of all nations, which is an inherent duty and right of the Church (cf. can. 747 §1 CIC/1983). The Second Vatican Council placed upon the entire Christian faithful the noble duty to spread the divine message of salvation (cf. AA 3, can. 211 CIC/1983).³¹² This common responsibility is shouldered by every member of the Christian faithful according to their vocation and condition in the Church. “All Christ’s faithful have the obligation and the right to strive so that the divine message of salvation may more and more reach all people of all times and all places” (Can. 211 CIC/1983; can. 14 CCEO/1990).

The sacred ministers are invested with the duty to proclaim the Word of God. It is the “Primus munus” – foremost duty of priests (Can. 608 CCEO/1990). Can. 757 assigns the duty to preach the Gospel to priests as they are called to cooperate with their bishops.³¹³ The canon also stresses the specific duty of parish priests and others who have the care of souls. They fulfil these privileged responsibilities primarily through preaching, especially in the homily (cf. can. 767 CIC/1983). The *Directory for the Ministry and the Life of Priests* considers preaching as a

³¹¹ Joseph T. Martín de Agar, *A Handbook on Canon Law*. Second Updated Edition (Montréal: Wilson & Lafleur Ltée, 2007), 161.

³¹² Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, *Decretum Apostolicam Actuositatem*, De apostolatu laicorum, 18 novembris 1965, in AAS 58 (1966): 837-864 (= AA).

³¹³ Can. 757 addresses presbyters as “co-workers of the bishops” in proclaiming the Gospel. Moreover, this obligation especially binds pastors and others to whom the care of souls is entrusted. Likewise, this canon asserts the responsibility of deacons to serve the people of God in the ministry of the Word in communion with the bishop and his *presbyterium* (cf. LG 28-29).

preferred channel for the transmission of the faith and the evangelizing mission (cf. *DMLP* 64). This preaching is directly linked to the sacrament of Orders.³¹⁴

Can. 528 §1 *CIC/1983* stresses the obligation of the parish priest who is the minister of the word to ensure that the word is proclaimed in the parish (cf. *PO* 4). Since it is the right of the People of God to seek from their priests the Word of God and the sacraments (cf. cann. 213, 528 §2, 762 *CIC/1983*) priests are never to neglect this fundamental duty. “The priest owes it to God’s people, whose fundamental ‘right’ to receive the Word of God, the sacraments and the service of charity, the original and irreplaceable content of the priest’s own pastoral ministry, he is called to acknowledge and foster” (*PDV* 70).

Can. 248 endorses the need for sacred ministers to proclaim the Gospel effectively to the people of their time and in a fashion suited to the manner of the people’s thinking (cf. can. 347 *CCEO/1990*). Can. 771 gives a summary of the special or extraordinary situations in which preaching by the pastors of souls is recommended: “The Word of God is also proclaimed to those of the faithful who because of the condition of their life do not have sufficient common and ordinary pastoral care or lack it completely” (cf. *CD* 18; *EN* 52, 56; can. 192 §1 *CCEO/1990*).³¹⁵ The second paragraph of this canon reminds priests of the need to preach the Gospel to the non-believers living in their territory (cf. *LG* 16; *CD* 13; *AG* 10, 20; *EN* 55, 58; can. 192 §3 *CCEO/1990*).

³¹⁴ Cf. José A. Fuentes. *Commentary to Can. 764*, in *Exegetical Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, Ángel Marzoa – Jorge Miras – Rafael Rodríguez Ocaña, eds., Vol. 3/1 (Montreal Canada: Wilson & Lafleur, 2004), 82. The reason is strictly theological. There is an intimate relation between the Eucharist - of which priests are the proper ministers (cf. can. 900 §1) and deacons in as much as they are ministers of the holy communion (cf. can. 910 §1) – and the preaching. Moreover, Eucharist appears as the source and summit of all evangelical preaching (cf. *PO* 5). Cf. CHIAPPETTA, *Il Codice di Diritto Canonico*, Vol. 2, 19. The priests entrusted with the pastoral care have this faculty by the law itself. Cf. WOODALL, *A Passion for Justice*, 220-221.

³¹⁵ Sacrosanctum Concilium Oecumenicum Vaticanum II, Decretum *Christus Dominus*, De pastoralis Episcoporum munere in Ecclesia, 28 octobris 1965, in *AAS* 58/10 (1966): 673-701 (= *CD*).

Priests have the mission of proclaiming the Gospel to the whole world (cf. *EN* 68). In the mission territories, the priests are to cooperate zealously in the work of evangelization (cf. can. 593 *CCEO*/1990). They are involved in a very special way in the commitment of the entire Church to evangelization (cf. *DMLP* 46). The number of *fidei donum* priests increased after the Second Vatican Council.³¹⁶ They have enkindled a renewed missionary flame in the heart of all the Christian faithful and have brought about a genuine collaboration between the particular churches of the ancient Christian tradition and those more recently founded (cf. *FD* 4, 43).³¹⁷ This “temporary service” has the advantage of helping the building up of a local church in the missionary territories and at the same time it is a stimulant for the spiritual and missionary renewal of the diocese that sends the priests.³¹⁸

1.1.2 Catechetical Instruction

Catechetical instruction is an integral part of the teaching office of the Church, which the priests are faithfully called to fulfil it. This is clearly outlined in the third Book of the 1983 Code of Canon Law. It is to be stressed that the ministry of the word is concretised in the catechetical formation of the faithful. Can. 773 identifies catechetical instruction as one of the principal duties of priests as they assume the pastoral care of the people entrusted to them. The *New Directory for Catechesis* dedicates two paragraphs to the priestly role in catechesis (*NDC* 115-

³¹⁶ Cf. Benedictus PP. XVI, Allocutio *Sono particolarmente lieto di contrarmi*, Ad conventum Superioris Consilii Pontificiorum Operum Missionalium nec non Congressum Internationalem Missionariorum instituti “Fidei Donum”, 5 maii 2007, in *AAS* 99/6 (2007): 439-441.

³¹⁷ Cf. Benedictus PP. XVI, Nuntius *In occasione della prossima*, Occasione LXXXI Diei Missionalis Internationalis, 27 maii 2007, in *AAS* 99/6 (2007): 463. Pius PP. XII, Litterae Encyclicae *Fidei donum*, De Catholicarum Missionum condicionibus praesertim in Africa, 21 aprilis 1957, in *AAS* 49/5 (1957): 225-248 (= *FD*).

³¹⁸ Cf. J. E. Bifet. *I responsabili e gli operatori della pastorale missionaria*, in Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana, *Cristo, Chiesa, missione: Commento alla “Redemptoris Missio,”* (Roma: Urbaniana University Press, 1992), 353.

116).³¹⁹ The priests have to coordinate, direct and promote catechetical activity in the parish community that they are assigned (cf. *NDC* 115; *DMLP* 65).

Catechetical formation is one of the chief means of the proclamation of the Word of God. Can. 776 enumerates the tasks of the parish priest in the catechetical formation of the local community.³²⁰ He is assisted by the clerics attached to the parish, of members of institutes of consecrated life and of societies of apostolic life and lay members of the Christian faithful.

Parish priests are to promote and foster family catechesis by carefully instructing parents (cf. can. 776, 528 §1 *CIC*/1983; can. 624 *CCEO*/1990). If the catechetical formation given to the children by their parents is not adequate and the pastors doubt the effectiveness of the family catechesis, then they need to organize classes at the parish level so as to provide children with an effective and adequate preparation before the reception of the sacraments.³²¹ Thus, it is the duty of parish priests to coordinate, to assess, to supplement and complete family catechetical instructions. They are to assist the parents in fulfilling their “ex justia duty” in imparting catechetical formation.

The sacred ministers are also requested to prepare the Christian faithful to participate in the sacraments with proper evangelization (cf. can. 843 §§1-2 *CIC*/1983). Priests and deacons should therefore arm themselves with more confidence, creativity and perseverance in presenting the sacraments and leading their people to appreciate them (cf. *NMI* 37).³²²

³¹⁹ Cf. Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelisation. *New Directory for Catechesis*, 23 March 2020 (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2020) (= *NDC*).

³²⁰ The Second Vatican Council declares priests as the “instructors in the faith” (cf. *PO* 6).

³²¹ José A. Fuentes, *Commentary to Can. 776*, 123.

³²² Ioannes Paulus PP. II, *Epistula Apostolica Novo millennio ineunte*, 6 ianuarii 2001, in *AAS* 93 (2001): 266-309 (= *NMI*).

1.2. The Sanctifying Role of the Priests (*munus sanctificandi*)

Sanctification is an ecclesial task incumbent upon all the People of God because of baptism, which enkindles in them a desire to participate in the priestly mission of Christ.³²³ The Book IV of the 1983 Code of Canon Law which explores the seven sacraments and other acts of divine worship gives the juridical norms regarding the sanctifying function of the Catholic Church. This book elaborates the religious dimension of the ecclesial reality.³²⁴ The sanctifying function of the Church is fulfilled “in a special way” in the celebrations of the liturgy (cf. can. 834 CIC/1983).

This function is discharged by priests as they share in the priesthood of Christ. Their ministry of sanctification brings them “into life-giving contact with the mystery of God’s holiness”.³²⁵ The sanctifying ministry of priests includes the preparation and celebration of the sacraments and sacramentals. They are also asked to accompany the Christian faithful in their spiritual needs. The following paragraphs will elaborate these two areas of special concern.

1.2.1. Minister of Sacraments and Sacramentals

The priests are often described as ministers of sacraments and sacramentals. They are considered as persons close to God and are chosen to offer sacrifices to God, a practice that is also seen in other religions. There is a tendency in the Church to reduce priests to mere agents performing sacred rituals, instruments of God’s mercy and pardon. They are identified with what they minister every day.

³²³ Luigi Chiappetta, *Il Codice di Diritto Canonico: Commento giuridico-pastorale*, Vol. 2 (Bologna: EDB, 2011), 80.

³²⁴ Manuel Jesús Arroba Conde and Michele Riondino, *Introduzione al diritto canonico* Seconda edizione (Milano: Le Monnier Università, 2017), 104.

³²⁵ Benedict XVI, General Audience, *Munus sanctificandi*, 5 May 2010, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/audiences/2010/documents/hf_ben-xvi_aud_20100505.html (accessed 23 July 2021).

The priests are the ordinary ministers of baptism together with bishops and deacons (cf. can. 861 §1). They are extraordinary ministers of confirmation (cf. cann. 882, 883 nn. 2-3, 994 §§1-2 *CIC/1983*). They are ministers of the Holy Eucharist, ordinary ministers of Holy Communion along with bishops and deacons (cf. can. 910 §1 *CIC/1983*); exclusive ministers of sacramental confession (cf. cann. 965, 966 §1 *CIC/1983*) and Anointing of the Sick (cf. can. 1003 §1 *CIC/1983*). Priests are the ordinary ministers of exposition of the Blessed Sacrament and of the Eucharistic blessing (cf. can. 943 *CIC/1983*).

Priests are the ordinary ministers of the blessings which are not reserved to the Roman Pontiff or to Bishops (cf. can. 1169 §2 *CIC/1983*). They can be delegated ministers of the blessing of the sacred places and churches (cf. Can. 1207). They are also delegated ministers of the consecration and dedication of places by virtue of law or by concession of the competent ecclesial authority (cf. can. 1169 §1).

There are number of canons which refer explicitly to the role of the parish priest in sanctifying the Christian faithful entrusted to his care. Can. 528 describes the sanctifying role of the parish priest who is the proper pastor of the parish entrusted to him (cf. Can. 519 *CIC/1983*). He is to give special care so that the Eucharist becomes the centre of the parochial community (cf. Can. 528 §2 *CIC/1983*). The parish priest who has been entrusted with the pastoral care of the parish community under the authority of the diocesan bishop carries out the three functions in collaboration with the other members of the *presbyterium* and with the assistance of the lay members of the Christian faithful according to the canonical provisions (cf. can. 519 *CIC/1983*). He exercises his power not in his own name but under the authority of the diocesan bishop (cf. Can. 515 §1 *CIC/1983*).

Among the means of sanctification, the Liturgy occupies the central place (cf. Can. 834 §1).³²⁶ The Church carries out its sanctifying function using other means of sanctification which are listed in Can. 839 §1. These include prayer, works of penance and charity. Priests can admit the lay faithful to the ecclesiastical offices and functions in accordance with the Code of Canon Law (cf. Can. 228 §1 *CIC*/1983).³²⁷ However, the lay faithful cannot replace the parish priest because he alone has received the ministerial priesthood.³²⁸

It is the duty of the sacred ministers to celebrate sacraments faithful to the liturgical books approved by the competent authority (cf. can. 846 §1 *CIC*/1983) and to celebrate according to their own proper rite (cf. can. 846 *CIC*/1983).

1.2.1 Special Pastoral care in the Marriage Preparation, Celebration and Accompaniment

Pastoral care in the area of marriage is an obligation not only for pastors of souls but also for the whole Christian community. “Pastors of souls are obliged to ensure that their own church community provides for Christ’s faithful the assistance by which the married state is preserved in its Christian character and develops in perfection” (can. 1063 *CIC*/1983). The canon outlines the practical ways in which the pastors of souls should give this assistance to the ecclesiastical community.

The Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*³²⁹ of Pope Francis underlines the need for pastoral accompaniment in the initial years of marriage, a “vital and sensitive period”, as they encounter the challenges and meaning of married life (cf. *AL* 223; *FC* 56).³³⁰ This pastoral

³²⁶ Cf. James A. Coriden, *An Introduction to Canon Law* (Paulist Press, New Jersey 2004), 53.

³²⁷ They can be given stable ministry of lector and of acolyte (cf. Can. 230 §1 *CIC*/1983).

³²⁸ Congregation for the Clergy. Instruction, *The Priest, Pastor and Leader of the Parish Community*, no. 2, 4 August 2002, in https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccclergy/documents/rc_con_ccclergy_doc_20020804_istruzione-presbitero_en.html (= *PPLPC*) (Accessed July 23, 2021)

³²⁹ Pope Francis, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Amoris Laetitia*, March 19, 2016, http://m.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf (= *AL*) (accessed July 23, 2021).

³³⁰ Ioannes Paulus PP. II, Adhortatio Apostolica Post-Synodalis *Familiaris consortio*, 22 novembris 1981,

accompaniment calls for the priest to go beyond the actual celebration of the sacrament (cf. *AL* 223).

The pastors of souls should create forums like associations, ecclesial movements and new communities, where experienced couples can freely help and encourage the younger couples. Moreover, pastors should encourage the couples to meet regularly to promote spiritual growth and help them to face the concrete demands of married life (cf. *AL* 223).

It is the duty of the pastors to encourage families to grow in faith. This can include arranging confession, spiritual direction, marriage counselling, talks by the experts and workshops on family and marriage, and annual retreats etc. for them (cf. *AL* 227, 229). Pastoral care of those who are separated, divorced or abandoned should be provided and should include efforts at reconciliation and mediation through the established specialized counselling centres of the diocese (cf. *AL* 242).

1.3 Governing Function of the Priest (*munus regendi*)

Priest has been entrusted with the mission to govern, to lead and to guide the People of God, with the authority given by Christ.³³¹ He is the minister of pastoral governance (cf. can. 468 *CIC/1983*; can. 289 §3 *CCEO/1990*; *CD* 18, 30; *PO* 6).³³² This ministry of pastoral governance is closely linked to the pastoral leadership exercised by the priest, in a special way by the parish priest in his parish community. It is to be noted that the governing function (*munus regendi/governandi*) of priests is evidenced in the pastoral governance of the parish priest.

Can. 529 of *CIC/1983* briefly identifies the pastoral functions of parish priests, which are related to their pastoral governance. The parish priest has to know the faithful through his visits

in AAS 74 (1982) 81-191 (= *FC*).

³³¹ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience 26 May 2010.

³³² John A. Renken, *Commentary to Can. 529*, in *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, John Philip Beal, James A. Coriden and Thomas J. Green, eds., (N.J.: Paulist Press, 2000), 700.

to the families, and by sharing in their cares, anxieties and griefs. When needed he should correct the faithful and strengthen them. He has to have special love for the poor and the suffering. He also gives support to parents to help them fulfill their obligations and to foster Christian life in the families.

To accomplish his central role as a guide and a leader, the parish priest will obtain the necessary help from the parish's consultative bodies mentioned in the Code of Canon Law (cf. cann. 536-537 *CIC/1983*; *PPLPC* 5). These councils are not to weaken the leadership of the parish priest but to help him to be very effective in his ministry (cf. *PPLPC* 5). It is the duty of the parish priest to preside over the parish pastoral council, which assists him to coordinate pastoral care in the parish (cf. can. 536 §1 *CIC/1983*). It is the duty of the parish finance council to assist the parish priest in the administration of the parochial goods (cf. can. 537 *CIC/1983*). The parish priest is the juridical representative of the parish and has the central role in the administration of the goods as per the canons 1281-1288 *CIC/1983*.³³³ Like the parish priest the assistant parish priest and all those who are appointed to special pastoral duties help in pastoral governance (cf. *PPLPC* 18).

It is the duty of the parish priest to promote active lay participation in the mission of the Church (cf. can. 529 §2 *CIC/1983*). The laity should be entrusted with the offices and duties in accordance with the Church's teachings. The parish priest has to foster lay associations so that the members strive after perfection, promote public worship and impart Christian teaching (cf. can. 298 §1 *CIC/1983*). He is to govern the parish in co-operation with his own local ordinary and with the diocesan *presbyterium*. In order to foster ecclesial communion, the parish priest is to promote among the faithful genuine concern for the parish community (cf. can. 529 §2 *CIC/1983*).

³³³ Cf. John A. Renken. *Commentary to Can. 537*, 710.

“By his vocation, every priest is called to be a leader”.³³⁴ The parish priest is not only a spiritual leader of the community but also a pastoral leader who governs so that everyone is helped to embrace the final goal of the Christian life, i.e., the Salvation of souls.³³⁵ The office of the parish priest is essentially pastoral (cf. *PPLPC* 19).

Conclusion

It is an undeniable truth that there has been an identity crisis among the Catholic priests since the Second Vatican Council.³³⁶ There are several reasons for this crisis. There has been a move in the Church to secularize the clergy and to clericalise the laity. The crisis of priestly identity is also partly due to a wrong understanding of the two ways of participating in the priesthood of Christ, the ministerial and the common priesthood (cf. *PPLPC* 7). There are also a number of other factors that have contributed to the crisis in priestly identity, some of which were mentioned in the introduction.

The 1983 Code was revised on the basis of the underlying ecclesiological theme of the Church’s participation in the *tria munera* of Christ as Priest, Prophet and King.³³⁷ The study of the threefold functions of Priests employed in this present article brings out vividly the priestly identity of the priest in the third millennium. They are the specific tasks of priests as affirmed by Pope Benedict XVI.³³⁸

The *cura pastoralis* or *cura animarum* which is proper to the parish priest is primarily carried out by him through preaching the Word of God, administering the sacraments, and in the pastoral government of the parish community. He exercises his leadership as the proper shepherd

³³⁴ Sahayaraj Lourdasamy, *Canon Law Themes for Today* (Mumbai: St. Pauls, 2019), 103.

³³⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*, 108.

³³⁶ Cf. Thomas M. Kocik, *Priestly Identity Crisis*, in *Homiletics & Pastoral Review* (April 1999): 18.

³³⁷ Cf. Thomas J. Green, *The Revision of Canon Law: Theological Implications*, in <http://cdn.theologicalstudies.net/40/40.4/40.4.1.pdf> (accessed April 18, 2021).

³³⁸ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, General Audience, *Munus sanctificandi*, 5 May 2010.

of the parochial community under the authority of the bishop.³³⁹ An in-depth understanding of these triple functions of the priest, paves the way for a deeper commitment and at the same time reinforces the credibility of the priestly ministry. The fundamental juridical status of the priests has been studied in these pages in the context of the three functions of the priests.

Priests are to configure themselves to the Lord. Conforming themselves to Christ, priests are urged to have a gaze characterized by tenderness, reconciliation and brotherhood. Jesus the Good Shepherd arouses in them a compassionate heart especially towards the sheep entrusted to them and who may have gone astray. The world is in need of priests who are strongly convinced of their priestly identity.

Priests are to be a “sign of contradiction and of hope for a society suffering from horizontalism and in need of openness to the Transcendent” (*EEu* 34).³⁴⁰ Priestly celibacy, which has been subjected of much critical reflection in recent years, is “a grace, a priceless gift of God for his Church, a prophetic value for the contemporary world, a source of intense spiritual life and pastoral fruitfulness, a witness to the eschatological Kingdom, a sign of God’s love for this world, as well as a sign of the priest’s undivided love for God and for his people” (*EEu* 34; cf. *PDV* 29). Priests are called to commit themselves to the restoration of justice, to constructive relationships between people, cultures and social groups.

During the years of formation, the candidates for priesthood are to be well instructed regarding their priestly identity and what the demands of the ministerial priesthood entail. Priestly formation needs to help the candidates keep in mind the demands the exercise of the ministry of teaching, sanctifying and governing the People of God will make on them (cf. can.

³³⁹ Cf. Martín De Agar, *A Handbook on Canon Law*, 129.

³⁴⁰ “The priest - like every other member of the Church ought to grow in awareness that he himself is continually in need of being evangelized” (*EG* 164; *PDV* 26; cf. *EN* 15). Ioannes Paulus PP. II, *Adhortatio Apostolica Post-Synodalis Ecclesia in Europa*, 28 iunii 2003, in *AAS* 75 (2003) 649-719 (= *EEu*).

255 *CIC/1983*). They should learn the principles and skills needed to perpetuate the Church's *tria munera* so that they may adequately serve the People of God.

Mission and Spirituality of Priests

Nabaasa Venansio

Introduction

In the Middle Ages, the Reformers, especially Martin Luther John Calvin and Zwingli, denied the essence of Holy Orders. This led the Catholic Church to respond to the questions raised by Luther's heresy and re-examine its teaching on priesthood, because the priesthood is a profound vocation which plays an essential role in the salvation of humankind.

This paper is divided into five main sections. In the first section, we will present the concept of priesthood. In the second section, we will present the concept of priestly identity in Sacred Scriptures. In the third section, we will analyze the concept of priesthood in the light of the teaching Magisterium of the Church. In the fourth section, we will analyze the modern thinking on priestly identity and in the fifth section, we will present the challenges facing priests and some practical solutions and end with the general conclusion.

1. The notion of Priesthood

We can find traces of the notion of priesthood even in our African Traditional Religions (ATR), where our great grandparents used to offer prayers, give thanks to the ancestors after heavy harvests and offer sacrifices in seasons of calamity. The word priest has been used down through the ages, even before Christ was born, thus, the term is not new. The word priest comes from a Latin word, *sacerdos*. A priest was known as God's representative and a cultic figure mediating between God and the rest of men. However, we find that the word "priest" is often identified with the infinitive verb "to serve".

According to Avery Cardinal Dulles, a priest is primarily a ritual leader, who stands in the sanctuary offering prayers and sacrifices to God, and transmitting God's gifts of grace and counsel to men.³⁴¹ It can be argued that in the Church, priesthood is a sign and guarantee of the Eucharistic unity of the Church. In a similar manner, Roger Vekemans has argued that priestly life ought to bring the humanity of Christ and into the presence of God through the mystery of the Eucharist while at the same time uniting a plurality of men and women around the table of sacrifice.³⁴² Hence, we see that a priest ought to promote unity by virtue of sacraments.

The intermediary definition comes from Karl Rahner. He defines a priest as one who is related to at least a potential community, and who preaches the Word of God by mandate of the Church and therefore officially he is entrusted with the highest levels of sacramental intensity of the Word.³⁴³ The priest is seen as an effective bearer of the power and grace of God. But before looking at the biblical notion, we need to know that the mind of Joseph Ratzinger was very much in line with Rahner. And he taught that "This celebration [of the Eucharist] is the fully empowered proclamation of the Easter Mystery of the death and resurrection of the Lord...the Church is thereby led, into the present of this mystery, brought actually into contemporaneity with it."³⁴⁴

1. The Nature of Priesthood based on the Sacred Scripture

In this section, we set to see the biblical usage of the term "priest" and the biblical basis of the Sacrament of Holy Orders. Although the Bible has many references to priesthood, we will just pick a few in order to lay the foundation of priestly identity today.

³⁴¹ Avery Cardinal Dulles, *Models of the Church* (United States of America: New York, Doubleday Publishers, 2002), 158.

³⁴² Roger Vekemans, *Caesar and God* (MaryKnoll: Orbis, 1972), 99-100.

³⁴³ Karl Rhaner, "What is the Theological Starting Point for a Definition of the Priestly Ministry?" in *Concilium* 43 (Paramus, N.J., Paulist Press, 1969), 85.

³⁴⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Priestly Ministry: A Search for Its Meaning* (New York: Sentinel Press, 1971), 20.

2.1 Witness of Priestly Identity in the Old Testament

In Genesis (14:18-20), Melchizedek, the King of Salem offered bread and wine; he was also a priestly figure. The book of Numbers mentions the seventy elders who were a prefiguration of the ordained ministers (Numbers 11:11-25). In the priestly family of Aaron, through divine legislation they passed on their sacerdotal privileges from father to son (Exodus 29:9, 29). Thus, the priestly office followed the bloodline of Aaron. Chapter 29 of Exodus shows that there were ceremonies for the installation of priests. These had two purposes: to cleanse the priests since they were to be in close contact with God and, to set up a bond of holiness between themselves and the altar where they were to serve.

The book of Leviticus like the book of Exodus describes the vestments with which the sacred ministers were to be clothed in (Leviticus 24:1-8; Exodus 28:1-3). The descendants of Levi were to be assistants to the priests from Aaron's family (Numbers 3:6). Just like today, the priest was to offer sacrifices to God on behalf of people. Such sacrifices included the holocaust and the communion sacrifice. They were to establish and maintain a healthy relationship with God. The priests were to atone for sins of people. The priestly identity in the OT was a foreshadowing of the priesthood of Jesus, from whom the modern priest shares his priesthood.

Priestly identity in OT was not a vocation, but rather a religious function. This was mostly carried out during the celebration of the feasts of Passover and Pentecost and the Day of Atonement. So, we note that as Exodus (19:6) states there were people within Israel chosen and set apart for this priestly function.

1.2 Witness of Priestly Identity in the New Testament (NT)

John A Hardson notes that in the NT, there are several grades of ministry coexisting. He shows that the word “priest” is derived from “presbyteroi” meaning elder.³⁴⁵ The word “elder” denotes someone who is exemplary in society, living a life of discipline. Hence in choosing the Church leaders after the time of Christ, discipline was important.

According to NT, Jesus Christ was sent by God the Father because he had a mission to fulfill (Matthew 7:29; Mark 1:27). He is both prophet and King (John 6:68, 4:19, 9:17, Luke 4:24), and he is also the anointed one (Mark 1:9-11; Luke 4:18; Mark 14:3-9). The same designation is found in Acts 10:38, “God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and power.” Jesus is the High Priest according to the order of Melchizedek. And all baptized people participate in his priesthood. However, the NT theology identifies two types of priesthood. There is priesthood all the faithful share with Jesus by virtue of their baptism, and there is the ministerial priesthood, which a candidate receives through the sacrament of holy orders performed by a bishop, according to the apostolic tradition of the Church. This priesthood is also known as the sacramental priesthood. This hierarchical priesthood includes the power of forming and governing the priestly people.³⁴⁶ Christ continued the concept of succession. He chose the twelve Apostles. He then commissioned them for a mission giving them his authority (Matthew 28:18f). Jesus asked the apostles to follow in his footsteps, to continue his work and to forgive the sins of the people.

According to the NT, there are specific roles of a priest. He is called or set apart to care for souls by teaching, sanctifying and governing the people of God.³⁴⁷ As teachers, they preach

³⁴⁵ John A. Hardon, ed., *The Catholic Catechism: A Contemporary Catechism of the Teachings of the Catholic Church* (New York: Garden City, Doubleday and Company, Inc. 1975), 523.

³⁴⁶ *Lumen Gentium*, 10.

³⁴⁷ *Christus Dominus*, 30.

the word of God to all the faithful, so that they may be firmly rooted in faith, hope and charity. The work of sanctification is summarised in the celebration of the Eucharistic sacrifice which is the centre and culmination of the entire life of the Christian community³⁴⁸.

The Letter to Hebrews teaches that Christ the Lord is the high priest taken from among men (Hebrews 5:1). And Paul in the Letter to Romans shows that not all the members of the Christian community have the same function. Only some are to forgive sins. On Holy Thursday the concept of priesthood was revealed, with Jesus as the primary and explicit model of priesthood.

3.1 Priestly Identity in the Light of the Magisterium of the Church

“The priestly life is built upon the foundation of the sacrament of orders, which imparts on souls an indelible mark...the priestly personality must be clearly there for others to see. It must be a sign for them. This is the first requisite for our pastoral service.”³⁴⁹ For this reason, a priest receives the sacrament of orders. And once a priest, he will remain a priest forever.

The Second Vatican Council outlined some of the attributes of a priest. The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests stated the functions of a priest: priests are ministers of God’s Word; they are the ministers of the Sacraments and the Eucharist and they are rulers of God’s people.³⁵⁰ It taught that priests should show apostolic zeal too. For this reason, they should, through their priesthood, be humble, hardworking and live a happy life.³⁵¹ Priests indeed are the elders of the Christian community, hence they must set a good example to follow. They must, as their vocation demands, also be close to people.

³⁴⁸ *Christus Dominus*, 30.

³⁴⁹ *Novo incipiente nostro*, 7.

³⁵⁰ *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 4-6.

³⁵¹ *Optatam Totius*, 2.

The Council also taught that priests are constituted providential cooperators with the episcopal order. And their primary role is the care of souls.³⁵² They exercise this care through administering of the Sacraments. Like the priests of the OT, they are to reconcile people with God and, through the Sacraments, help the faithful to reach God. Through the administration of the Sacraments, they act as the bridge with the Transcendent.

The Council also taught that “the priesthood calls for a special integrity of life and service and such integrity is supremely suited to our priestly identity. Priestly identity incorporates both great dignity and the availability proportionate to it.”³⁵³ A priest is also a gift of Christ to the community.³⁵⁴ Thus, he ought to serve the community since his priesthood is a gift but also a task.

Catechism of the Catholic Church gives us a consecratory prayer that is used during the rite of priestly ordination. “We ask you, all powerful Father, give these servants of yours the dignity of the presbyterate. Renew the Spirit of holiness within them. By your divine gift may they attain the second order in the hierarchy and exemplify right conduct in their lives.”³⁵⁵ This prayer focuses on some aspects of the identity of a priest. It shows that priesthood is a divine gift, it is a hierarchical order in the Church and the ordained must be an example of right conduct. And this is what the Church, even today, expects from any ordained minister.

We end this section with the words of Pope Pius XII:

Only to the Apostles, and thenceforth to those on whom their successors imposed hands, is granted the power of the priesthood, in virtue of which they represent the person of Jesus Christ before their people...this priesthood is not transmitted by heredity or human descent...the priest is the ambassador of the divine Redeemer. He is God’s vicegerent in the midst of the flock precisely because Jesus Christ is head of that body of which

³⁵² *Christus Dominus*, 28.

³⁵³ *Novo incipiente nostro*, 4.

³⁵⁴ *Novo incipiente nostro*, 4

³⁵⁵ Hardon, ed., *The Catholic Catechism*, 525.

Christians are members. The power entrusted to him, therefore, bears no resemblance to anything human.³⁵⁶

From whatever angle we try to analyze the priestly identity today, Jesus is the sole proprietor of priesthood. Today's priesthood as seen in the above section can be traced back to the Levitical caste of the Old Testament, to Jesus Christ, and to the early Christian communities.

4. Modern Understanding of Priesthood and their Ministry

This section is divided into two parts: the mission of priests and their spirituality. In the mission section, we will look at the modern understanding and the functions of a priest. Then we shall turn our reflection to the spirituality of a priest.

4.1 The Mission of a Priest

The modern understanding of priesthood is not so different from what has already been described in the above sections. As stated earlier, the sacrament of Holy Orders has a divine origin and through ordination, a priest receives an indelible mark. When the bishop pronounces the words "receive the Holy Spirit," a special conferral of divine gifts takes place. With these gifts of the Holy Spirit a priest becomes God's ordained instrument, someone trained in piety and with the duty of care for or the shepherding of souls. The priest must live the virtues above of all other men, because the nature of priesthood makes him an example in God's service. Hence, priests should be examples of responsible stewardship, of accountability and transparency. In fact, John Paul II stated that through such an example they become the salt of the earth and light of the world.³⁵⁷

A priest, as St Paul in 1 Corinthians 3: 2, 14, 20 indicates, is one who has reached a mature inner unity, for whom his experience of God is the basis for his action for others, whose actions reveal to people the love of God and draw them closer to God in love and commitment.

³⁵⁶ Pius XII, *Mediator Dei*, I, 40.

³⁵⁷ Ronzani, *Apostolic Ministry*, 24.

Hence, the priest's particular mission is service with a great enthusiasm for making God known. Priests must be available for people: this is what we call availability for the mission. A priest must be ready to obey, to follow and commit himself to the mission of Christ, because the mission of a priest is a participation in the mission of Christ. And the mission is set by Christ, Matthew 28:28-29.

Ronzani recalls the words of Saint John Paul II about the ministry of a priest. "Every priest configured by ordination to Christ, the Head and Good Shepherd, is called to be a living sign of Jesus Christ... He must cultivate a profound spiritual life that involves listening to the Word of God, celebrating the Eucharist and fidelity to prayer, especially the Hours. They must resolutely commit themselves to an evangelical and a fraternal community life."³⁵⁸

Additionally, a priest is involved in the offering of sacrifices especially the Eucharistic sacrifice. This Eucharistic Sacrifice is the zenith of the liturgy in which all the faithful are called to participate fully. A priest through the action of the Holy Spirit helps people to receive grace especially through the administration of the sacraments, for example, through the sacrament of reconciliation.

Priests should also guide and counsel the faithful. Many people have problems. Some problems are psychological. Hence, priests should offer emotional support to the young, old and all sexes. Many people's families and relationship are breaking up but through the words of encouragement from a priest, they gain hope.

4.2 The Spirituality of a Priest

Many people have characteristics which identify them and the work they do, and so does a priest. A priest is identified by the spirituality he lives or follows. Hence, when we talk of the

³⁵⁸ Ronzani, *Apostolic Ministry*, 24.

spirituality of a priest, we are also focusing on what a priest should be and what defines him. Amongst the many, the following take precedence.

Prayer life: A priest should be a man of prayer. He prays for and intercedes on behalf of the people especially through the Eucharistic prayer. In prayer, he should be an example. Hence, people should look to the priest as far as his prayer life is concerned. This should include meditation and contemplation, reading the Bible often, and teaching others how to pray.

Virtuous life: Candidates for the priesthood have a long period in training. This is not only for theological studies but also for moral formation. A priest is always an icon as far as his moral life is concerned. However, due to different challenges, for example, from the environment, and economic problems, some priests have lost the virtues they should be passing on to the faithful.

Commitment: Commitment involves many things. A priest should be committed to the mission, to his bishop or religious superiors, to vows or promises he has taken. He should also be committed to the gospel, to his prayer life and to the celebration of the sacraments. This commitment requires a deep devotion to the Blessed Virgin Mary. She is the immediate intercessor and the mediatrix of God's graces.

5.1 Pastoral Challenges affecting the Mission and Spirituality of priests today

This section will highlight some other challenges. Each challenge will be followed by a proposed solution. The section itself will be concluded with proposed solutions to a plethora of challenges.

Lack of total commitment: at times, sufferings, the search for love, wealth and power, pressure from the society and socio-economic factors have troubled many priests. They no longer find the gospel message meaningful in their lives because they want to obtain worldly riches,

power and honors. In the end, they lose their fidelity to the Spirit of God, and they lose their sense of commitment. Lack of commitment especially to their identity and to the spiritual life is therefore a big challenge. The best solution is an annual retreat. These can, perhaps, help the poorly committed priests since they can deepen their faith-knowledge of God. Retreats therefore can become an essential means to renew a priest's spirituality.

Integration of the Spiritual life and the Apostolate: Any priest's priority should be to save his soul and the souls of others. Hence, the spiritual life and apostolate are interconnected. However, some priests focus on their own spirituality and leave apostolate, or ignore both priorities. Yet, there is a great relationship between faith and mission. The two must be taken together. Those priests who focus only on one, especially on the mission than rather their own life of faith, end up taken up by the world. This is a great challenge to priestly identity today.

The solution should be a refocusing on a priest's prayer life, trying to become more aware of his call and identity, aware of circumstantial problems, opening up himself to the new experiences and perhaps, refocusing on the daily spiritual renewal. This calls for meditation, spiritual study and an examination of conscience, a renewed commitment to the mission and the fostering of the spiritual life for himself and the faithful.

Vocation versus career: Some priests today have turned their vocation into a career. They have misused the divine ministry to exercise political power rather than religious. This has a great impact on the souls of both the priest and the people he serves who often gives only lip service to his priestly ministry. In fact, from a radical eschatological point of view, priestly vocation should be more concerned with saving souls than with struggling for wealth and political powers of the secular world.

Simplicity of life: Since priesthood is not a profession but rather a vocation, a priest ought to live a simple life. For instance, among the religious priest, simplicity of life will be inward measure of his spirituality based on evangelical counsels especially that of poverty. In the gospel of Matthew 25:35-40, Jesus commanded his disciples to feed the hungry, give a drink to the thirsty, to visit the sick and care for the prisoners, etc.. This is not far from any priestly role. Every priest's reputation should be founded on a simple way of life that includes giving what he has to those in need.

Unfortunately, some priests are “gatherers”. Gathering what? They are gathering riches, fighting for power, they are influenced by life of plenty, they want a free life style, they like driving expensive cars, and living a life of elegance and excess. They no longer live an exemplary life because they live according to the prevailing values of the society. In this regard, they have forgotten their service; they are no longer models for spiritual inspiration. Hence, their lack of simplicity has been and still is a challenge.

Ronzani argues that many priests have left the active ministry because they “felt lonely, isolated, unappreciated or mistreated...and struggle with a lot of other problems such as alcohol, depression, sexual disorders, cyber-sex, anxiety, compulsive eating, and mismanagement of money...”³⁵⁹ Additionally, many priests are suffering in different ways. This suffering may result from the harsh conditions they operate under, from interior pressure created by fellow priests, health conditions. Others suffer because of their race and large population they serve. Challenges also come from other religions and religious leaders especially those who are anti-Catholic.

The challenge of celibacy: Remaining faithful to priestly celibacy in the Church at times has been a challenge to some priests. Some priests have been the culprits in sexual scandals. Others however have been patient and through their prayer life have overcome the challenges.

³⁵⁹Rinaldo Ronzani, *Apostolic Ministry*, 19.

Yet others have left the church and attempted marriage. But according to the Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, celibacy must be accepted because it is an inestimable gift of God, a stimulus for pastoral charity, and a witness to the kingdom of the world.³⁶⁰ It is also important because of its ecclesiological, eschatological and Christological values.

5.2 General solutions to Priestly Challenges

Among the solutions possible, the best may well be prayer. Prayer fashions the essential style of a priest who otherwise might be spiritually deformed. Prayer helps him to deepen his spiritual life, and his pastoral and intellectual life. Through the prayer, the priest will be able to find light, achieve inner conversion and meet God constantly.³⁶¹ To meet the constant challenges of priests, Pope Benedict declared a ‘Year for Priests’. This was to give an opportunity for the whole Church to reflect on the gift of priesthood and to pray for priests.³⁶² Archbishop Anthony Muheire while ordaining deacons at Utume on 24th May, 2019 said, “Perhaps you are not the best speaker, not smart in theology, maybe Scripture disturbs you, but pray to God, he will deliver you. He has chosen you in that way.”³⁶³ Thus, prayer is a special weapon for any priest.

Ronzani mentions some of the possible answers to the challenges facing a priest today. They include among the many, annual and monthly days of recollection, regular prayer life and the reading of Scriptures, ongoing formation, especially for young priests who need to be lovingly accompanied, and also providing the means for an honorable life for sick and aged priests.³⁶⁴ These solutions can help the priests overcome some of their challenges, especially, with the grace of God.

³⁶⁰ *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 29.

³⁶¹ *Novo incipiente nostro*, 10.

³⁶² Pope Benedict XVI declared a Year for Priests beginning with the Solemnity of the Sacred Heart of Jesus on June 19, 2009. Also Cf. www.annussacerdotalis.org.

³⁶³ The Homily of Archbishop Anthony Muheire, at Utume on Friday 24th May, 2019 at Utume Theological College.

³⁶⁴ Ronzani, *Apostolic Ministry*, 25.

Last but not least is spiritual renewal. This renewal ought to take an apostolic dimension. There must be an inner renovation at a personal level and within the community of the faithful. Thus, the spiritual renewal can be considered a refocusing on a priest's call to ministry or the goal of priesthood as designed and desired by Christ himself. Any priest, therefore, should refocus on the experience of God, the works of salvation in his soul and the entire Church. A priest should be in a habitual contemplative union with Christ and should remember that he has been called to serve God and God's creation, through and within persecutions, especially by imitating Christ.

Conclusion

In conclusion, I would like to stress the service a priest of today can offer to humanity in general and the Church of Christ. First of all, he must bear fruits otherwise he will be like the fig tree mentioned in the gospel; like vine branches which are cut and burnt if they do not hold on to the vine to produce fruits (John 15:1-7). Due to constant changes in the world, especially due to development in technology, the only solution is the imitation of Christ. By and large, even if the world is constantly changing, the law of Christ, "Love your neighbor as you love yourself" (Matthew 22:39, Mark 12:31), does not change. Every priest must hold on to the newness of the gospel. This is the challenge that faces every Christian and priest.

The imitation of Christ reminds us that a priest is set on a mission for the salvation of souls. By virtue of his ordination, he is expected to serve the community in a prophetic and liturgical way, in order to build up the community, to preside at its worship, to proclaim the Word of God and to transform society in the light of the gospel. Every priest today has a duty to aspire to find meaning in the imitation of Christ. This will not stop him from meeting challenges but possibly help him to succeed because his mind, body and soul will be driven by God's Spirit.

St Paul, in the letter to Philippians 2:5-7, asserts that we should put on the mind of Christ who emptied himself and took on the condition of a slave. Priests therefore ought not to be anxious for tomorrow, sufficient for the day is the evil thereof (Matthew 6:34).

Unlike in OT times, the sacrifice offered by a priest today, the Eucharistic sacrifice, is celebrated in *the persona christi*. Although there are many challenges facing a priest today, a better and longer formation program including psychology, relationship skills and service and constant prayer can have a great impact. The candidates to the priesthood should be made aware that the priestly mission is directed entirely to the service of the new humanity which Christ saved from the sin of Adam and which the Spirit that constantly creates anew.

Lastly, both the Sacred Scriptures and the teaching of the Church confirm that among the faithful, there are some who are called to holy orders, and appointed in the name of Christ. They are to help in feeding the Church with God's word and his grace. Not all are called to priestly life. And therefore, those who are so called should lead their people into fuller communion with God, despite the problems they meet in their spiritual journey or vocation.



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