

THE PRIESTHOOD: GIFT AND SACRIFICE



PASTORAL LETTER 2021

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Retrospection and Gratitude:

1. With every sense of duty we give thanks to God whose loving providence has lead us thus far. To Him be glory, honor and never-ending praise forever.

In the past one year the world has experienced the ravages of an unexpected and extra-ordinary Virus, the corona virus pandemic which unleashed untold changes in most aspects of our life, our educational, social, administrative and pastoral systems were totally disrupted. For the first time in our living memory the Church has had to strongly regulate participation in our communal religious celebrations, especially the Holy Eucharist, and at a point leading to the suspension of the normal Sunday Masses. Millions of infections and hundreds of deaths were recorded in many countries not excluding ours. Our students have been forced to stay at home for their physical safety, and so many businesses which are means of livelihood for so many have either been closed down or have been negatively influenced by losses.

However, there has been on the positive side a growing knowledge of the covid-19 virus and growing ability to counter its negative effects on health. More importantly, different vaccines have been rolled out by drug companies and are already being administered in some countries. It is hoped that more discoveries and more cure would continue to unfold.

2. It is remarkable and note worthy that notwithstanding the enormous scientific and technological advances that human beings have made and are still making, they are not and cannot be masters of creation. It reminds us of our limitations as humans and nudges us to always turn to our maker who is the Lord and Master of his own creation.

In times like this, it is most appropriate to keep constantly in mind the love of God for his people. He sent us our Redeemer who has shown us such great love, greater than which no man has (Cf. John 15:13).

As human beings and as believers we are always surrounded by unquestionable evidence of the love of God who is the origin of all we are, and all we have.

MOTIVATION AND CHOICE OF TOPIC:

3. Last December, (December 5, 2020) marked exactly one hundred and thirty-five years since the arrival to Onitsha of Reverend Father Joseph Emile Lutz, CSSP and his companions the pastoral work of this thirty-two-year-old priest together with his companion and successors changed the lives of the people of the South-Eastern part of Nigeria. Among other blessings they brought the light of the Gospel of Christ and the knowledge of salvation. They were God's gift to the people. Providentially, this year 2021, I commemorate forty years of my priestly consecration. Within these years, I have experienced the power of God's grace and divine favour, as well as the mystery of the priesthood beckoning human response.

Therefore, my dear people of God, this year, I have chosen to reflect with you on the importance of the gift of the priesthood and the role of this gift for the Church and humanity. The role of being a link between the human and divine, between God and his children. It is a welcome opportunity to reflect on the priestly ministry; on Christ's priesthood and the ministry of participation of the human being in this singular priesthood, which is an epitome of Christ's love for the Church and for humanity. Because this sacrament symbolizes the love of Christ in a very special way, it also points to the demand for some reciprocity, which though is by nature hugely unequal, should be viewed as a show of gratitude for God's love.

4. Reflection on the priesthood is also a call to prayer in thanksgiving for God's gift, and supplication for God's graces for priest to continue faithfully in Christ's ministry. It also affords the faithful a special opportunity to pray for their priests. Though many books have been written on this subject, nevertheless, we have chosen to reflect on the priesthood of Christ emphasizing its' nature as a gift from God, requiring from the human person a response of gratitude and a call for sacrifice out of love and appreciation.

5. In this pastoral letter we shall discuss the priesthood of Jesus Christ which he has graciously shared with humans through the sacrament of Holy Orders. We shall examine this priesthood as a precious gift which like any other good gift calls for grateful acknowledgement and appreciation. This appreciation shows itself in the life and ministry of the priest (recipient of the gift) as a sacrifice in loving response to God for the gift of the priesthood. Without the life of sacrifice, the priesthood becomes incomplete and in fact empty.

CHAPTER TWO

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS.

6. **Priesthood:** The emergence of religion in different societies also called into existence a select group of people who officiate and intercede for the people and become their mediators with the divine. Such cultic personifications of humans existed in ancient societies like ancient Egyptian society, ancient Greek, ancient Roman, ancient Igbo societies and many more. These are generally denominated priests.

Therefore, a priest can be defined as a religious official, authorized and empowered to perform the sacred rituals for a religious group, especially as a mediatory medium between humans and the transcendent.

7. In some ancient cultures the priesthood is a profession, in some others it is a function of age, where the oldest member of the extended family of nuclear household becomes its priest automatically. In the Old Testament we have a very well-developed tradition of the priesthood which is viewed as a fore runner of the priesthood of Christ. But in the Old Testament, the role of the priest was filled at different times in different ways. The fundamental thing which the knowledge of the priesthood of many religions bequeaths to us is the importance of this profession, which links the human and the divine.

8. THE PRIESTHOOD OF CHRIST:

The letter to the Hebrews defines the priest as someone who is taken from among men and set apart for the things that appertain to God (Hebrews 5:1). This definition emphasizes the crucial function of the priestly duty as a bridge, a link between the divine and the human, between God and his people, and between the created and their creator. It also recognizes that it is, surprisingly human beings who are chosen to do this function and not angels or some other higher beings. It is the human beings who are bestowed with these privileges and given its obligations.

In the Old Testament the function of the priests included: (1) consulting the Urim and Thummim (Exodus 28:30), the sacred lot cast in order to decipher the mind of God in specific problematic situations. (2) Teaching, since according to the prophet they shall teach the sons of Israel the laws of God (Jer 18:18). (3) Sacrifice and cultic offering.

The common denominator in all these is that even in the Old Testament, the priest was an intermediary between God and men, the bridge uniting them in a two-way interchange (cf. Raymond Brown, *Priests and Bishops: Biblical Reflections*, 1970 p. 12-13).

9. However, in the Old Testament, the priests offered animals like bulls and goats. But Christ the priest offered himself to his heavenly Father. He is thus the victim and the priest, the epitome of sacrifice. Some traditional religions have human sacrifice as the highest sacrifice in the most difficult and intractable moments of the life of the community. In the sacrifice of Christ, it is the God-man Jesus Christ that is the victim, not bulls and goats, not even created human beings. This is the special character of Christ's priesthood. That Christ is both priest and victim underscores the sublimity of the sacrifice of Christ and of his priesthood. It is the highest possible sacrifice that can be conceived. His sacrifice and priesthood are therefore unique.

It is this priesthood of Christ which is our interest, the subject of our discussion. It is this priesthood of Christ which he has perpetuated in mystery through the sacrament of Holy Orders. It is this gift that calls for grateful loving response from the privileged recipient or beneficiary.

10. Love informs the sacrifice of Christ which is an integral part of his salvific mission. It is this same enduring love that made it necessary that the Lord should call human beings to share in his mission, to exercise the most sublime priesthood. The call to this priesthood is a gratuitous gift.

CHAPTER THREE

FOUNDATIONS AND INSTITUTION OF THE PRIESTHOOD

11. The etymology of the term priest is rooted in the Greek word “*Presbyteros*” (Which means elder, local community leader or City father), which refers to a person of experience, mature age and of importance in the society. In the biblical context, the functions of the elders included guarding the flock against false teachings that may erupt within the community. The term later stood for a special kind of religious intermediary “consecrated to deity” and so “belongs to the divine sphere” Gradually in the Christian tradition, the term priest came to stand for the special kind of religious intermediary which was later designated by the Latin term: *Sacerdos*” or the Greek term “*Hiereus*”, both refer to a person who is sacred. That is, one who is consecrated and filled with God’s power. Thus, we understand the priest as a person set apart for the activities of the divine-human realm. With the passage of time, the term “priest” means not only a spiritual leader but also an office holder whose authority was extended to the realm of administration and accepted by the community.

In the Catholic Christian tradition, a priest is one who is sacramentally configured to share the priesthood of Christ who is a priest, a king and a prophet. Thus, there is common priesthood of the faithful through the sacrament of baptism and the ministerial priesthood through Holy Orders. Our reflection here centers more on the ministerial priesthood: The Catholic Priesthood.

12. BIBLICAL FOUNDATION OF THE PRIESTHOOD.

IN THE OLD TESTAMENT.

The search for understanding the Catholic priesthood begins from the scriptures. The salvation history unites the Old and New Covenants with Christ at the centre who came not to abolish the law or the prophets but to fulfill and perfect them. He did not abolish the priesthood either, rather, he perfects the priesthood and begins a new and eternal ministry of the priesthood rooted in his person.

Evidence of the priesthood from the scripture indicates a progression that moves from Adam as the priest of creation, to the priesthood of his sons, that is the priesthood of father of the family (*Pater Familias*), through the priesthood of Israel as a nation (Royal Priesthood), to the priesthood of the tribe of Levi, of Aaron and his sons, to the priesthood of Moses and of the seventy elders, to the priesthood of Christ and of the apostles and their successors. The Church appreciates that the

priesthood has its roots in the bible, starting from the time of creation in Genesis when God created man and assigned him the “fatherly” role over creation “to work it and take care of it” (Gen.2:15). By this God also made him the head and priest of all creation. By these functions, Scott Hahn argues, God made Adam a co-creator, making his mandate nothing less than an ordination, that is upgrading his fatherhood to a priesthood. (Cf. Scott Hahn, *Many are called*, New York, 2010, p. 42).

This fatherly role of Adam was passed down to his sons, such that the same role included offering sacrifices to God on behalf of their families. The patriarchal priestly authority continued from Abraham through his descendants until the days of Moses when the Lord established Israel as a kingdom of priests with its attendant blessings (cf. Exodus 19: 5-6; Deut. 7:6). In a way, the patriarchal order shared some affinity with the priesthood which enabled worthy men to preside over their posterity in time and eternity. Also, to some extent the patriarchal priesthood bears similarity to the common priesthood of the faithful in the Church today.

13. The constitution of the nation of Israel as a royal priesthood at Mount Sinai (Cf. Ex 19: 6-7) was then followed by the choice of the tribe of Levi and, especially the family of Aaron to be priests unto the nation (cf. Ex 29: 1-3).

A careful glance through the Old Testament reveals that the roles and functions of priests originated, changed and developed over the centuries. While the entire tribe of Levi and the sons of Aaron became priests by divine decree, (Ex 28:1-4, Ex 29:9), as time progressed the Levites’ priests only assisted the sons of Aaron in their priestly duties. Only the sons of Aaron were called priests while the Levite priests were identified as cultic functionaries. (Cf. Num 8:5-22) also (Cf. Lk 10: 31-32).

In all, it is clear that in the Old Testament the priesthood is not a human invention but God’s gift. The priests and the prophets made mediation between God and Humans but in different ways, different roles. Although the Old Testament does not have a call narrative for the priests as they do for the kings and for the prophets, authentic priesthood rested on Yahweh’s choice and promise. Yahweh elected a priestly ancestor such as Aaron or Phinehas or Levites and established a covenant with their descendants.

Nevertheless, the priesthood of the Old Testament proved grossly inadequate which gave rise to the need of the real priest (Cf. Heb 5:3, 7:27;10:1-4). This ideal priest is found in Christ, the priest of the New Testament.

PRIESTHOOD IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

14. In the New Testament, Jesus instituted the ministerial priesthood to administer the sacraments, a mystery separate from the royal priesthood of all the baptized. He reserved this sacramental priesthood for his Apostles, who in their own time too, chose only men as their successors. The new priesthood is established in the person of Christ, which is a departure from the priesthood of old.

Christ's priesthood was neither Levitical, because it was not inherited by son from father, nor temporal, for he rose from the dead and never to die again, but of the order of Melchizedek. (Cf. Richard R. Gaillardetz & co, *Keys to the Council*, p.81).

15. In the New testament a new order of priesthood is established not opposed to the old but entirely new and different. The letter to the Hebrews is very helpful in our knowledge of this priesthood. The text tells us that Jesus is the "high priest" which implies there is a priesthood under him (Heb 4: 14-5:3). Further, Jesus has gone through the heavens as the high priest went into the Holy of Holies. He was tempted in all the ways but did not sin. For this reason, he is able to exercise his priestly ministry representing men to God and offering sacrifices to God on their behalf. This is the first striking image of the priesthood of Christ as presented in the letter to the Hebrews.

Again, Jesus is a high priest called by God (Heb 5: 4-10). Priests do not call themselves but are called by God. This was true of Aaron, the priests of the order of Levi and the order of Melchizedek. Thus, Jesus was designated a high priest after the order of Melchizedek.

Jesus' priesthood in the order of Melchizedek (Heb 7:1-28) surpasses the Levitical priesthood. This is because he does not need to offer sacrifices for his own sins and neither does he need to carry on offering sacrifices repeatedly. His one sacrifice is complete, for all time, for everyone and for every sin (Heb. 7:27).

16. Finally, Jesus is the high priest of the New Covenant (Heb 8:1-13). He serves at the tabernacle set up by God himself not set up by man and sits at the right hand of God- the Father. This signifies his victory and his status. He does not stand at the altar as other priests do, rather he sits at the throne of the king. Again, as a priest he does not offer just any gifts, rather he offered himself. Hence, the New Testament involves the one perfect, once-for-all sacrifice of Jesus for the sins of the world. This new covenant replaces the old covenant which was imperfect and establishes the new priesthood.

17. THE MINISTERIAL PRIESTHOOD

Jesus continues his priesthood through the Apostles and the ministerial priesthood. Jesus had always planned to continue his priestly ministry through a group set apart. Thus, he gave the twelve apostles a special and privileged status among his followers and disciples. He chose them from among the disciples and named them “Apostles” (Lk. 6:13). He taught them everything mostly in private, and he loved them to the end (Jn. 13:1). He ate his last Passover meal (Last Supper) in their company (Mk. 14: 22-25). Jesus also consecrated the apostles (Jn. 17:19), and entrusted them with the obligation of repeating his actions of breaking the bread, transforming it into his body, blessing the chalice to transform it into his blood, with the mandate to do them in memory of him (Lk. 22:19-20). Thus, it is the express desire of Jesus to continue his ministry through his Apostles. He also commissioned them saying, “As the father has sent me even so do I send you” (Jn. 20:21). He further assured them saying “he who receives you receives me” (Lk. 10:40)

By the ministerial priesthood, the Apostles are chosen from among Christ’s disciples who share in the common priesthood. They are given special privilege and responsibility to continue the mission of Jesus in the world. They act in the name of Christ, develop an intimate relationship through him to the father. As representatives of Jesus, the apostles are filled with divine authority, for Jesus says; “He who hears you hears me, and he who rejects you rejects me, and he who rejects me rejects Him who sent me”. (Lk.10:16). Accordingly, the Apostles do not act from their own authority, but by the authority and the power they have received from Christ, they stand before the church in the name of Christ. It is this mission, power and priesthood that the apostles handed on to their successors in the community.

Vatican II in *Lumen Gentium* teaches that “Through the Apostles themselves, Christ made their successors, the Bishops, sharers in his consecration and mission, duly entrusted in varying subordinate degrees the office of ministry” (LG. n.28). Thus, the apostolate handed over by Jesus to the apostles is given to the Bishops and this paved way for the birth of a genuine ministerial priesthood in the New Testament. This is the priesthood which the Bishops share with the ordained priests.

18. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, remind us that through baptism, the faithful also share the priesthood of Christ, this is the common priesthood of the faithful. However, the Baptismal priesthood and the ministerial or hierarchical priesthood differ from one another in essence and in degree. The ministers (the

priests) are able by the sacred power of orders to offer sacrifice and to forgive sins, and they perform their priestly office publicly for men in the name of Christ. Christ through the apostles, made their successors, the Bishops, sharers in his consecration and mission. The office ...handed down in a lesser degree to the priests... as co-workers of the episcopal order. (cf. Presby Ordinis, n.2).

19. LOVE AS FOUNDATION: It is always good to remember that the Priesthood of Christ is firmly founded on Love. First of all, the gift of Christ to the world is founded on the love of God the father who so loved the world that he gave his only son as our redeemer (Jn. 3:16). The priesthood of Christ and his sacrifice were also informed by love. Having loved those who were his own, he loved them to the end, such led him to the sacrifice on the cross, the institution of the Holy Eucharist and the ministerial priesthood.

It is this sublime and Godly priesthood epitomized in the Holy Eucharist, that the human priests are called to participate in. Those called become in a special way likened to Christ being configured to him sacramentally, such that, in the best of Catholic tradition, they are called *alter Christus* (another Christ). It is through the sacrament of orders that this mysterious union is able to come to fruition.

CHAPTER FOUR

THE CATHOLIC PRIEST: NATURE AND IDENTITY.

20. At this point, having reflected on the foundations of the priesthood, it is good to ask the crucial question, who is a priest in the Catholic tradition? What image and identity does he carry? Who is a Catholic priest?

The nature and identity of a Catholic priest can be summed up in the teachings of the Church especially the documents of the Second Vatican Council and *Pastores Dabo Vobis*.

In the Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* of Pope JohnPaul II we read, “indeed, 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 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” (PDV, 12).

From the above we can identify and observe the following images as the core identity of the Catholic priest.

21. A Priest is a man chosen from among men.

Priests do not fall from the sky. They are called by God who chooses them from among other humans among whom they must live and work and towards whom they must be close as bridges between God and man. Every priest has a personal history coming from his family background, schools, circumstances and environment. These are often with riches and wounds. As a disciple of the Lord the priest should not allow himself to be dominated by his limitations but rather should build on his strengths and talents. The priest should always make present in himself the image of that joyful shepherd sent to serve his people.

22. A Priest is Another Christ

The Catholic tradition has always understood the priest to be another Christ (*Alter Christus*), a living and transparent “image of Christ”, “an extension of Christ” the high priest, the priesthood becomes meaningful only in this way becomes meaningful only in this way when he strives to exemplify and mirror the virtues of Christ in his daily life. In that way as the priest acts in the person of Christ (*in*

persona Christi) while celebrating the sacraments, he simultaneously becomes a sacrament that is a living, visible and tangible sign of Christ interacting with the people.

The identity and dignity of the Catholic priest become evident when the ministerial priest does not only possess sacramentally the authority to act in the power and place of the person of Christ but also becomes a living image of Jesus Christ.

23. A Priest is a man of holiness

The Priest like all the baptized participates in the “universal call to holiness” recognized and articulated at the Second Vatican Council. In addition, the priest, at his ordination publicly states his resolution to consecrate his life to God and unite himself more closely every day to Christ the High Priest who sacrificed himself for the salvation of his people, (his brothers and sisters). This is quite a resolution. It is a vow on to the Lord which obliges the priest to go beyond keeping the commandments of God and the precepts of the Church. It calls for extra effort and sacrifice. It calls on the priest to dedicate all his energy, skills, efforts, resources to God for the salvation of his people and the glory of God. It calls for holiness of life. This holiness is also enhanced when the priest celebrates the sacraments with faith and dedicates his life to penance and prayer.

24. A Priest is a Teacher and Preacher of the Word.

A Priest is a teacher and preacher of God’s word. On the day of his diaconate ordination, he is given a Holy Bible with the instruction “Receive the Gospel of Christ whose herald you are. Believe what you read, teach what you believe and practice what you teach. Priests being ministers of God’s word have it as a sacred duty to teach others the word. Should they be committed to this duty sincerely and be open to the spirit themselves, they would receive the word first before teaching others. Fidelity to this duty would make the priest to grow daily into a perfect follower of Christ the Lord and a true minister of his Gospel. Teaching the Good News is a primary duty of the priest who also fulfills the injunction of the Lord who says “Go into the whole world and preach the gospel to every creature” (MK.16:15).

25. A Priest is a man of Service

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches us that Baptism, Confirmation and Holy Eucharist are sacraments of Christian Initiation. They ground the common vocation of all Christ’s disciples, a vocation to holiness and to mission...

Two other sacraments, Holy Orders and Matrimony, are directed towards the salvation of others, if they contribute as well to personal salvation, it is through service to others that they do so (Cf. CCC. 1534).

The Sacrament of Holy Orders is therefore principally for service. Through sound formation and the example of other good priests, a priest learns to recognize the joy that comes from self-giving love in imitation of Christ., who came not to be served but to serve and to give His life as a ransom for many (cf. Mk. 10:45).

Pope Francis has spoken frequently on the virtue of availability and service in the life of priests. In his 2014 Chrism Mass, he noted: “The availability of her priests makes the Church a house with open doors, a refuge for sinners, a home for people living on the streets, a place of loving care for the sick, a camp for the young. A classroom for catechizing children... whenever God’s people have desires or needs, there is the priest, who knows how to listen and feels a loving mandate from Christ who sends him to relieve that need with mercy or to encourage those good desires with resourceful charity.

The priesthood is a gift from God for service to his people. The paradox is that the more the priest empties himself in loving service to God and his people, the more he experiences the joy of the Risen Christ.

26. The Priest: A Man of Knowledge.

If the Lord required knowledge from the priests of the Old Testament warning them, “because you have rejected knowledge, I will also reject you, that you shall be no priest for me”. (Hosea 4:6), it is clear that knowledge will be all the more required from the priest of today.

The priest is a teacher and a leader without knowledge he will lack an essential tool or equipment for his work. The priest should be knowledgeable in sacred and social sciences. His teachings on the sacred scriptures, Church documents and other aspects of our faith must be relevant and meaningful to the people. In the words of Pope Pius XII, the ministry of the priest must be illuminated by the light of wisdom and discipline and inflamed by the fire of charity (cf. *Menti Nostrae*, no. 66).

27. A Priest: Man of all Virtues

By the nature of his calling the priest willingly accepts to live a virtuous life. By the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, the priest is called and he freely embraces a life of total commitment to the evangelical counsels. The obedience of the priest

reveals the obedience of Jesus to his heavenly father and unites the priest to the ministry of the Bishop. The Priest's life of chastity for the sake of the kingdom of God mirrors the life of Christ, the Lamb without blemish. And, through his poverty the priest contents himself only with what is necessary for a decent life. He shuns greed, materialism and unnecessary attachment to wealth. The priest is further filled with compassion making himself a visible presence of God's loving kindness. Pope Pius XII in *Menti Nostrae*, strongly recommends that the priest should cultivate all the virtues as faithfully as in imitation of Jesus Christ. He says "the priest should be adorned with all the virtues, and give an example to others of a righteous life... The priest must reproduce in himself the living image of Christ: who full of the Holy Spirit and power. He went about doing good and healing all who were sick." (Acts. 10:38).

28. A Priest; A man of Prayer.

Prayer is the life of every sincere priest as he remembers always that he is exercising sacred powers. He needs the strength and power of he who has said to the Apostles, "I am the vine, you are the branches. Whoever remains in me... will bear much fruit, because without me you can do nothing. (Jn 15:5). "Without familiarity with God in spiritual communion and profound prayer life... his ministry will be merely a superficial sacramentalizing enterprise" (Presby Ordinis. n. 4).

29. Who then is a Catholic priest?

Having seen the various images of a priest, his nature and identity, let us attempt a summary by answering the question who then is a priest in the Catholic tradition.

The priesthood is a mystery. It is a paradox. It is an exalted position to serve in *persona Christi*. It is the greatest privilege given to the human being; the greatest call because one is configured to Christ himself by the working of the Holy Spirit. But it is not as if the priest can be consumed by pride. Not at all. He is handling a reality that is not his own, his acts are Christ's "personal act". Strictly speaking, the priest as an individual does not really exist. After his priestly ordination or consecration Christ now lives and acts in him. Thus, the priest is exercising a humble profession. Realization of this fact with humility is a potent means of sanity for the priest. The word he is proclaiming, the sacraments he is dispensing are not his own. He is a servant first of God and then of the community of the faithful who mediates his relationship with God. This is a paradox as his exaltation also calls for humility. Therefore, the priest has to learn from Christ who was divine, yet emptied himself taking the form of a servant (Cf. Phil 2:6-7).

30. As the priesthood is that of Christ, the priestly act should only be aimed at the realization of God's kingdom and his glory. The Mission of Christ becomes his watchword in whatever circumstance the priest may find himself. These implications do not translate to a depersonalization of the human priest rather they elevate him to a privileged position as a bridge between God and his people. His total self-giving is a loving grateful response for the gift of the ministry. The many duties of the priest like prayer and adoration, preaching, celebration of the sacraments and other services he renders to the community contribute to the increase of God's glory and men's growth in the divine life. These are summarized in the three-fold functions of a priest in imitation of Christ who is a priest, a prophet, and a king. He fulfils these functions as he does his work of preaching, sanctification and administration. All these are done in love and a spirit of service. The priesthood of Christ is thus a mystery and an incomparable gift of love to the world.

CHAPTER FIVE

SACRIFICE IN THE LIFE AND MINISTRY OF THE PRIEST

31. The ordination of a priest is an initiation into a mystery of sacrifice clearly spelt out in the dialogue between the ordaining prelate and the candidates. The ordinand is presented with an impression to which he accedes. When asked “Are you resolved to sacrifice your life with Christ and unite yourself more closely everyday with Christ... for the salvation of your brothers and sisters?” He responds, “I do”. By accepting and answering to the call, the priest embraces the life-giving self-oblation that leads him through the Cross to eternal life. In fact, he is “uniquely inserted into the mystery of Christ’s sacrifice through a personal union with him, in order to extend his saving mission. This union, which happens in the sacrament of orders, seeks to become closer through the generous response of the priest himself” (Benedict XVI, *The Seven Sacraments*, 76-77).

32. Christ made a supreme sacrifice of self in order to save us. His supreme sacrifice is an indication of supreme love. It is this highest, this most holy sacrifice that depicts for us the priesthood of Christ. Again, this sacrifice of love elicits a response. It is the desire to respond to this enormous sacrifice and to imitate it, (or perpetuate it) that constitutes the ministerial priesthood. The formation of the candidate to the priesthood, the rites of ordination and the entire life and ministry of the priest are all geared towards this life of sacrifice.

33. Formation to the Catholic Priesthood.

The Church inspired by Jesus training of his apostles (Mk 3:13ff) considers the systematic training of her priests as her duty and exclusive right (CIC. 232). The goal of their rigorous training lasting for many years, under teachers qualified and of outstanding virtue (CIC 253), is to enable the candidates to arrive at an appropriate harmony between human, spiritual, intellectual and pastoral values, and to equip them to play their role in a manner relevant to time, place and people. (Cf. CIC 255; PDV 42). This unique formation is to enable the candidates respond with dignity and nobility to the call of the priesthood which is a gift of love from Christ calling for a loving response.

The formation of the candidate often starts from the family which the Church has described as an initial Seminary (*Optatam Totus* no.2). In the family, good parents initiate a child into the life of faith in God, kindness and love for others especially

members of the family, love of truth and respect for the common good. These prepare such a child for the life of love and sacrifice which the priesthood entails.

34. The Seminary training which emphasizes the four dimensions of formation namely; the Human formation, the Spiritual formation, the intellectual formation and the Pastoral formation prepare the candidate to be a bridge and not an obstacle for others in their meeting with God through Jesus Christ the Redeemer of human race. As the humanity of Christ- the word made flesh was the *instrumentum salutis* (instrument of salvation), so the humanity of the priest is formed to be an instrument in mediating the redemptive gifts of Christ to the people of today. The candidate is prepared to be a mature, prayerful, prudent, intelligent and sensitive person who is ready to take up the role of a servant and a leader among his people. It goes without saying that an efficient playing of this role is a life of sacrifice.

35. The Rite of Priestly Ordination.

The entire rite of priestly ordination is an initiation into the life of sacrifice.

The election of the candidate is like a free and joyful declaration by the candidate who says to the Lord, here I am send me. Do with me as you please.

The promise of obedience: With this act the candidate renounces the use of his free will seeking to follow the will of the Lord through the directives of his Bishop. This is a great sacrifice indeed.

The Litany of the Saints: During the Litany of the Saints the candidates humbly prostrate with his head towards the altar. He ritually empties himself saying with St. Paul “My life is already being poured out like a libation “(2 Tim 4:6). He prays God to fill him up with His grace and strength. The Church together with the Saints pray God to accept and confirm the willful self-offering of the candidate.

36. Interrogation of the Candidate:

Here more than any other part the sacrificial aspect of this life is spelt out. The candidate through his responses to the questions declares his willingness and resolution to unite himself more closely with Christ everyday as he sacrifices his life to God for the salvation of his brothers and sisters. This gift is a call to sacrifice.

37. **Imposition of Hands:** In the words of His Holiness Pope Benedict XVI, by the imposition of hands the Lord takes possession of the Candidates saying “you belong to me” (Benedict XVI, *Priests of Jesus Christ*, Reflections on the priesthood, p. 12). If the Lord takes us, he is saying, be my messenger, be my angel, from now you will

do my work not yours. You are under the protection of my hands. You are under the protection of my heart (Cf. Benedict XVI, *Priests of Jesus Christ*, p.12) in a sense, the candidate is called upon to give up his life as a project and be a man of God.

38. Anointing of hands: in the Catholic tradition, anointing with sacred oil is a sign of the invocation of the Holy Spirit and his power. The anointing of hands during priestly ordination symbolically represents the taken over of the human- priestly- hands by God for blessings, for service and for God's work. Since the hand is a symbol of human work, God is telling the candidate from now on offer your power and all your activities to work for me. I take your hands for my work.

PRAYER OF CONSECRATION

The prayer of Consecration and the preface to the Eucharistic prayer both emphasize sacrifice as the soul of the priestly life. The same life of sacrifice is recommended to the newly ordained priest when he is handed over the chalice with the host being advised to translate and mirror in his personal life the mystery of the Lord's cross which he celebrates. "Know what you are doing, and imitate the mystery you celebrate, and model your life on the mystery of the Lord's cross" (Cf. The Rites of Priestly Ordination).

39. The Priestly Life and Ministry:

The entire life and ministry of a priest can only be meaningful when lived as a happy sacrifice. The life of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience together with prayer and charity summarize the life of a priest.

40. Evangelical Poverty is a great step to receive and accept the providence of God. Every priest ought to appreciate the import of Jesus' response his prospective disciples. He reminded them that "foxes have dens, and birds have nest, but the Son of Man, has no place to lay his head" (Lk 9:58). The vocation to the priesthood is an invitation to a radical trust in divine providence.

While poverty has to do with financial and material issues, evangelical poverty is beyond the economic sphere. It is first and foremost about faith, trust and surrender. In poverty, a priest professes absolute trust in God, which countervails covetousness, greed, avarice, materialism and every aspect of mercantile tendency relative to his ministry. It is more about detachment and resisting temptations to turn the priesthood into a business than about penury. Evangelical poverty helps the priest to shun attachment to possessions, consumption and competition. Poverty in the spirit is the right attitude towards material things which helps the priest to see material goods as

instruments for promoting the reign of God, helping the poor and the less privileged and not idols to be worshipped. By evangelical poverty the priest develops an attitude which proclaims providence over possessions.

41. Priestly Celibacy brings out the splendor of Chastity. That the priestly vocation is radically and intimately connected to sacrifice is very evident in this vow. Celibacy is for greater charity. It is a total self-giving that frees one to be completely available to offer himself, body and soul in radical imitation of Christ. It is not an end but a means that enables a priest to give away himself without reserve. Celibacy, by its nature, is ordered to a greater charity, a greater love, a greater self-giving. Pope Paul VI said that the priest's constant, undistracted and undivided availability is a sign of his Charity, which is drawn from God, and gives him "a limitless horizon" as "it deepens and gives breath to his sense of responsibility". This is fatherhood taken to a degree otherwise impossible. It is Grace. (Cf. Scott Hahn, *Many are called*, p.73) Proper integration of Charity and Chastity unleashes the beauty, the truth and the goodness of priestly interpersonal encounter with God's people.

Celibate Chastity shines the light of divine love and sweetness that draws the people to God through the priest. Priestly celibacy imbues the priest with a pastoral love and availability. It creates room for trust and confidence in the priest leading to a childlike disposition on the part of the flock that helps them open up without fear of exploitation, manipulation or abuse as the priest exudes divine fatherhood.

The value of celibate chastity transcends pastoral circumference. It makes the priest conform more to Christ, the celibate priest. It reflects angelic purity and makes the priest available for a higher spiritual fatherhood. But this, however, calls for a life of daily discipline and sacrifice.

42. Priestly Obedience

In the vow of obedience, the priest displays the spirit of sacrifice. Obedience by nature involves sacrifice. In obedience, the priest is invited to submit his "I" to the "I" of Christ and live in the "I" of the Church. He submits his destiny to the Lordship of Christ through his Church, choosing not his will but the will of He who called him. Such a submission involves a dying to self, to one's will and to idiosyncrasies as well as accepting that the will of God is communicated through the choices of the legitimate superiors.

This obedience which is the sacrifice of the human will to God, also demands poverty from the priests. It requires a self-emptying, a *kenosis*. This is because a

proud man who is full of himself can hardly be obedient. Obedience requires deep faith in God (Like the faith of Abraham, (Gen.22), otherwise one overlooks the providence of God's plan, falling into sadness or depression. A disobedient priest is an unhappy priest, generally difficult and problematic.

Again, obedience is a sign of love. One of the characteristics of love, according to Pauline teaching, is that it is not self-seeking (cf. 1 Cor. 13:1-7). Obedience in the priesthood is a sign of love of God. During his ordination, the candidate puts his hands into those of his bishop and vows obedience. This marks the sacrificial nature of the priesthood as a self-giving sacrifice by the ordained for the sake of the love he has for Christ and his body, the Church. It is this same sacrificial love that propels the priest to take on the mantle of a servant as commanded by Christ during the institution of the priesthood on Holy Thursday.

Obedience as a virtue stands out at the heart of our human engagement with each other and in our relationship with God.

Scripture is replete with how disobedience has caused man a lot, including the scourge of original sin. (Gen. 4:8). Again, to resound its veritable importance, the scripture in the Decalogue attaches a blessing to the law of obedience (Ex. 20:12). Obedience is the loving surrender to the will of God and this is an oblation that is pleasing to Him, for he does not desire offerings and sacrifices, but a humbled heart. (Psalm 40:6). In fact, the Lord prizes the sacrifice of obedience above ritual offerings, hence he told king Saul, "Obedience is better than sacrifice" (1 Sam 15:22-23).

Through priestly obedience, the priest joins Christ, his master, who came to do the father's will, who was obedient to the point of sacrificing himself on the cross. Without sacrifice and obedience to God, the priesthood of Christ in which men participate becomes impossible. Priestly obedience is therefore a form of sacrifice.

43. PRAYER AND PASTORAL CHARITY.

The priestly life and ministry can be summarized in the life of Prayer and Charity.

During his ordination the candidate pledges not only to pray daily for the Church but for the entire world. Prayer is therefore not an optional duty for the priest. He prays regularly to be connected to God from whom he draws his strength but he makes the extra sacrifice of praying for the children of God. It is a duty which he has willingly imposed on himself by his priestly consecration. Also, the priesthood of Christ is a gift of love, given out of love of Christ for his own whom he loved till the end. Everything about this sacrament is informed by love therefore the human-priest who is privileged to receive this gift must exercise it in love. All the functions, duties and pastoral work of the priest should be infused and directed by love with the sacrifices that love entails. This is the true nature of the life and ministry of a priest.

CHAPTER SIX

PRIESTHOOD AND THE HOLY EUCHARIST

44. The Eucharistic sacrifice... is the Centre and root of the whole priestly life (Cf. Vat. II Presby. Ordinis, no.14). The Second Vatican Council and the Council of Trent agree that the Eucharist is the most important reason for the existence of the priesthood. Whereas the Council of Trent focuses on the sacramental nature of the priesthood and its cultic context, the Second Vatican Council highlights the presbyterial nature of the priesthood with emphasis on its missionary context. The fathers of the Second Vatican Council set out to explain the theology of the priesthood by going back to the source and they rediscovered the concept of presbyter.

They presented the priesthood from the perspective of mission and proclamation of the Good News, starting from the Mission of the son from the Father. The two councils, however, maintain the centrality and indispensability of the Eucharistic sacrifice to the whole priestly life.

45. Pope Benedict XVI reminds us that “on the night before he died, Jesus instituted the Eucharist and at the same time established the priesthood of the New Covenant” (Benedict XVI, *The Seven Sacraments*, 78-79). This explains the Church’s stand on the indispensability of priestly ordination for valid celebration of the Eucharist. This position is beyond personal opinion, for “the Church teaches that priestly ordination is the indispensable condition for the valid celebration of the Eucharist” (Benedict XVI, *The Seven Sacraments*, 79).

46. Though the priest and the rest of the people of God share the priesthood of Christ through baptism, the common priesthood (with its immense dignity) is neither a rival to nor a substitute for the ministerial priesthood. The ordained priest is configured into Christ the head of the Church and he is thus equipped to act in the person of Christ -the head, (in persona Christi Capitis). It is this configuration into the person and headship of Christ that attaches an incredible value in relation to the ministry of Christ. Liturgical actions are actions of Christ through the priest therefore sacramental sacrifice will require a ministerial priesthood. There is only one Eucharist that which Christ the High Priest celebrates which is made present through the instrumentality or ministry of the priest.

47. The ordained priesthood is very necessary for the sacrament of the Eucharist. Any other person is not allowed to offer the sacrifice of the Mass. It is by divine will of Christ that he chose ordinary men to minister to his people in his stead. God's election is absolutely according to the pleasure of his will and purpose, including calling feeble, mortal and fallible men to preside over the eternal mysteries. Priests make present the body and blood of Christ not on account of their power, knowledge or holiness but on account of the power of Christ. The Priest's sanctity helps him and the faithful to appreciate this mystery, which is however not dependent on his sanctity. The priest's instrumentality is a privilege of grace, which requires humility, docility and obedience to the rules of the Church. The Priest's preparedness and efficiency contribute to dispose the community of the faithful for an encounter with the divine presence. The priest-president of a Eucharistic assembly should always be an aid and not an obstacle or distraction to the worshipping assembly.

48. From the faith and teachings of the Church, we affirm that, "All the sacraments are related to the Eucharist, they flow into and flow from it. But the priesthood has a unique and special relationship with it. Christ instituted the Eucharist and the priesthood at the same time in the context of the paschal sacrifice. Christ made the Eucharist the Sacrifice of the New Covenant of his Body and Blood, and made the priesthood priests of the sacrifice of this New Covenant who will make present the sacrifice where the priest (Jesus Christ) is both priest and Victim. Therefore, the priest through his sacred ordination is called to live a Eucharistic life, a spirituality of sacrifice and love" (Valerian M. Okeke, *The Holy Eucharist: Our Strength*, no.44).

THE EUCHARISTIC SPIRITUALITY OF THE PRIEST

49. The priestly life consists of a life-giving self-gift with its attendant consequences after the example of Christ. What is required of the priest is not a violent sacrifice or willful suicide but a vulnerable, oblation, self-giving love that overcomes all boundaries. It is a love that gives freely without counting the cost. It is that sacrifice which the Apostle Paul recommends even to the faithful when he wrote to the Christians in Rome. "I urge you therefore, brothers, by the mercies of God, to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God (Rom 12:1). This applies to the priest to a higher degree. The sacrifice called for is a style of life, a life of love, a life of total self-giving.

According to Joseph Carola SJ. "if we are to be an *alter Christus*, if we are to minister *in persona Christi capitis*, we must die daily to ourselves so as to live in

Christ. We must die to sin, seek God's strength in our human weakness, and strive with the help of Christ's grace to overcome our imperfections, temper our idiosyncrasies, reject vice and grow in virtues" (J. Carola SJ, Quoting Benedict XVI, *In the Nature of the Priesthood*). The priest's ministry demands an ongoing dying to self as a life long project. After the mind of Christ and in imitation of him whose entire life was a life-giving sacrificial self-offering for the salvation of the world, the priest lives in such a way that he is able to claim in the words of St. Paul, "it is no longer I, who live, but Christ who lives in me" (Gal 2:20). In fact, by the daily death demanded by his pastoral ministry the priest lives a Eucharistic spirituality of sacrifice. He participates in the priesthood of Christ and his victimhood.

50. Though the sacrificial life of a priest has to be manifested primarily in his life of selfless love, he can also show this life of sacrifice in many other ways. For example, in the life of self-denial, shunning the life of vanity, pride, over attachment to one's own opinions and impulses. He can show sacrifice by a healthy attitude towards sickness, accidents, failures, false accusations, ingratitude from people who have benefited from him and even his attitude to old age when he is no longer the center "of the solar system" and the world must move on without him. The ability to tolerate, accommodate his brother priests, the members of his biological family including but not limited to the troublesome ones among them can show great sacrifice. The Eucharistic spirituality of sacrificial love will show the priest as having authentic priestly spirituality.

Again, by essence and name the Eucharist is also thanksgiving. As the priesthood has unique and special affinity with the Holy Eucharist which is thanksgiving, the authentic priestly spirituality is that of thanksgiving. Our Lord Jesus was dismayed by the reaction of nine of the ten lepers he cured miraculously who did not return to render thanks for the favour of healing received (Lk 17: 11-19). In the same way a priest will be an ungrateful person if he realizes what God has done for him and refuses to give thanks and glory to God.

51. Therefore, priestly life will be a life of Humility, joy, integrity and gratitude. A life of awe and wonder. Wonder, that of all humans the Lord has chosen this particular person "me" for the ministerial priesthood. It calls for gratitude.

It will be a life of humility since no one is worthy of this exalted gift of God. It is grace. Like Gideon in the Bible or our Blessed Mother Mary, a humble person who is conscious of his unworthiness for his exalted vocation reciprocates in a life of thanksgiving.

It will be a life of joy. Joy of the man who enjoys God's strength.

52. It will be a life of integrity. The life of a man whose interior convictions correspond to his outward utterances and actions. A man of nobility of character who inspires respect, trust and goodness in others. A man who is convinced of God's special love for him and shares this same love of God with others.

In summary, a good priest is one whose thanksgiving is his life. He lives a Eucharistic Spirituality.

CHAPTER SEVEN

CHALLENGES TO THE PRIESTHOOD TODAY

53. The modern era presents a lot of challenges to the priests as well as to the Church at large. The priest remains as we have seen a paradox of exaltation and humility on account of his configuration to Christ whose mission he does. It is thus not surprising that in many ways the priesthood remains a sign of contradiction which defies understanding in a world that is obsessed with self-fulfillment and pursuit of pleasure. With it being intimately associated with sacrifice the priesthood appears a folly in a world ruled by materialism, reductionism, hedonism, and selfishness. Sacrifice is rather antithetical to a world often controlled by instant gratification and self-congratulatory focus on success and achievement. The identity of the priest faces a challenge if not crisis in a modern world that understands neither the language of mystery nor sacrifice.

54. If we can define challenge as a call to survive in a difficult or competitive situation, we can identify some of the challenges facing the priesthood today injecting crisis of identity. Challenges are part of life as they exist in every state of life.

We can group the challenges facing the priesthood today into two groups: external and internal. The external challenges include but are not limited to a more secularized society, Crisis in family values, anti-clerical atmosphere, authority crisis in the Church and poor performance of some priests.

Today the world is more secularized, matters of faith are becoming less and less important to many. Objective truth and religion are relegated to the background. This leads to a breakdown of metaphysical vision of reality. Things are viewed by their functional and utilitarian value. The sacramental structure of life including the priesthood are no more appreciated. This situation poses a challenge as some priests engage in activism in order to be relevant. This should not arise. In the priesthood there is a primacy of being over doing, identity over activity. The priest is not an ordinary social worker or the modern social worker or the modern-day pastor, evangelist or prophet. He is not a mere preacher, teacher or modern-day healer. The totality of these do not exhaust his identity. He is an *alter Christus* a pastor, a shepherd and a lamb of sacrifice.

55. Crisis in family values today affect the priesthood. Some families experience crisis due to failed marriages. Some other families are so busy with their work and

financial responsibilities that they pay little attention to the upbringing of their Children. A priest from such a crisis-laden family background often faces challenges. He often quarrels with other priests and other around him.

Also, the crisis of values in the wider society affects the priest. The epistemological bent of the contemporary world towards materialism, functionalism and quasi idolatry of efficiency compel some people to assess the priest in terms of material value and relevance. When they do not see much mundane value, the priest suffers a rejection, the priest should know that the yardstick of the world does not determine his value. Our Lord Jesus advised his apostles, “if you belonged to the world, the world would know you for its own and love you...”(Jn15:19).

56. More importantly some priest at the high and low levels of authority including parish priests, Vicars and heads of institutions have abused the trust and authority they have over their subjects. They have caused scandal by their misconduct. The abuse of minors is a case in point. It is regrettable and deserves total condemnation. Some priests also attract distrust by their high handedness and lack of Charity in their general duties. This should never come from a priest who is a symbol of charity.

57. The internal challenges facing the priesthood include but not limited to identity crises, economic pressure, feeling of insecurity, inability to promote healthy community life, and readiness to accept and integrate other priest-brothers into the priestly fraternity.

Sometimes, a priest is misunderstood, his talents are not recognized, he may have some other challenges that may lead to crisis. Maturity and intense prayer life are called for at this period. Problems can come to anybody; it is our attitude to the problems which will show our maturity.

The world has never been immuned from economic problems but it seems the world today is in economic crises. This is a challenge to the priest who often has pressure from the poor, from biological family members, from friends and from some others who see the priesthood as a business. This is a challenge to the priest never to act or think in a selfish way or turn the Church into an economic enterprise to his advantage.

58. Another challenge which is the priest must overcome is the inability to live in a priestly community and promote the priestly fraternity. This is called for in communities where priests live and work, and when appointments into administrative offices are required. The priestly fraternity admits of no artificial cast

system in terms of divides along local government, linguistic, state, regional and other groups. This is particularly a challenge in the Nigerian Society. These challenges and many more, far from being insurmountable can always be overcome with the spirit of the priesthood which goes with prayer, sacrifice and above all love.

CHAPTER EIGHT

WHAT ABOUT US?

59. After the discussion on the difficulties of the rich and their chances of getting into heaven. Peter asked Jesus what about us. We have left everything and followed you, what do we expect? (Mtt: 19:27).

60. After our reflection on the Catholic priesthood as sacrifice, as an indescribable divine gift of inestimable value which calls for total self-giving in grateful loving response to this mysterious gift of love, one is tempted to ask, “why sacrifice?” what makes it desirable? Why accept such a demanding gift?

The self-sacrifice demanded of the priest is not suicide. It is an act of love which is continuous and life-long uniting itself to the sacrifice of Christ. The priest should remember that it is the sacrifice of Christ which underlies his exaltation. The Book of Revelation says

“Worthy is the Lamb who was slain, to receive, power and wealth and wisdom and might, and honor and glory and blessing.” (Rev 5:12).

61. It is clear that the glory and exaltation of the lamb came after the sacrifice. Also, in his letter to the Philippians, Paul says that, Christ humbled himself and became obedient unto death even death on a cross, therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name which is above every name. That at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue proclaim that Jesus Christ is the Lord. (Phil 2:6-11).

It follows that Jesus became Lord after his self-sacrifice. His exaltation came after the humiliation.

In the same way the life of a priest when well lived becomes a blessing, a joy to God’s children and a glory to God. It is a life that enriches the people of God. The priestly life is life-giving, transmitting the loving kindness and healing love of God to his people. It is a mysterious divine gift which is a mystery of love.

We may recall Jesus Christ’s response to Peter ‘s question, “Anyone who has given up houses or brothers... for my sake, will receive a hundredfold more, (in this Life) and will inherit eternal life (Cf. Mtt 19:29).

62. The people of God through their baptism and confirmation also participate in the priesthood of Christ through the common priesthood of the faithful. In the Old

Testament (Exodus 19:6), the people of Israel are referred to as a “kingdom of Priests”. In the New Testament as well, Christians are addressed by Peter as “a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation” (1 Peter 2:9). It goes to say that all Christians are called to holiness. They are not priests in the sense of the ministerial priests but they participate in the Mission of Christ through their life of Charity which sanctifies the world. They also participate in the ministry of the ordained priests through prayer and support to the family of God.

CHAPTER NINE

MARY MOTHER OF PRIESTS

63. Mary's connection to the priesthood comes from her position as the Mother of the eternal High priest, Jesus Christ. Her divine maternity of the High Priest and whole-hearted submission to the will of God create special bond between her, her son Jesus Christ, the individual priest and other priests (*alter Christi*) who are brothers of her son by sacramental configuration. Mary is indeed a special formator to the priests, helping them to appreciate the will of God and surrender to it as she did.

The Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, highlights this intimate relationship between Mary and the priesthood in his General Catechesis. He teaches that

“Mary’s “Yes” is therefore the door through which God was
Able to enter the world to become man. So it is that Mary is
Truly and profoundly involved in the mystery of the incarnation,
of our salvation. And the incarnation, the son’s becoming man
Was the beginning that prepared the ground for the gift of himself;
for giving himself with great love on the cross to become Bread
For the life of the world. Hence, sacrifice, priesthood and incarnation
Go together and Mary is at the heart of this mystery (Benedict XVI,
“*Mary and the Priesthood*” General Audience, Wed 12 August, 2009)

64. Mary cares for priests with special affection because they are sacramentally her sons, configured to Christ the Priest and hence participate in Mary's mission of bringing Christ the Redeemer to the world.

Pope Benedict XVI further explains that the special fondness of Mary's love for priests is Christological. This is because they are more like Jesus, the love of her heart and they are committed to the mission of proclaiming, bearing witness to and giving Christ to the World. (cf. Benedict XVI, *Mary and the Priesthood*, wed. 12 August 2009),

65. According to Pope John Paul II, All of us... who receive the same power through priestly ordination have in a sense a prior right to see Mary as our mother...you should entrust your priesthood to her in a special way, (Cf. Pope Johnpaul II *Letter to Priest*, 1979 no.11) we recall that in a special way, Mary is associated with the priestly ministry not only by being the mother of the Lord, the High Priest, Jesus

Christ, but also through her close association with the ministry of the apostles. Beyond the entrustment of new motherhood to her at the foot of the Cross, she was present at the upper Room praying and waiting for the Holy Spirit. She prayed with and for the apostles and they received the Holy spirit on the birthday of the Church. Through her solidarity she exercised the maternal closeness and spiritual motherhood that the nascent Church needed. Becoming the Mother of Christ, Mary has become the Mother of priests and of the Church.

Every priest should endeavor to be a true child of Mary. All should develop a deep reverence and devotion to her. Like John the Apostle every priest should take Mary home and be under her maternal care.

CHAPTER TEN

CONCLUSION

66. Our reflections on the priesthood lead us to the conclusion that the priesthood is a mystery, an indescribable divine gift that calls for sacrifice as a response from the priest recipient. We are encouraged by St. Paul who reminds us of the words of the Divine Master, “My Grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness” (2 Cor. 12: 9). The grace of God confers upon the priests this honor to which mere mortals could never on their own alone aspire or attain. When a good person receives a precious gift, he not only takes good care of it, he naturally safeguards it. In like manner any priest who recognizes the priesthood for the great treasure that it is will respond with two dispositions: Thanksgiving and Sacrifice,

PRAYER

67. Almighty and merciful God, in Blessed Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, you joined the Apostolic zeal of a priest and a pastor, to the way of life of a Monk. Grant us by his intercession that persevering in prayer, we may seek untiringly the coming of your kingdom by winning our brethren for Christ by love, through the priestly ministry, in order to share with them your eternal glory. Through Christ Our Lord! Amen

(Adapted from the Collect of the memorial of Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi, Jan.20)

Given in Onitsha, at the Cathedral Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity, on 17th February, Ash Wednesday, in the year of our Lord 2021

MOST REV. VALERIAN M. OKEKE
Archbishop of Onitsha

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