

AN INTROSPECTIVE CONTEMPLATION ON
THE PRIESTLY IDEALS

Religio

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MOSES MDOOYONGU ORHUNGUR



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DEDICATION

This retreat manual is dedicated to my late brother
Very Revd Fr James Shagba Moti.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

First to be acknowledged is God Almighty, provider of all and sustainer of all. I extol Him for guiding and granting me safe journey to and from Jalingo, and using me to communicate His will to His children. I will ever remain indebted to Him for his goodness and mercy.

I owe gratuitous regards to my Bishop Athanasius Usuh, for permitting me to answer God's call to facilitate the 2008 Annual Retreat of the Catholic Diocese of Jalingo. My appreciation also goes to Bishop Damaan for finding me worthy to share my experience and the ideals of the Priesthood with my beloved priests in the Catholic Diocese of Jalingo.

I commend Revd Fr Shagbaor Wegh for his brotherly, spiritual and moral support. I also thank my friends Revd Frs Ajiki, Akegh, Ortese, and my younger brothers Tivlumun Ge and Terfa Nicholas Tughemba. May the God of PEACE and LOVE continue to bless and provide for you all. Amen

FOREWORD

In a world where the priesthood is facing dire challenges like sexual abuse of children, spiritual aridity, misappropriation of funds and gross materialism among others, there is a need for priests who are well experienced in ministry and have developed themselves not only spiritually but intellectually and psychologically to help their fellow priests live above the challenges of the 21st century. One of those refined priests in Northern Nigeria is Reverend Father Professor Moses Orhungur, a scholar and legend.

Fr Moses Orhungur has lived up to this task of helping in guiding and instructing his fellow priests in line with the challenges of the time. This is what Father has done in 2008 at the annual retreat in the Catholic Diocese of Jalingo. In this eight chapter book, Father Orhungur has reflected on the essence of a retreat and the attitude of priests during retreats; the true ideals of the priesthood, the challenges of the Nigerian priests in the 21st century; the collective responsibility of all priests; Mary, our mother and model; a lesson on patience; and the importance of reconciliation. Each of these chapters has a unique message for a contemporary priest and the lay faithful. They offer an outstanding expose' on the failure and strength of the priesthood. This revolutionary and scholarly message from Father do not only address the problems within the priesthood

but teaches priests to live peacefully with one another and in a serene environment that is conducive to reflection to deepen our spirituality for the salvation of all souls for Christ. Father has presented this salvific message in concise and simple language devoid of theological misgivings and heretic insinuations. In fact, no priest will go through this piece and remain the same, hence it contains classic initiatives that are capable of salvaging the souls that are even on the verge of despair and awakening priest's consciousness on the need to be more responsible and live chastely.

I therefore encourage priests and the faithful alike to get a copy of this resourceful and revolutionary material as well as reflect on it for guidance and spiritual resurgence. The ideas coded in here will not only save the priesthood of Nigerian Church from failing as her counterparts in Ireland, United States and other countries have, but prepare her for impending scandals. Let us save ourselves and the Catholic Church from shame by guiding ourselves accordingly with this retreat stuff by a Psychologist, Theologian, Philosopher and Spiritual Director of repute, Professor Moses Mdooyongu Orhungur. Happy reading and reflection!

Very Revd Fr Dr James Moti
Catholic Diocese of Makurdi
15 January, 2011.

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INTRODUCTION

Retreat is a period of grace, which offers us the opportunities of growth in holiness and of intimacy with Jesus Christ. It is a period of spiritual rejuvenation and edification. A period set aside to listen, digest, introspect and contemplate the word of God. This is a period within which individually, we retrospect analytically how we have been living out our priestly calling, with the view to ensuring that we live out our priesthood in consonance with the dictates of the Ministry. It is a period of reconciliation with the Church, the diocese and our fellow priests. Also, it is a period of restoration.

In the history of the people of Israel, we see how yearly the Israelites returned home to Jerusalem for the Passover feast. This homecoming was an opportunity to come en masse to celebrate and consolidate their oneness, to remind themselves of the fact that they have a common root and a compelling need to encourage one another. Today, we too, like the people of Israel have come together in this year's annual retreat to reflect on our common vocation as priests.

In Matthew's gospel, Jesus condemned hypocrisy: "why do you observe the chip in your brother's eye, but not consider the beam in your

own eye?” (Matt. 7:3) “...first of all remove the beam from your own eye and then you will see clearly to remove the chip from your brother’s eye” (Matt. 7:5). This is because hypocrisy makes us unvirtuous. As the retreat director, I am not perfect. I have my own shortcomings and inadequacies. However, one thing I am convinced of is that I have the disposition and total surrender to the Holy Spirit to be used even as I direct this annual retreat. More so, it must be noted that we all are missionaries to ourselves with an assignment to rebuild the broken walls of our lives, to bring healing to the wounded, to reconcile those that hate each other, to inject sanity and discipline into our system and to transform each of us from simply being administratively the Vicar General, the Chancellor, the Parish Priest or the Parish Vicar in the diocese to becoming functionally, the first and last at our duty posts.

There are five very important things I request of you during this retreat. Without these things, you will achieve very little from this enviable and indispensable gathering. I consider it indispensable because throughout the year, this is the only opportunity we have to come together as a family to remind ourselves of our unique calling, make amends in the areas we have failed and spiritually renew ourselves for the greater tasks we have ahead. It is on these five points that all that we

shall be doing rest. In fact, I consider them as the foundational requisites upon which the successes of this retreat rest.

Create an Enabling Environment

According to Henri Nouwen (2002),

silence protects the inner fire... guards the inner heat of religious emotions. This inner heat is the life of the Holy Spirit within us. Thus, silence is the discipline by which the inner fire of God is tended and kept alive.

Silence is also construed as an enabling environment for reflection, divine promptings and inspirations, which will help us re-examine our stand before God and man, locate or relocate where we generally invest or waste our God-given talents and resources. Let this annual retreat be a good avenue for you to take inventory of your priestly casualties, noting how much losses you have sustained, how much gains recorded and how much more gains are remaining. Solitude is what we need here, in order to come face to face with our true or false self.

Be Sincere and Open to God

Here, two things are required of us – the first is to be sincere in bringing to God all about how you

have been living your priestly life. The second is to humbly accept and allow what I am going to say to be moderated by God for future fruitful pastoral ministry. Coming to Jesus in retreat qualifies you better to go to others, because it will enable you to draw spiritual strength with which you will carry out His mission. This communitarian act helps us to abide in Him more firmly. Just as He said:

Stay in me, and I in you. As the branch is unable to bear fruit of itself unless it stays in the vine, even so, neither can you unless you stay in me (Jn 15:4).

So, the fruitfulness of our ministry is totally dependent on our steadfast love for Jesus. This period is necessary for us to know if we are in communion with God via His son Jesus Christ to ensure that we are still carrying out our priestly duties diligently since cut off from Jesus, our priesthood becomes arid and barren.

You are a Teacher

You are a teacher of the people of God. Their salvific messiah, meant to lead their souls to salvation. The question, how have I been fulfilling this obligation? is of paramount importance here. Mother Theresa of Calcutta in her words to the

priests who gathered for the 1984 World-Wide Retreat in Rome said:

We need you priests to teach us how to realise the presence of Jesus Christ. We need you to teach us how to be holy. We need you to teach us how to pray. I beg you to live your priesthood to the fullest by being carriers of Jesus Christ. You must be for the people the living realities of Christ among them. You must be there where obedience has placed you and you are the only ones who can do it.

Such maternal words are still relevant to all the priests in the world, most especially for you who have gathered here for this annual retreat. The missionary spirit of oneness must be fostered. Jalingo Diocese needs holy priests such as those whose charming characteristics are thus portrayed by Mother Theresa. The attainment of our mission as priests can only come from the execution of such outstanding characteristic features. This calls for re-examination of our priestly role of teaching and exemplary leadership.

A Period of Self-Knowledge

This period is of self-knowledge. Every individual person is an embodiment of three people: the person you think you are, the person

others think you are and the person you really are. Many people lack self-knowledge. This is borne out of lack of contemplative silence. Silence is the only time within which the individual can tear off any mask he has put on himself so that he can see himself as he really is. This is only achieved during sessions like this. Retreat periods provide the golden opportunity of self-renewal and reawakening. During retreats, there is an inward stillness and inward healing. The lips and the heart are mostly still. We no longer entertain our own imperfect thoughts and opinions, but God alone speaks to us and we wait in singleness of heart, that we may know His will, and in silence of our spirits, that we may do His will, and do that only. In silence, we discover God. Psalm 46:10 says, “be still and know that I am God.” For St Augustine exhorts: “enter into yourself: it is in the interior man where truth is found.”

Silence is the language of deeper infused prayer that the Holy Spirit gives to those who thirst for God’s word. Love and cherish silence, for it is in it that knowledge is born.

A Period of Intercession and Prayers

Retreat is the time to make sacramental confession after a sincere, humble and honest examination of conscience. Many of us have developed a carefree conscience as a result of bad

company, neglect of sacramental confession of sins, and lax attitude about prayer. Within this period of intercession and prayer, we must re-evaluate our attitude to prayer. For prayer is what we were ordained for and we shall spend all our priestly life in prayer. Prayer is the mother lode of all the spiritual graces we need to be sustained in the priesthood. Brothers,

The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is He who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts, His asking arises from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realise it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for Him
CCC ²⁵⁶⁰.

So it is God who wants us to always go to Him in prayer, and we must always pray. Not just for the Church, and ourselves but for our families, as well as those in special need. You must know that the devil has a special desire in bastardising and destabilising the families of priests. You cannot be in peace in your parish when your biological family is dagger drawn. For as a physician, you have to heal your family first. Hence, our prayer life must be revitalised. During this annual

retreat, the Lord is standing at the door of your heart knocking, calling, so that if only you hear His voice and open, He will come in and dine with you (cf Rev. 3:20). The decision to open and let Him in is inestimably important. Since without Him, the entire priestly ministry becomes arid and boring. Our personal experience with Jesus Christ is what determines the effectiveness of our sacramental ministry.

Our gathering here during this period of grace is to let God speak to us. Our attitude has to be that of the young Samuel: “Speak Lord, your servant is listening” (1 Samuel 3:9) and we can only face this challenge with the help of the Holy Spirit, our eternal advocate who will lead us to a spiritual communion with God our Father. May our blessed Mother Mary, help us to do this retreat with faithfulness so as to become faithful priests after the mind of Her Son, Jesus Christ.

THE IDEALS OF THE PRIESTLY MINISTRY

Nature of the Priesthood

...the Lord... appointed certain men as ministers in order that they might be united in one body in which "all the members have not the same function" (Romans 12:4). These men were to hold in the community of the faithful the sacred power of Order, that of offering sacrifice and forgiving sins and were to exercise the priestly office publicly on behalf of men in the name of Christ. Thus, Christ sent the apostles as He Himself had been sent by the Father, and then through the apostles made their successors, the bishops, sharers in his consecration and mission. The function of the Bishop's ministry was handed over in a subordinate degree to priests so that they might be appointed in the order of the priesthood and be co-workers of the Episcopal order for the proper fulfilment of the apostolic mission that had been entrusted to it by Christ (Presbyterorum Ordinis No.2).

Today, because the priestly ministry is joined to the Episcopal order, we share in the authority by which Christ Himself builds up, sanctifies and rules His body. Hence our priesthood while

presupposing the sacraments of initiation is nevertheless conferred by its own particular sacrament. Through that sacrament we by the anointing of the Holy Spirit are signed with a special character and so are configured to Christ the priest in such a way that we are able to act in the person of Christ the head.

Therefore, the object that we strive for in our ministry and life is the procuring of the glory of God the father in Christ. That glory consists in men's conscious, free, and grateful acceptance of God's plan as completed in Christ and their manifestation of it in their whole life. Thus, whether we devote ourselves to prayer and adoration or preach the word or offer the Eucharistic sacrifice and administer the other sacraments, or exercise other services for the benefit of men, are contributing at once to the increase of God's glory and men's growth in the divine life. All of these activities will find their consummation in the glorious coming of the same Lord, when He shall have delivered up the kingdom to God the Father.

Place of Priests in the World

The place of priests in the world is best encapsulated in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*. According to this second Vatican document,

Priests, while being taken from amongst men and appointed for men in the things that appertain to God that they may offer gifts and sacrifices for sins, live with the rest of men as with brothers. So also the Lord Jesus the Son of God, a man sent by the father to men, dwelt amongst us and willed to be made like to his brothers in all things except only sin (Presbyterorum Ordinis no. 3).

All of us are chosen from the people and set apart for God's salvific purpose of saving the rest of mankind for Him. We can only do this by being models of single heartedness like Christ. So like the apostles who imitated Jesus Christ, we too must make Him known to the world. St Paul acknowledged Jesus as the man "set apart for the gospel of God" (Rom. 1:1), and declares that Jesus became all things in all men that He might save all. Our mission in the world is prioritised by witnessing to Jesus Christ, without this, we cannot be considered as Christ's servants. This is outstandingly captured by the second Vatican Council document Presbyterorum Ordinis:

The Priests of the New Testament are, it is true, by their vocation to ordination, set apart in some way in the midst of the people of God, but this is not in order that they should be separated from that

people or from any man, but that they should be completely consecrated to the task for which God chooses them. They could not be the servants of Christ unless they were witnesses and dispensers of a life other than that of this earth (No.3).

From the foregoing, it is obviously clear that we are not political leaders and must not champion the course of materialism. Our very ministry lays a special claim on us not to conform ourselves to this world. St Paul echoed this in his epistle to the Romans,

Do not conform yourselves to this age, but be transformed by a renewal of mind that you may test what is the will of God, what is good, well pleasing and perfect (Rom.12:2).

We are required at the same time to live among men in this world and that as good shepherds, we should know our sheep and should also seek to lead back those who do not belong to this fold, so that we too may hear the voice of Christ and there may be one fold and one shepherd.

We can only achieve this aim by cultivating Godly virtues, which are rightly held in high esteem in human relations. Such qualities are goodness of heart, sincerity, strength and

constancy of mind, careful attention to justice, courtesy and others which Apostle Paul recommend when he said:

Whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there is any excellence, if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things (Philippians 4:8).

The Function of Priests

Our function in the ministry is subsumed in those that shall be exposed here. And you have to listen well, so as to do a comparative analysis of this teaching on how you have been living out the priesthood. It is from here that possible corrections could be made with the view to making sure that all you do as a priest conforms to what the Church has stipulated.

Priests as Ministers of God's Word

Our first task as co-workers of the Bishops is to preach the Gospel of God to all men. It is in doing this that we fulfil the Lord's command, "Go into the world and preach the Gospel to every creature" (Matt. 16:15) and thus set up and increase the people of God. For by the saving word of God, faith is aroused in the heart of unbelievers and is nourished in the heart of believers. By this

the congregation of the faithful begins and grows according to Pauline teaching:

Faith comes from what is heard and what is heard comes by the preaching of Christ (Rom. 10:17).

We then owe it to the people to share with them the truth of the Gospel. Therefore, whether by behaving honourably towards people, we ought to lead people to glorify God, or by openly preaching or proclaiming the mystery of Christ to unbelievers; or teaching the Christian message or explaining the Church's doctrine or endeavouring to treat contemporary problems in the light of Christ's teaching – in every case our role is to teach not our own wisdom but the Word of God and to issue an urgent invitation to all men to conversion and holiness. Moreover, our preaching, if it must become more effective in moving the minds of our hearers, must expound the Word of God not merely in a general and abstract way but by an application of the eternal truth of the Gospel to the concrete circumstances of life.

Priests as Ministers of the Sacraments and the Eucharist

The purpose for which we are consecrated by

God, through the ministry of the Bishop is that we should be made to share in a special way in Christ's priesthood and by carrying out sacred functions, act as His ministers who through His spirit continually exercise His priestly function for our benefit in the liturgy. By baptism, we introduce men into the people of God; by the sacrament of penance we reconcile sinners with God and the Church; by the anointing of the sick we relieve those who are ill and especially by the celebration of the mass we offer Christ's sacrifice sacramentally. But in the celebration of all the sacraments, as St Ignatius Martyr asserted – priests are hierarchically united with the Bishop in various ways and so make him present in a certain sense in individual assemblies of the faithful.

Suffice to note that the other sacraments and indeed all ecclesiastical ministries and works of the apostolate are bound up with the Eucharist and are directed towards it. In the Eucharist, Christ himself our pasch and the living bread gives life to men through the Holy Spirit. For this reason, the Eucharist is the source and the summit of all preaching of the Gospel.

In the spirit of Christ, we instruct the faithful to submit their sins to the church with a contrite heart in the sacrament of penance, so that they may be daily more and more converted to the

Lord, remembering His words: “Repent for the kingdom of heaven is at hand” (Matt. 4:17).

Every one of us must do a flashback to how we have been administering the sacraments. Is it according to the teachings of the Church? How do I prepare for the mass? How do I celebrate the Eucharist? Do I give time to it or just rush through the rubrics and finish it in few minutes to go for other things? Do I administer the sacraments as if they were the things I was ordained for? The answer to these questions should be on display in the heart of each of us for a critical appraisal and rational diagnosis.

Priests as Rulers of God’s People

All priests exercise the function of Christ as pastors and Heads in proportion to our share of authority. In the name of the Bishop, we gather the family of God as a brotherhood endowed with the spirit of unity and lead it in Christ through the spirit of God the father. For the exercise of this ministry, a spiritual power is given to us, a power whose purpose is to build up. And in building up the Church, we ought to treat everybody with the greatest kindness after the model of our Lord. We should teach them and warn them as our dearest children, according to the words of the apostle:

Be urgent in season and out of season, convince, rebuke and exhort, be unfailing in patience and in teaching (2 Tim. 4:2).

Although we owe service to everybody, the poor and the weaker ones have been committed to our care in a special way. We are also called to look after young people with special diligence. This also applies to married couples and parents. It is desirable that these should meet in friendly groups to help each other in the task of more easily and more fully living in a Christian way of life that is often difficult. We have to keep in mind that all religious men and women, being particularly eminent group in the Lord's house, are deserving of having special care directed to their spiritual progress for the good of the whole church. Finally, we ought to be especially devoted to the sick and those dying, visiting them and comforting them in the Lord.

The task of the Parish priest is not limited to individual care of the faithful. It extends by right also to the formation of a genuine Christian community. A local community, which ought not to merely promote the care of the faithful within itself, but imbued with the missionary spirit, smoothen the path to Christ for all men. In addition, the ecclesial community exercises a truly motherly function in leading souls to Christ by its

charity, its prayer, its example and its penitential works.

In building a Christian community, we can never be the servants of any human ideology or party. Rather, our task as heralds of the Gospel and pastors of the church is the attainment of the spiritual growth of the body of Christ.

Special Spiritual Requirement in the Life of the Priest

Priests Call to Holiness

... all in the Church, whether they belong to the hierarchy or are cared for by it, are called to holiness, according to the apostle's saying, for this is the will of God your sanctification (1 Thess. 4:3; Lumen Gentium No. 39).

All Christians are called to holiness. Jesus Christ himself made this clarion call. The Lord Jesus, divine teacher and model of all perfection said, "You, therefore must be perfect, as your heavenly father is perfect" (Matt. 5:48). However, *Presbyterorum Ordinis* has it that the priest is given new impetus to strive for holiness because of his special consecration to God, his distinctive configuration to Christ in the sacrament of Holy Orders and his share in Christ's ministry of

pastoral charity (No.12).

In his Apostolic Exhortation on the formation of priests, Pope John Paul II emphasised the essentials of holiness in priestly ministry. Pope John Paul II said,

The priestly ministry is essentially a call to holiness, in the form, which derives from the sacrament of Orders. Holiness is intimacy with God: it is the imitation of Christ who was poor, chaste and humble; it is unreserved love for souls and a giving of oneself on their behalf and for their true good; it is love for the church, which is holy and wants us to be holy, because this is the mission that Christ entrusted to her. Each one of you should also be holy in order to help your brothers and sisters pursue their vocation to holiness (Pastores Dabo Vobis, No.33).

Therefore without holiness, the priestly ministry becomes an unfruitful mission. Brothers in Christ, if our ministry is to be fruitful, holiness is an indispensable criterion. It is of greatest benefit for the fulfilment of the ministry. The fact that it is possible for God's grace to carry out the work of salvation through unworthy ministers, yet God ordinarily prefers to show his wonders through those men who are more submissive to the impulse

and guidance of the Holy Spirit, and who because of their intimate union with Christ and their holiness of life, are able to say with St Paul, “It is no longer I who live but Christ lives in me” (Gal. 2:20).

In his daily life, the priest is to model his life according to the call to holiness that comes to all Christians. The witness of his commitment in the face of his human frailty and struggle with sin – can challenge others to a deeper commitment to a life of faithful discipleship. His exemplary life can empower the formation of the Christian image in others much like the example of the saints can do. This is not because a priest is already a saint but because he struggles to become a saint in the midst of his own humanity. And it is of paramount importance that the witness of the priest’s own efforts to be a faithful disciple is essential to giving authenticity to his teaching. His message is more powerful when it is mirrored in his personal life. Without this, his message is contradictory and simply incredible.

Biblical scripture tells us that priests are “appointed to act on behalf of men and women in relation to God” (Heb. 5:1). Some of us take it for granted that every service given to men can be called a service of God. When we become involved in hundreds of other ministries but fail to give that specific service we are qualified to give, then

something is wrong. Many priests neglect the work of God when they concentrate on projects that are material, economic, administrative, mechanical or recreational in nature. With such things, the priestly ministry is under the threat of being secularised.

In his famous dictum, St Augustine said, "God is to be followed, but is not to be seen. Man is to be seen but not to be followed. So God became man so that we might find someone to both see and follow." As priests, the light of Christ must be radiant in our lives. For as His ambassadors, we all must radiate his qualities to the world that is darkened by evil. By implication, we should be like Christ in every way in our thoughts, in our words and in our deeds. It means living constantly in the presence of God and trying our best in every situation and circumstance to carry out our every activity according to the will of God, for we are the focus of holiness in the church. Our lives must constitute a pragmatic example of the way in which the values of the Gospel can be demonstrated in the lives of individuals and the community as a whole. In fact, we are the source of inspiration to all Christians.

At an occasion in New Delhi, the Minister of Social Welfare asked Mother Theresa why she and her sisters were so different when "you and I do the same social work." And she replied, the

difference is that “you do it for something, but we only do it for someone.” As priests, this should be our motivation that we are doing our work for someone: the man, the woman, the child coming to you for help is someone and that someone he or she represents is Jesus. We must realise that we are not social workers and that the Catholic Church is not a kind of welfare wing of the government. No doubt we will do social work but we bring to it a unique perspective because it is our conviction that we are serving Christ in the people we serve.

The call to holiness is not a new thing. However, it is ever crucial that it constituted the theme for the World Retreat for priests held in Rome, 1984. Long ago, the Lord told his people in Lev.19:2 that “Be ye Holy because I, the Lord your God I am Holy.” Hundreds of years later, Jesus reiterated the same thing in His famous Sermon on the Mount: “Be ye perfect as your heavenly Father is perfect” (cf Matt. 5:48). Peter also appeals,

...do not be conformed to the passions of your former ignorance but as he who called you is holy, be holy yourselves in all your conduct: since it is written, you shall be holy for I am holy (1 Pet. 1:14ff).

Apostle Paul in his first epistle to Timothy said “train yourself in godliness” (1 Tim.4:7). In Heb.12:14, the author declared that without holiness no one will see the Lord. Just as Msgr Gotan put it,

It will be a pity after all the tremendous sacrifices we make in trying to follow Jesus if we end up outside heaven and in hell because we are not holy.

Today is the right time to make serious effort to become holy.

Prayer is the key that unlocks the door of holiness. Through prayer, we get close to Jesus. Prayer sets our hearts on fire for the Lord and intensifies our desire to follow Jesus, know Him, love Him, imitate Him and serve Him. It is from Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament in daily adoration that we learn to abhor sin in all its ramifications. As we pursue and discover Jesus through prayer, we grow more eager to making him followed, known, loved, imitated, and served by others. Getting close to Jesus makes us to hate sin and love God above all things.

Brotherly Bond and Cooperation among Priests
According to the second Vatican Council,

All priests who are constituted in the order of priesthood by the sacrament of Order, are bound together by an intimate sacramental brotherhood (Presbyterorum Ordinis No.8).

So even though priests may be assigned duties yet they fulfill the one priestly service for humanity. And based on this fact, it is important that all priests should help each other so that they may be fellow-helpers of the truth. Each priest is joined to the rest of the members of this priestly body by special ties of apostolic charity of ministry and of brotherhood. This is signified liturgically from ancient times by the fact that priests present at an ordination are invited to impose hands, along with the ordaining Bishop, on the chosen candidate(s) and when priests concelebrate the sacred Eucharist in a spirit of harmony. So, all priests are united with their brother priests by the bond of charity, prayer and total cooperation. In this way, the unity which Christ willed his own to be perfected in one is demonstrated.

It therefore follows from the foregoing that older priests should sincerely accept the younger ones as brothers in the ministry and be of help to them in facing the first tasks and responsibilities of their ministry. They should also make effort to understand their outlook even though it may be

different from their own and should give kindly encouragement to their projects. Young priests on their own part must respect the age and experience of their elders; they must consult with them on matters concerning the care of souls and willingly cooperate with them.

The spirit of brotherhood would help priests never to forget hospitality and cultivate kindness and altruism. The church calls them to be particularly concerned about those who are sick, about the afflicted, the overworked, the lonely, the exiled, and the persecuted. Priests also have to be delighted to gather together for relaxation, remembering the words by which the Lord himself invited his weary apostles: “come apart into a desert place and rest a little” (Mk. 6:31).

In addition, the knowledge of the bond of brotherhood should help priests to realise that they have an obligation towards those labouring under difficulties. They must offer timely help to them. Priests ought to always treat with fraternal charity and compassion those who have failed in certain ways. Priests must always pray earnestly for them and never cease to show them love.

It is possible that during this retreat, priests shall discover opportunities they have lost or time they have wasted. However, God Almighty can “repay you for the years, which the locust has eaten” (James 2:25). Encouraged in this way,

priests can move toward the future with great faith in the one for whom nothing is impossible. To Him who, through the power at work in us, is able to accomplish much more than anything we ask for or imagine, to Him be glory in the Church and in Christ Jesus to all the generations forever. Amen (cf Eph. 3:20).

CHALLENGES OF THE NIGERIAN PRIESTS IN THE 21ST CENTURY

The Irish Church: Lessons and Challenges for Nigeria

Church history has it that Irish missionaries contributed immensely to the mission of the Catholic Church globally. Many countries in Africa, Asia, Europe and America benefited in the vocation boom that was witnessed in Ireland. For priests in Nigeria, the great achievements of Catholicism in the past hundred years of her existence (1865-1965) is in large measure a chronicle of the heroism of the many Irish men and women who traversed our vast country, implanting the Catholic faith, opening schools and vocational centres, and founding hospitals and orphanage homes.

The Maynooth College, the All Hallows College, the Kiltigan and the training centres of the Christian Brothers, the Our Lady of Apostles Sisters, the St Louis Sisters and the Mercy Sisters, among others produced tens of thousands of missionaries that carried the Christian gospel to various parts of the world. The Republic of Ireland was referred to as the land of Saints and Scholars. This was in recognition of the tremendous contributions of numerous people of Irish descent

to Christian spirituality and theology as well as to intellectual advancement of humanity.

About thirty-one years ago, Ireland began to witness a rapid decline in religious practice and in vocations to the priesthood and the religious life, culminating today in the closure of many houses of formation for lack of vocations and the widespread phenomenon of empty pews at Sunday masses. Religious congregations are ageing. Seminaries and convents are becoming empty. Some formation houses are sold, while others are used to train people. Many of those baptised and confirmed in the church are today championing anti-life, anti-church, anti-pope courses in parliaments and the media. With the exposure of numerous scandals on the part of some members of the clergy and religious superiors in recent years, and with the exaggerated celebration of these scandals by an obviously anti-church media, the ageing clergy and religious superiors in Ireland are today thoroughly derided, maligned, harassed and humiliated. Many priests and religious leaders go around disguised as very few of them have the courage to walk the streets of Dublin or Cork with their clerical collars or habits. In the midst of this embarrassing scenario, there is widespread crisis of identity and relevance among the leaders of today's Irish Church.

Strictly speaking, the Catholic Church seems to have lost its grip on the Irish population, as the social values and ethos of the majority of people, now seem to contradict the spiritual orientation and the moral prescriptions handed down to successive generations of Irish people. Not only have many catholic politicians publicly rejected the church's teaching on such matters as contraception and abortion. The generality of the people seem to have cultivated an anti-clerical disposition that is sometimes vicious in its manifestations.

In recent years, a number of the clergy and religious superiors including high prelates have been embroiled in serious scandals that were unduly celebrated by a mischievous mass media, which appear poised to get its pound of flesh from the leadership of the institutional church. The public on their part seemed to have responded to the embarrassing revelation of child abuse levied against one member of the clergy and religious leaders after another, with shock, outrage and resentment. Now we seem to have come full circle. The clergy used to be the pride of Ireland. Today, they are becoming an object of scorn, derision and even occasional aggression.

Challenges

The Nigerian Church owes its origin in large measure to the Irish missionary endeavours. Since we operate along the same paradigm of the Church and are still very much hooked unto the parameters set by the missionaries – having done precious little to incarnate the faith or contextualise the structures of our church – the fate of Catholicism and the plight of the clergy and religious leaders in Ireland today thus pose dire dangers for the leadership of the Nigerian church at the dawn of the 21st century. These dangers call not only for your prayerful reflection under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, but also for the courage to speak out in favour of, and to initiate necessary changes on the part of all who are committed to the continued relevance of the Catholic Church in this new millennium. In fact, as Monsignor Aniagwu, former Rector SS Peter and Paul Seminary Ibadan, a priest who has visited Ireland many times (i.e. 1981, 1986, 1994) says, it is possible that the Irish pandemonium could be ours in the nearest future. For him,

If Nigeria suddenly strikes gold and there is affluence everywhere, if there is no longer so much shocking poverty around, if people's basic needs begin to be adequately met, will our churches continue to be filled on Sundays? Frankly,

I don't think they will continue to go in the numbers that we know now. Just how soon all that will happen will depend on how fast Nigeria climbs out of poverty into affluence. "Poverty is good for religion" may be a wicked cliché. But it is sadly true. It has been verified again and again since the days of the decadent Rome.

This shows that Nigeria's poor economy is one of the major factors sustaining Catholicism in this part of the world. Once there is an economic boom, the Catholic Church will start experiencing in a large measure what the Irish Church has suffered.

The poverty level of this country notwithstanding, Pentecostalism is seriously inflaming anti-Catholicism. They criticise and squash catholic doctrine, justifying their own teaching and telling people to come to their living churches. Churches of signs and wonders, miracle working centres that has permanent solution to their problems. And because many of our people have a lot of problems, you see them flocking to the Adeboye's, the T.B. Joshua's, the Oyedepo's, the Kumuyi's and the Oyakhilome's.

Commenting on the lifestyle of the clergy Monsignor Aniagwu said, that

If the truth must be told, the lifestyle of many priests in Nigeria today leave much to be desired. There is a brazen flaunting of material affluence in the face of crushing poverty of the masses. Even in the traditional areas of “sin”, “immorality” I am told that prudence has often been thrown to the wind, that many priests and religious leaders openly comport themselves in ways that are unexpected of celibates.

Today, it is in few places that when a priest is caught living in open promiscuity or concubinage, the scandal is no longer a thing of surprise. Atrocities like lying on oath, forgery, abuse of office, official corruption, denial of fundamental human rights, mismanagement and misappropriation of public funds have reverberated into the church among the ranks of the clergy and religious leaders. It is very terrible if you see the way some priests behave.

Monsignor Aniagwu (Ehusani, 2000) in his reaction to “Challenges for the Church in the 21st Century: a Memorandum to the leaders of the Nigerian Church” recounted a story of a girl who came to his office. She had three children for a priest. After the priest was suspended by his bishop, he became infuriated and abandoned the girl and the children. The church did nothing to

come to her aid. The girl, a catholic-born and bred turned to the Apostolic Church for solace. She got it readily. She left the Catholic Church to join the Apostolic faith. This girl told Monsignor that nothing will ever make her return to the Catholic Church. This is a very terrible thing that may cost the priest involved and the church a lot of money in the nearest future. And if a serious statistical study is carried out, it may be amazing how many Catholics drop out to join the Pentecostal Churches, and even in extreme cases to take to traditional religions with great bitterness towards the Church. For Mother Ifechukwu Udorah of the Daughters of Divine Home Congregation, Enugu,

...the percentage of emigrants from the church, especially in our tertiary institutions far exceeds that of converts into the Catholic Church.

This is very true. If not, from where are the Pentecostal Churches getting the mammoth crowd that gather in their Churches? Anti-clericalism and anti-Catholicism are fast gaining grounds in our society. Our public media often make headline news of scandals from members of the Catholic Clergy, which the public receives with excitement. And if the Irish Church's experience today is in large measure, the

consequences of the mistakes of the yester years, then we have to be prepared for our own quota because the Nigerian Church seems to be a replica of the Irish Church.

Many of you may think that it is an Irish and American problem only. Of course, it is not. The 1st National Pastoral Congress held at Ibadan from 11th through 15th December 2002, indicated that all is not well even here in Nigeria, with regards to priests and their relationship with the opposite sex. The report prepared by the Catholic Secretariat, Lagos for the National Pastoral Congress, is clear that many priests are wanting in celibacy. Some parts of the report reads:

Without violating confidentiality, priests and religious superiors can point to particular cases where abuse by priests has led to sisters becoming pregnant and to abortions as well as sisters being dismissed from their congregations. On the other hand, the priest concerned received a new assignment. The difficulties encountered in the Diocese of Ekiti and elsewhere made news on national television. Questionnaires and interviews with seminarians reveal that sexual abuse has occurred at several major seminaries. Some major seminarians with a homosexual orientation have been expelled.

Msgr Matthew Kukah has this to say on the challenges of the Church today. According to him,

...what one says about the Catholic Church in Ireland, one can say of the changes everywhere in the world. These changes, largely propelled by social, economic, political and ideological variables well beyond our control are fascinating but unstoppable, especially if we see it within the context of the truism that 'change is the only permanent reality'.

If the changes that almost petered out Catholicism in Ireland can possibly affect the entire globe, then it calls for a return to the sacred. We must all uphold the sacred ideals of the Catholic Priesthood; else our society is speedily changing. For socially, economically, politically and ideologically wise, Nigeria is changing. Since we cannot control such changes, we have to immediately redress our steps to considering the sacred ideals of the priesthood and living strictly by those ideals.

The American Church: Lessons and Challenges

Just after the close of the second Vatican Council in 1966, Fr Robert E. McNally predicted an impending priest shortage. According to him,

an impending vocations crisis would devastate the Catholic Priesthood. In fact, he stated that the shortage would become so acute that “in the course of the next century, the catholic priesthood might almost disappear.” Statistics bear out the first part of McNally’s prophecy: there are far fewer men studying for the priesthood at the dawn of the 21st century than thirty years before. From 1966 to 1999, the total number of seminarians dropped from 39,638 to 4,826. While priestly ordinations during that same time dropped from 994 to 509 per year.

To this day, the doomsayers are prophesying that the shortage of priests will continue to worsen until as according to McNally, the priesthood is nearly extinct.

Why has the Catholic Church seen fewer and fewer young men devoting themselves to the sacrificial life of the priesthood? Michael Rose of “Goodbye Good Men” in his exposé blamed it on a multitude of factors including materialism, practical and philosophical atheism, skepticism, subjectivism, individualism, hedonism, social injustice; parents who do not want their children (sons) to be priests and the commonly perceived “unrealistic expectation” of the life long celibacy as well as failure to properly instruct catholic youths in the faith.

According to Archbishop Elden F. Curtis, the

problem is man-made. In an article in 1995, Curtis implicated vocations directors and others directly responsible for promoting vocations as having a “death wish” for the male, celibate priesthood. The article published in the Archbishop’s Diocesan newspaper, the *Catholic Voice* was reprinted in our *Sunday Visitors* for national distribution. In it, he made a startling observation based on his experience as a former Diocesan vocations director and seminary rector:

It seems to me that the vocation crisis is precipitated by people who want to change the Church’s agenda, by people who do not support Orthodox candidate loyal to the magisterial teaching of the Pope and Bishops and by people who actually discourage viable candidates from seeking priesthood and vowed religious life as the Church defines these ministries. I am personally aware of certain vocations directors, vocations teams and evaluation boards who turn away candidates who do not support the possibility of ordaining women or who defend the church’s teaching about artificial birth control or exhibit a strong piety towards certain devotions such as the rosary.

In “Goodbye Good Men”, Michael Rose asserted that the turning away of qualified candidates for the priesthood is not confined to a few church officials, but pervades nearly the entire system for recruiting and training new priests in America. This simply shows that the gay structure was so powerful that it had the veto power to determine who is enrolled into the seminary and who is ordained for the American Church. No wonder Fr Donald B. Cozzens when he was serving as Rector of St Mary’s Seminary in Cleveland, wrote “The Changing Face of the Priesthood” a book in which he warns of a growing public concern that the priesthood is becoming a “gay profession.” He states,

straight men in a predominantly or significantly gay environment commonly experience chronic destabilisation, a common symptom of which is self-doubt.

This compounded the challenge of studying, praying and living alongside gay seminarians. By implication, this “gay structure” comprised of both students and faculty lecturers at certain seminaries, deters the heterosexual man from continuing to study for the priesthood.

According to Michael Rose, former seminarians and recently ordained priests said that “gay

structure” is so renowned at certain seminaries that these institutions have earned nicknames such as Notre Flame (for Notre Dame Seminary in New Orleans) and theological closet (for Theological College at the Catholic University of America in Washington DC). St Mary’s in Baltimore has earned the nickname the “Pink Palace.” The situation is so vile that in March 2000, Fr Andrew Greeley of Chicago testified that seminary professors tell their students that they are gay and take some of them to gay bars and gay students sleep with each other.

From the foregoing, there would not have been shortage of vocations but the problem of gay structure in the priesthood is one of the prime militating factors obstructing the process of considering qualified young men for the priesthood.

Another factor responsible for the shortage of priests and the decline of church attendance and anti-clericalism in America is the profound scandal of sexual improprieties by many priests in recent years. Public betrayal of priestly vows do interminable damage to the image of the priesthood, and they are discouraging young men from considering joining the priestly family. Worse of all is the unremitting instances of child - sex abuse among Priests, including Bishops, adding to the problem of priests who present

themselves as unmanly and effeminate. However, not all priests are homosexuals, pedophiles or even effeminate but far too many have been exposed as sexual predators. For example, in 1999, Patrick Ziemann, an American Bishop resigned from the head of Santa Rosa Diocese in California, admitting publicly to an ongoing sexual rapport with a priest who sued him and the Diocese for damages worth 8 million US dollars.

Another problem is the lack of role models among priests. It is only by good example and personal influence that dedicated, pious, intelligent, well-informed priests will attract tomorrow's candidates to the priesthood. But the opposite has become the case. Not many priests have this quality that is considered almost indispensable in the accomplishment of our priestly ministry. Pope St Pius X wrote on the necessity of the holy priestly role models:

In order for Jesus Christ to reign in the world, nothing is so necessary as the holiness of the clergy so that with their example, word and knowledge they might be a guide for the faithful.

It is very important to see priests that one can love and imitate as they imitate Christ, which makes the word of God to take flesh. But in America, the

profound scandal of sexual improprieties has darkened priests character that they are even hardly seen. So how can they be role models when most of them hide their identity?

Challenges

According to Msgr Hassan Kukah,

... what one says about the Catholic faith in Ireland, one can say of the changes everywhere in the world.

This is very true because Ireland was one of the major nations that ensured the fast spread of Catholicism and enjoyed vocation boom. And if America is one of the countries that benefited from the evangelistic contributions of the Irish Church to the entire world, then you do not have to be surprised about what is happening in America today. For it will even get worse, since the American church is already experiencing priests shortage and there are very few young men being formed for the priesthood. The Nigerian church too is not an exception. Ours is a matter of time. Almost all the atrocities that are fueling the decline of church attendance and anti-clericalism could be found here. The profound scandals of sexual improprieties, lack of role models and the high current of Pentecostalism are the things that

will hamper and destroy Catholicism in Nigeria, since the social, economic, political and ideological variables that propel these changes are unstoppable. Urgent measures must be taken by all of us, beginning with a radical transformation of our lives. We must influence the lay faithful positively to at least give them a more reasonable understanding of who a priest is. Our lifestyle is very paramount here. We must strive to cultivate the virtues of humility, justice, love and compassion, which will encourage the flock to be open and honest towards us and to exercise our charisms with zeal and enthusiasm.

What You Must Know

There are five essential things that I suppose triggered anti-clericalism, anti-Catholicism and the decline of Church attendance in both Ireland and America. They are, inadequate appreciation of the signs of the times, clerical triumphalism, hypocrisy and pharisaism, greater devotion to structures and the defensiveness of church leaders. If those things had been taken seriously, the church would have suffered less in Ireland and America. As a result, I have five things to tell you that will help us in attending to the challenges confronting us in Nigeria.

Appreciation of the Signs of the Times

It is very vital to be able to read and interpret correctly the signs of the times and also be able to respond adequately to the challenges posed by the changes. Now the rapid and inevitable changes are already here. Most of us are still in our cocoon. I wish to say with emphasis that you must wake from your slumber. Priests who do not know about this must know it through you. The ugly structures and their gradual escalation must not come to limelight before we start doing something. The signals that we are getting calls for introspective contemplation and solitude. For the laity has known too much about us. We need to have our secrets.

No Longer Hypocrisy and Pharisaism

The knowledge of the signs of the times must change our belief system and attitude. Do not only have an outward image of holiness, but be holy. Holiness, purity and austerity must be a reality in our everyday life. No longer distance yourself from the sinful world and deal harshly with sinful members of the church and be steep in sin. Be compassionate, forgiving, loving, kind, and holy. If we can, we have to eradicate most of the terrible atrocities that has perverted the Church. We must be doers of the word and not only preachers and teachers. For the faithful are fed-up with hearing

sermons, they want to see sermons. We must always try to do what we preach to them.

Quit Clerical Triumphalism

The Nigerian church of today is over-clericalised. We must empower the lay faithful in our place of ministry. Master-servant relationship with the flock has to stop in our places of work. Every one of us should have flexible juridical approach to church discipline. Church leadership, administration and management are no longer exclusive reserve of the clergy since the advent of the second Vatican Council. Today, the church is understood as “people of God”. You and your parishioners are the people of God and must work together to achieve the salvific purpose of the Church.

Do not be too Defensive

Today, the challenges that confront us have been exposed here. Do not fail to hear and hearken to what the Spirit is saying to you. Do not adopt a siege mentality in the face of this ugly situation that calls for ardent soul-searching and self-evaluation. Humbly confront our wounded world with the simple message of healing, love and compassion. If you adopt a defensive approach in handling issues, you will meet the resentment from today’s increasingly critical generation, one

that has begun to appreciate the gains of her new found democracy, individual freedom (rights) and economic prosperity. Be wise and humble.

Devote More Time to Spiritual Growth

A critical periscope of the Nigerian church reveals the fact that we are devoting too much time to the maintenance of dogmatic, juridical, hierarchical and physical structures in the church at the expense of fostering the spirit of love, mercy and compassion among the faithful. Magnificent structures are found in many places without concomitant growth in real conversion, spirituality and holiness. We must learn to devote more time to the spiritual growth of the faithful. They need our unceasing spiritual encouragement.

OUR COLLECTIVE RESPONSIBILITY

When people move or journey together, it is difficult for one person to feel tired. Besides, what one person does not see, another or others would see. Thus they evade dangers and collaborate for their integral individual and collective advantage.

In our journey towards the yonder world in our spiritual marathon too, this is applicable. St Paul makes it clear, when he said:

we do not live to ourselves, and we do not die to ourselves. If we live, we live to the Lord, and if we die, we die to the Lord. So then, whether we live or die, we are the Lord's (Rom. 14:7-8).

So none of us lives or dies for himself alone, for alive or dead, we belong to the Lord – as members of His mystical body. In the Christian community, the members harmoniously pull together and harness their respective individual gifts and talents for their general well-being. Yes because all the different gifts – prophesy, vision, discernment, wisdom among others are for the edification and benefit of the entire community (1 Cor. 12:3).

According to Msgr Gotan of the Archdiocese

of Jos,

To stay away from the Christian community, and not savour the sweetness of together and mutual solidarity, is to die of spiritual wretchedness and hunger.

In the epistle to the Hebrews, we see how the author exposed the vitality of active participation and sharing in communities. He writes:

Let us be concerned for one another, to show love and to do good. Let us not give up the habit of meeting together, as some are doing. Instead, encourage one another... (Heb. 10:24-25).

Every one of us in his God-directed duty post is doing his job for God's glory, like salt, making life savoury, like light shining in the dark, is to be respected, if for nothing else, because each of us is made in God's image and likeness. This dignity is not assigned by man; and should be recognised, acknowledged, revered and celebrated as a gift of God. Without respect for the dignity of each of us in our actions and reactions, there will be a general breakdown as far as our social life is concerned. It is only when we truly see with faith and love the image of God in each of us that we can hope for peace, and have security, which no military might

be able to establish and no bomb can destroy. A question that readily comes to mind is: what am I expected to do to show my responsibility towards a fellow priest? What fraternal approach must we engage in our dealings with one another? How can we solve our problems and learn to live and manage our crises? Problems and crises are challenges to our collective responsibility in conflict resolution.

An analogy about the image of the priest as a sheltering tree can help us to understand more how we can be of help to ourselves in the ministry. Swindoll (1977), has this to say about a sheltering tree:

When the searching rays of adversity's sun burn their way into lives, there is nothing quite like a sheltering tree, a friend to give us relief in its cool shade.

The sacred scripture has many examples of sheltering trees that as priests we can derive our inspiration from. Let me mention a few of them. When Elijah was depressed and threatened, he was ready to quit. In fact, he wrote his resignation, which God refused to endorse. Instead, He gave him Elisha who ministered to him. And so, Elijah rested in the shade of Elisha's shelter (1 Kings 19:19-21). Paul also had a similar experience. The

sheltering tree that significantly sustained him was Barnabas, who stood by him when everyone else deserted him (Acts 9:26-27, 11:25-26). There was also Silas, his travelling companion over many lonely miles (Acts 15:40-41). When you add Luke, Timothy, Onesiphorous, Epaphroditus and Aquila, you will find a veritable forest of sheltering trees in Paul's life. There are many more sheltering cases of people that provided shelter, refreshment, encouragement and companionship to other people in the difficult moments of their lives and this is simply because they were committed to the basic principles of friendship, brotherhood and collective responsibility.

Dear Fathers, I ask you: Beneath whose branches among the priests of this diocese, do you receive your own shelter? And who among the priests of this diocese have you allowed shelter?

For our calling to worth its salt, collective responsibility must be done in charity and must come from the heart. In every sacrificial love and charitable giving, it is generally believed that what we get is always better than what we give. The story of life is the story of an echo. If you give people your time, attention, encouragement, advice, money, kindness, patience, and so on, you will get these back with interest.

There is no limit to what you can achieve in this Diocese if only you pay attention to being your

brother priest's keeper. Begin from Genesis and go through to the book of Revelation, and you will discover that it is the story of men who thoroughly committed and dedicated themselves to selfless generosity. History and experience show that mankind rises and falls together, and that it is part of God's divine plan that nothing created achieves fulfilment by itself alone. No flower cross-fertilises itself. A flower requires the action of a butterfly to do the assignment of cross-fertilisation. To blossom, a plant needs the action of the sun; and no battery charges itself without another source of energy like electricity current generating set or solar power.

This is exactly the same within the human setting. Our actions are, and should be, mutually reinforcing, where each of us has a responsibility to fulfil for the benefit and edification of all, and where my fellow priest is myself because what happens to him touches you and me. Take the experience in America where some priests were found guilty of child-sex abuse as an example. CNN commented that:

The child-sex abuse by priests in America is a religious earthquake that has seriously damaged and badly dented the image of the catholic priesthood worldwide.

This is to say that the scandal of some priests in America has a very wide and far-reaching implication for all priests, the world over. In other words, its effect is universal and pan-cosmic. A scandal committed by one of us can taint the image of the whole priests of this diocese.

When we realise that we are actually one with our fellow priests, then, and only then, do we appreciate the need for collective responsibility. That we are, and should be collectively responsible for our actions and reactions is the greatest truth of all truths. It is a duty we owe ourselves, a responsibility, which will elevate our priesthood and make us more receptive and accommodating, as well as cement the lands of our social order. My attitude to you, not my ability to achieve, is what is needed to shape the collective destiny of our priestly behaviours. It may well be that you have no problems but others do and you know it. You may be privileged to be comfortable in your place of work, but there are other colleagues who are not.

You may be enjoying vast financial empire in a rich parish, but does it not worry you that others are putting enormous physical effort just to eke out a below subsistence level of living? Not minding the favourable condition in which I find myself, I should worry and try to bail others from their intolerable crises. Showing sympathy and

understanding can change the entire atmosphere of our life in common. You meet joy when you prove your love for all your companions on the road of life. As a spiritual writer observed:

There is joy in knowing how to share life with others. We experience it when we look for and work towards people's happiness

The joy of living as brothers in the priesthood is one of the best thing to do when we do not postpone a priest's happiness, prolong his sadness, or encourage his bitterness. In other words, whatever we can do to improve his condition is the big challenge to our collective responsibility. We have the obligation to help each other maximise our potentialities in tapping the resources endowed on others by God without placing any stumbling blocks or taking undue advantage of their lapses as opportunity to ridicule or thwart them. And bias should never control our actions towards one another.

Collective responsibility should teach me an important lesson that I am neither self-reliant nor totally sufficient. I need a fellow priest. I need his support, his insight, his discernment, his counsel, his love, and his presence. He is my God-given companion and partner, ever aware of my moods

and my needs. He hears my secrets and keeps them. He knows my faults and forgives them often. He is my sheltering tree. We are blessed with the vocation and mission to hear the anguish and hope of one another. We need to solve many problems and save the Diocese the headache of undertaking conflict resolution. We do not, for example, need to get the permission of the Pope to rally round an erring brother, nor do we need the Bishop's approval to practice charity amongst ourselves. A Presbyterium is not really a Presbyterium unless it is a home wherein dwells friendly cooperation, harmonious relationship and a family spirit. No one can really enjoy great heights of success or distinction without the friendly cooperation of his colleagues. It is often said that the more people you take along with you to success, the higher will be your success; and success without a successor is a failure. This is why we need collective responsibility.

It needs no coaxing, no preamble and no formality. In practicing it, we meet one another in sympathy without age and without any barrier. It is a visitor without invitation and when it comes, it always forgets to be polite. It prefers flexibility to rigidity when properly practiced; it can make us quarrel without offence, praise without flattery and disagree without bitterness. It is only when we draw near and stand in solidarity with each

other that we can solve the litany of problems besetting the priesthood today. I thought of the many intrigues that sometimes characterise our relationship with one another. I thought of the rivalries among priests who jostle for appointments and try strategies ranging from the bizarre to the profane to curry favours. As we all know what each individual does affects all of us; for we live in a world of inter-subjectivity. In other words, a man's happiness is conditioned by the action and inaction of those around him.

The Father's house is more than an architectural structure for housing priests and all the needed articles of furniture. Rather, it is a functional servant, a friendly attractive and stimulating place, imparting a feeling of security and a sense of pride, a place of leisure and rest. It is not a virtue to find it in a sorry state of untidiness. As the saying goes, cleanliness is next to Godliness. Hence, every nook and cranny of the Father's house should be left neat and tidy. It is often said that a person's home is the first sign of how cultured that person is, and there is simply no holiness or no humility in indecency, and dirtiness. Sure, we can afford to change curtains, broken toilets and have water at all costs. A good Father's house should be a very beautiful place to behold at all times.

It is vital to note that a Father's house should

never be a centre for suppression but an opportunity for expression. Regardless of its infrastructures, every Father's house should be a castle for happiness where peace must reign. It is disheartening for priests to live in the same Father's house, concelebrate at the same Mass, and yet encounter one another without sincerity. No mutual trust but mutual suspicion, their rapport is best described as togetherness without fellowship.

A Father's house should be a place of encounter. In this encounter, people are sincere; they are loving, they are open to one another; they become fully present to one another's problem; they celebrate their humanity without bitterness. As a result, life flows from one person to the other and transformation takes place. Every Father's house should be a home whose beauty is order, whose blessing is contentment, whose glory is hospitality and whose crown is Godliness. It is disgusting that it is often weakened, if not destroyed, by the type of life we live when we are put together. In most houses, our priestly living does not just have any correlation coefficient.

When priests live together, they ought to create an enabling environment to praying together, planning and discussing issues and matters affecting the apostolate together. It is mutually reinforcing to live together as brothers and form

a forum in the Father's house for the cross-fertilisation of ideas. Anything less has a way of patronising loneliness, isolation and making us keep safe distance from the warmth of priestly interaction. Some of us are good at saying, it is not my business. If it is not your own business, it must be somebody's business. A timely word from a brother to an erring brother can help much better than whatever goodwill from an authority figure. The presumption that each of us is matured and should be accountable for himself is wrong. The truth is that as we are struggling on this spiritual journey to heaven, there is current pulling at us, which can take hold of us and carry us along unless we make an effort to keep our balance.

Let us look at our driving habit. Most of us have a reputation of over-speeding and reckless nocturnal driving habits like the biblical Jehu who in 2 Kings 9:16-17, 20 drove a chariot and he was said to drive furiously. One bible version said that he drove like a madman. Like Jehu, some of us do drive home very furiously especially after such public liturgical functions like priestly ordination, burial, Cathedradicum amongs others with a kind of naivety that appears to celebrate a victory parade for overtaking every car on one's way. Many priest have gone as a result of this and we must take note. One author described the

relationship between the kilometres we cover, their effect on the sound of the engine and their capacity to terminate life, in a very good way. According to him: “At “135km” the engine sound is “my soul is thirsty for the Lord...” At “140km” the engine sound is “my lifetime, I will give God my lifetime.” At “145km” the sound goes higher to: “This world is not my own....” At “150km” the sound is still higher: “Yes, I shall arise and return to my Father.” At “155km” the engine begins howling: “Into your hands O Lord, I commend my spirit.” At “160km” there is a big bang followed by silence. When the silence is broken, the following message lashes before us: I wish you 30 minutes in heaven before the devil knows you are dead”.

GOD AND EAGLES: A LESSON ON PATIENCE

In the midst of the tests coming my way as a priest, the Lord gave me much encouragement by these promises,

...they that wait upon the Lord... shall mount up with wings as eagles... (Isaiah 40:30). As an eagle stirs up its nest and hovers over its young; as it spreads its wings, takes them up, and bears them aloft on its pinions, the Lord along guide him... (Deut. 32:11-12).

These verses of the sacred scripture helped me to be patient and enduring through the turmoil I went through as a young priest.

To fully appreciate the marvelous comfort of these promises, one needs to know something about the mother eagle - and her method of raising and training her young.

The eagle builds her nest in lofty crags, high on the side of a mountain. She weaves together prickly branches from briar and thorn bush to form a strong interlocking structure for her eggs. Soft materials combined with feathers plucked from her breast line the nest. This forms an inviting shelter for her young.

A Comfortable Nest

Once hatched, the eaglets dwell high above all harm in warm comfort. The mother eagle feeds, protects and sees to their every need. This is the way God treats us as “babes in Christ.” We come to know the grace, love, forgiveness and abundant provision of a kind and compassionate father. We enjoy dwelling in a place of safety, learning from and enjoying the “sincere milk of the word” (1 Pet. 2:2).

Comfort Removed

However, there comes a time in the growing up experience when the mother eagle “stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young.” This means she rips out the soft feathers. Flapping her massive wings, she blows away all the comfortable lining materials. This exposes the eaglets to the prickly briars and thorns.

Try though they may, the eaglets can find no place of comfort. Things are crowded and uncomfortable because several younger eaglets are competing for the same space. Complaints and squawks fill the air. Test and trials begin to agitate the young eaglets that before now had known no pain. Although the younger eaglets do not understand all that is happening to them, mother eagle has a plan. She is making the nest uncomfortable for them, so they will be willing to

abandon it for flying training.

In spiritual life as well as natural life, there is a principle “no pain – no gain.” We are all like those little eaglets. Although the Bible tells us we are on a pilgrimage through a world that is not our home, we love comfort and ease. We love to settle down by our little oasis and enjoy the dates and sunshine. We are comfortable where we are. We do not want to move on via the wilderness experiences with their hardships, to our promised land.

We hear the Word and the talks, and the preaching. Sometimes we find it down entertaining. Life is good and comfortable. This happens mostly when we are posted to big town parishes, or given a good appointment like the Health Coordinator of the diocese, Cathedral Administrator, and so on. And because of the peaceful and comfortable state of our hearts, when the Lord speaks to us, we are too distracted by comfort to hear Him.

But then, God decides, it is time to do some growing up and things change rapidly. Suddenly, difficulties, pain and suffering hits us; a Cathedral Administrator is transferred to a group “D” parish in the diocese to serve as a pastor; an old priest of over 23 years is made a curate. At this time, we begin to rebuke the devil, complaining but all to no avail.

When the pain and suffering has done its work

of getting our attention, when we are again willing to wait on Him and listen to His voice, He shows us what is next on His agenda for us. God is going to teach us “...to mount up with wings as eagles.”

Flying Lessons

The mother eagle “takes them up and bears them aloft on its pinions.” At this point in the training process, the eaglet is so happy to get out of the thorny nest, it takes little persuasion to get him to leap on mother eagle’s back and fix his talons securely into the pinions of her sturdy wings. Young eagle is air borne for the first time. Mother eagle catches an updraft and soars up, up and up until she and the eaglet are several thousand feet above the valley below. Isn’t this fun! Thinks the eaglet.

“It is time to fly, little eaglet!” Without warning, mother eagle abruptly executes a diving outside loop and junior is tossed to the wind to begin flight. Terrified, the little eaglet struggles clumsily flapping his new wings, trying desperately to control his fate. Down, down, down the eaglet plummets to apparent imminent destruction.

Just when all hope is gone, the eaglet feels the mother’s strong back coming up under its talons as she swoops under him, breaking his fall. Again, he fastens his talons into his mother’s strong pinions safe once more.

Again mother eagle soars up, up and up to repeat the whole episode again. Each time he falls, the eaglet learns a little more until finally he can glide and "...mount up with wings as eagles." How thrilling to fly on his own wings rather than on his mother's back.

Like the eaglets, we respond to God's call to the Ministry "to mount up with wings as eagles." We think this is a wonderful idea. Before long, we will be "flying high." But God mercifully hides from us the anxiety, pain and difficulties involved in the priestly ministry. Many of us do not understand what it will cost.

After ordination, we optimistically launch out expecting instant success and glory. For a short time, things go well; then all of a sudden, the bottom falls out. Problems erupt among us and sometimes, with the laity. Everything starts going wrong, people who used to be our friends are not as close any more.

What is happening? We are learning to fly. These adversaries and troubles push us into faith growth and greater reliance on the Holy Spirit. We are learning to mount up above all the adversities. We are learning what Paul meant, "...having done all to stand, stand therefore." When everything is falling around us, we are learning to stand on our Rock, Jesus Christ.

All the difficulties you see today are meant to

strengthen you in preparation for the challenges ahead. In Psalms 4:1, we see how David after his murderous and adulterous affair with Bathsheba (cf 2 Sam. 11) said to God, “thou hast enlarged me when I was under pressure.” So trials and pressure are stepping-stones to the attainment of great heights. In fact, God uses them to know whether we serve Him because we love Him or whether we serve Him for all the blessings He gives us. For Jesus discovered that some followed Him “for the loaves of bread and the fishes” not because they loved Him. Trials in James’ theology produce perseverance and maturity. James said,

Consider it pure joy, my brothers when you face trials of many kinds, because you know the testing of your faith develops perseverance. Perseverance must finish its work so that you may be mature... not lacking anything (Jas 1:2-4).

Always make sure that you recognise the hand of God in every trial you face. This point is epitomised in the life of St Paul after casting a demon out of a girl at Philippi. The girl’s deliverance resulted to

A mob being quickly formed against Paul and Silas, and the judges ordered them stripped and beaten with wooden whips.

Again and again, the rods slashed down across their bared backs; and afterwards, they were thrown into prison. The jailer was threatened with death if they escaped, so he took no chance, but put them into the inner dungeon and clamped their feet into the stocks. Around midnight, Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns to the Lord and the other prisoners were listening (Acts 16:22-25).

The Lord, faithful to His promise had surrounded Paul and Silas with "...songs of deliverance" (Ps 32:7). What happened as a result of singing their "songs of deliverance"? The Lord sent an earthquake that set free not only Paul and Silas, but all the other prisoners as well. The jailer was converted and took Paul and Silas home and made them his house guests. A strong church was established in Philippi as a result.

God Almighty will do the same for you and me if we will walk in the spirit and not start complaining against Him or others when trials and tests come. Recognise God's hand in every trial that comes to you. For it is God who has called you to work for Him and He knows where you will serve Him better. Wherever you are posted to minister to Him, humbly and joyfully go and see the great works He will use you to do in

accomplishment of His salvific mission on earth. God is like the mother eagle, which trains its young for the task ahead. God also is training you for the ministerial challenges of the time and He will never leave you to be an orphan but His Spirit will continue to sustain you in the mighty name of Jesus Christ.

MARY, OUR MOTHER AND MODEL

The term *theotokos*, which means 'Mother of God' was used by the Alexandrians as far back as Origen (185-254 AD). Certainly, Alexander of Alexandria used the title and it is found in the earliest prayer dedicated to Mary, the *sub tuum praesidium*.

In the council of Ephesus and in the refutation of Nestorius, Cyril of Alexandria used the expression *theotokos*. This is found in the first of his teaching on Nestorius:

If anyone does not confess that Emmanuel is in truth God, and that the holy virgin is mother of God because she bore according to the flesh the Word of God when he became flesh: let him be anathema sit.

In his homily at the opening of the council of Ephesus, Cyril of Alexandria speaks enthusiastically of Mary as *theotokos*:

Mary, mother of God, we salute you precious vessel; worthy of the whole world's reverence, you are an ever shining light, the crown of virginity, the symbol of orthodoxy, an indestructible

temple, the place can contain, mother and virgin. Because of you the Holy gospel could say: blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord.

For Cyril, one of the renowned fathers of the Church who wrote extensively on this subject, the term 'theotokos' means more than "God bearer". It includes the whole process of motherhood: conception, gestation and birth. In his writings, 'theolokos' is best translated "Mother of God." In the second part of the Hail Mary, the expression is used, thereby keeping within the depths of the Catholic faith that favoured title of Mary, "...Holy Mary, Mother of God, pray for us sinners now and at the hour of our death. Amen."

This term was also reaffirmed during the short period of reconciliation between the Eastern bishops, the Western Pontiff, Sixtus III (432-440), and Cyril, in the celebrated "creed of faith" or "creed of Ephesus,"

We confess therefore, that our Lord Jesus Christ is the only begotten Son of God, perfect God and perfect man. Having a rational soul and a body, according to his divinity, born of the Virgin Mary for us and for our salvation. According to His divinity, He is consubstantial with the Father, and according to His humanity,

He is consubstantial with us. A union was made of the two natures, on which account we confess one Christ, one Son, one Lord. In accord with His understanding of the unconfused union of God, through God the Word's being incarnate and becoming man, and from this conception, His joining to Himself the temple assumed from her.

Mary is considered as the Mother of God in order to affirm the fact that Christ, born from her, was true God and true man. St Luke's Gospel called Mary "the mother of Jesus" (Lk. 1:43). This took place prior to the birth of Jesus Christ. According to the Catechism of the Catholic Church:

Mary is acclaimed by Elizabeth at the prompting of the spirit and even before the birth of her son, as "the mother of my Lord." In fact, the one whom she conceived as man by the Holy Spirit, who truly became her son according to the flesh, was none other than the Father's eternal son, the second person of the Holy Trinity. Hence the Church confesses that Mary is truly "Mother of God" (CCC⁴⁹⁵).

No one can doubt the fact of 'theotokos'. Not even our brothers and sisters from the other

churches. That is while the Church's first dogma was an affirmation of theotokos. It taught that the blessed-virgin Mary by virtue of her being mother of Emmanuel, is the mother of God. One of the Fathers of the Church, in his epistle to the senate of Constantinople (534) clarified this more:

...it is right for Catholics to confess that the glorious and Holy Mary, ever virgin, is truly and properly the mother of God (DS 617; cf DS 701-703).

Jesus is Mary's only son but her spiritual motherhood extends to all men whom indeed He came to save:

The son whom she brought forth is He whom God placed as the first born among many brethren, that is the faithful in whose generation and formulation she cooperates with a mother's love (CCC⁵⁰¹).

If Mary is the mother of God made-man in Christ, she is the mother of all of us with whom the mission of God made-man can be accomplished.

In her revelation to Fr Stephen Gobbi, compiled in "TO THE PRIESTS OUR LADY'S BELOVED SONS," our Mother Mary said:

I am the Mother of all especially of those who are furthest away, who are still walking in darkness. And in particular, I am the mother of those who are poorest, simplest, most abandoned and most vulnerable.

As a good mother, she cares more for the needy, especially the impoverished and the poor. There is an offshoot here. An offshoot of responsibility upon us, priests. The offshoot is a fertilisation of our care for the poor, the needy and the destitute. In her absence, it is our mission to care more for the needy.

In her dogma on the perpetual virginity of Mary, the Church teaches and truly so it is, that the Blessed Virgin Mary was a virgin before she gave birth to Jesus Christ, she gave birth to Him as a Virgin and remained perpetually a Virgin even after giving birth to Him (cf DS 294; 427; 502-504). The church also confessed that Jesus was conceived solely by the power of the Holy Spirit in the womb of the Virgin Mary. St Ignatius of Antioch at the beginning of the 2nd century beautifully encapsulated this when he said:

You are firmly convinced about our Lord, who is truly of the race of David according to the flesh, Son of God, according to the will and power of God,

truly born of a virgin... He was truly nailed to a tree for us in His flesh under Pontius Pilate... He truly suffered, as He is truly risen.

The gospel of Matthew sees the virginal conception of Jesus as a divine work that surpasses all human understanding and possibility: "Joseph, ... do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit" (Matt. 1:20) said the angel. This is the fulfilment of the prophecy of Isaiah: "Behold, a virgin shall conceive and bear a son." Our Mother's virginity manifests God's absolute initiative in the incarnation. Jesus has only God as his father. He is naturally Son of the Father as to His divinity and naturally Son of His mother as to His humanity, but properly Son of the Father in both natures.

Mary's virginity is a sign of her faith. Unadulterated by any doubt and of her undivided gift of herself to God's will. It is her faith that enables her to become the mother of the saviour. And today, it is our commitment to the salvation of souls that truly makes us spiritual Fathers. This stems out of our faith in God which calls for total dedication and commitment to the salvific mission entrusted to us.

In her life of Perpetual Virginity, our Mother

Mary left us an inspiring example of chastity in this age of sexual permissiveness. In her the saving value of chastity lived for the kingdom of heaven shines out in its crystal brightness. It stands out in the midst of all the living for all of us to follow, mostly according to our vow of celibacy. Learning from her paradigm is of great value. By her purity, she portrays what values God places on chaste living. This is also epitomised in Jesus' life of celibacy.

Our Mother Mary through her Marian Movement of Priests has planted a seed in the garden of the Church with Father Stephen Gobbi as her Visionary. This seed through the marvelous contribution of priests has become a great tree, which has its branches in every part of the world. According to our Mother Mary, she has chosen us through this movement so that she can manifest her power through us. She said:

I have chosen you because you are the least apt instrument, thus no one will say that this is your work. The Marian Movement of Priests must be my work alone. Through your weakness I will manifest my strength; through your nothingness I will manifest my power (July 16, 1973).

This movement is a 'spirit' said Pope John Paul II. It is something inpalpable, but very strong and very much alike, as are the gifts of God, and it has its main purpose the living out of the consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary. According to Fr Gobbi (1966), "for priests to entrust themselves to Mary is to become more aware of their own consecration, made to God on the day of their baptism and their priestly ordination. In this movement, we listen to Our Lady and cooperate with the work of the Holy Spirit, to the glory of the Most High Trinity.

Fathers, the clarion call of the movement of our mother is to help us live out our priestly ministry better. Consecration to the Immaculate Heart of Mary gives us a profound sense of trust and serenity. To believe in each and every concrete situation, that Our Lady is always near, anxious to help us as much as even more than any mother, gives a feeling of security even amid personal sufferings and uncertainties of the days in which we live.

To those priests who consecrate themselves to Her Immaculate Heart, Our Lady promise to be

A true mother for them, and they will be true sons to me! I will take complete possession of their life; gently, gently I will transform it and set it on fire with zeal, I

will make it perfect. I will make them understand how they must be detached from everything and live only for my Jesus; how they must defend Him from every attack, love Him unconditionally, in living out the gospel to the letter (August 1, 1973).

Our Mother Mary has these and many more wonderful messages. She has given to us through Fr Gobbi concerning the importance of the Marian Movement of Priests to our Ministry. As a matter of fact, it is time to go to our Mother Mary to seek her maternal guidance and grace to contend with the challenges of the times. Only her mediatrix role can help us to live our vows better. Today, I invite all of you who are yet to be consecrated to this movement of ours to do so in order to enhance our commitment and dedication to the priestly ministry.

Our Mother Mary has been honoured and venerated by men and women of all times and places, yet she has remained the most controversial woman in history. She seems to be the obstacle to non-Catholics in prayer and Bible study groups. Because of her, many Catholics have left the Catholic Church to join other denominations. And for centuries, our brothers and sisters of the other Church communions have vehemently opposed the exaltation of Mary and

the devotion to her in the Catholic Church. However, all we do in venerating and honouring her is based on the fact that God Himself honoured Mary above all creatures when He chose her to be the mother of her son. This divine revelation is firmly rooted in the revealed word of God on which the solid dogmatic foundations of the church are based. Among all the women who have ever lived, Mary the Mother of Jesus Christ is perhaps the most celebrated, the most venerated, the most portrayed and the most honoured. She has been revered by all generations for her unflinching cooperation with the divine plan to "...redeem those who were under the law, so that we might receive adoption as Sons" (Gal. 4:4-5). The Holy Mother Church has given a very beautiful exposé on the great role she has played in the salvation of man, and the honour accorded her. This is contained in *Lumen Gentium*:

The Virgin Mary, who at the message of the angel received the word of God in her heart and in her body and gave life to the world, is acknowledged and honoured as being truly the mother of God and of the redeemer. Redeemed in a more exalted fashion, by reason of the merits of her son and united to Him by a close and indissoluble tie. She is endowed with the high office and dignity of the

mother of the Son of God, and therefore she is also the beloved daughter of the father and the temple of the Holy Spirit. Because of this gift of sublime grace she far surpasses all creatures, both in heaven and on earth... She is clearly the mother of the members of Christ ... since she has by her charity joined in bringing about the birth of believers in the church, who are members of its head (No.53).

Mary today is our mother and our model, exemplar and a shining beacon on the road to perfection. Luke's gospel presents her as a disciple par excellence. In fact, she is the first mentioned disciple in the gospel of Luke. To Jesus, the description of a true disciple is the one who hears the word of God and keeps it. Mary has all these prerequisites of true discipleship. She hears the word of God and responds submissively by letting that word happen in her life. Mary agrees to let God's proposal form her into a young mother. She was a woman of faith from whom we have a lot of lessons to learn. The assignment she was given was quite a difficult one. And this is why she demanded for some explanations. Angel Gabriel conveyed God's message to her. Without asking questions, Mary conceded, I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done unto me. By implication, Mary totally accepted what God

wants of her. This was her faith. A leap in the dark, God came to her aid, and all took place without any disappointment.

I consider what God asked Mary to do as difficult and dangerous. This is because in those days in Palestine, we must remember any pregnancy a woman got outside wedlock had a deadly penalty, which was death by stoning. The same penalty applies to any case of adultery. Mary knew the risk involved, yet, accepted God's assignment. Worse still, nobody had ever conceived by the Holy Spirit in the entire history of her people, so who would accept her kind of story? And yet she still accepted God's mission in her life: I am the handmaid of the Lord, let what you have said be done to me.

Today as priests, God has commissioned us to do difficult tasks for him. In fact, he has called us to live a lifestyle that many people humanly speaking consider impossible. And in our weaknesses, we too do wonder if we can live according to the dictates of our calling. God also continues to ask us to make decisions, the outcome of which we do not know. It may be about our posting or assignment; it may be in form of obedience to our superiors, or Bishop, and so on. It can be a serious illness, the death of a beloved priest, armed robbery attack, the loss of our good name or reputation. God can make all of these

demands from us. Even His only Son, He did sent to come, suffer and die for our sake. So, just like our beloved Mother, we must learn to accept difficult circumstances that will always befall us. Mary did not ask: why not another lady? She accepted God's call and mission in her life. We must learn to say that we are of the Lord, let it be done to us as He wills. We can also say like Jesus in the Garden of Gethsemane: "My father, if this cup cannot pass by but I must drink it, your will be done" (Matt. 26:42). In times of trial and tribulation, we look for help from medicine men, secret cults, prophets and prophetesses or Satan himself. This must stop. We have the example of Mary and her husband, Joseph. And an example of what he did for her son, Jesus Christ: He raised Him from the dead and glorified Him forever. In the same way, if we rely on God in times of trial, He will surely help us.

Mary is also a model of charity. Our Mother Mary is commonly known and approached mainly as one who intercedes for us, as one whose intercession is most powerful and most effective. Through the intercession of the Blessed Mother, Jesus changed water into wine at the wedding feast at Cana (Jn 2:1-12). Mary thought it was her business and she did what she could do about it. She made her son perform His first miracle there and then. This is an example of a caring person.

In the magnificat, we see our Mother Mary as a woman who hungers for a new justice on the earth, one that totally reflects God's justice. The God who dethrones the mighty and exalts the lowly. In our world today, the rich are filled with good things, the hungry sent empty away. She voices a radical protest against what many of us ignore; that the mighty will always prevail over the weak; that the well-fed nations will thrive while others starve to death; that the politically strong will always occupy positions of power and authority.

Often times, we find ourselves in a position to help someone: a job seeker, a homeless person, someone who is hungry, a sick person or perhaps an accident victim. What do we do? Or is it too inconveniencing for us to help? Many of us are quite generous when people ask us for help, most especially the opposite sex. Suppose they do not ask, do we wait for them to do so before we come to their aid? Our Blessed Mother Mary did not ask. She did not wait for the stewards to come to her, soliciting for help before she intervened. She anticipated their need and helped them, even though her son had never performed a miracle before. And I believe they seriously appreciated her kind gesture. Brother priests, even if men that we are of help to, do not appreciate our goodness to them, God will. He will give us His blessings

and reward. Do not be selfish in your generosity. Everyone that you come in contact with that has a genuine need, Christian charity says, you have to help, not only your relations and friends. It always baffles me when I hear a priest boasting about his fat bank account! What are you doing with those millions? Do you have a family, a wife or children secretly? Imagine if you are to die now, what will happen to all your investments? Be wise! You have no child, no wife and you pledged to live for others, you must endeavour to do all you vowed to do. For if you as a priest do not light a candle of love wherever you go, to dispel the darkness of selfishness and greed that has beclouded this nation, who will? So like our Mother Mary, let us always try to demonstrate love of God and love of our neighbour in all our actions. We must love ourselves and then teach the world the language of love.

RECONCILIATION

The Catholic Church is founded on the unity of God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit. Without this Trinitarian oneness, there would have been no church. *Lumen Gentium* affirms the fact that the Church is found on the communitarian oneness of the three persons of the Trinity:

The universal church is... “a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit” (No.4).

This goes to stress the paramount importance of unity in the accomplishment of the saving mission of the Church in the world today. Hence, we must always appreciate the unity of the Church universally, by loving ourselves and doing all within our reach to sustain God’s fire of unity and love established among us.

Glory to God for His marvelous works! I believe you have enough to contemplate about your priestly ministry, with a reasonable view to starting the process of mending your life here. Some of us who are yet to reconcile with our neighbour, I believe this discussion will help you

do so today. After this talk, you are obliged by the Lord to take a colleague aside for reconciliation or even go for the sacrament of confession.

The conventional aphorism: “United we stand but divided we fall” holds water here. It is only in unity and peace that as a people chosen and set aside for the primary purpose of leading people to God, we can accomplish this task. For the Church herself is founded on the terms of oneness. No wonder, prior to His sudden departure, Jesus Christ prayed that we may all be one, Just as Him and the Father are one (cf Jn 17:21). It is living in unity, peace and tranquility that the faithful and the world may know that we have all been sent by Jesus Christ. Without unity, peace and love among you, many people will doubt the veracity of the Gospel you preach to them. Therefore, you must always make effort to foster and build bridges of peace and unity among yourselves.

Reconciliation with our brother priests is the first step in attaining unity, peace and love. We have to know that all of us are human beings. We are also bound by human frailty and liable to sin. In other words, we all have our inadequacies. And that is why Psalm 130:3 tells us that if God Almighty should mark our iniquities, who will survive? Nobody will survive! So, all I am saying here is that you have to know that God is always forgiving you, and you too must always do same

to your neighbour who sin against you. For if not for the ever-flowing mercy of God, you and I would not have sat here as priests of the Holy Mother Church. God Almighty has demonstrated what leadership by example truly entails. God the Father out of His infinite compassion forgave the sins of Adam and Eve, paving way for the adoptive sonship, which we share in today. Out of His unfathomable love, God sent His only son that we might ever be reconciled to Him: “for God so loved the world, that He gave His only begotten son that everyone who believes in Him may not perish but may have eternal live” (Jn 3:16). Today, Jesus has opened the door of salvation for all, even you who are not in good terms. This is the appropriate time to be reconciled with one another.

Every time, therefore, we speak of God’s love, the Bible presents to us an idea. This idea is found in St John’s Gospel. A very vital idea that we must have as we think of our sins: that God’s love for us is not bound by any condition. It is unconditional. We do not deserve to be loved the way He has loved us. This is because of our sinful nature. But His love for us persists even in spite of our sins. Hosea 11:1-9 has one of the most beautiful expressions of God’s unconditional love in the Old Testament. He said:

When Israel was a child, I loved him and out of Egypt I called my son. The more I called them, the more they went from me; they kept sacrifices to Baal and offering incense to idols. Yet it was I who taught Ephraim to walk, I took them up into my arms; but they did not know that I healed them. I led them with cords of human kindness, with bands of love. I was to them like those who lift infants to their cheeks. I bent down to them and fed them. They shall return to the land of Egypt and Assyria shall be their king because they have refused to return to me. The sword rages in their cities, it consumes their oracle priests, and devours because of their schemes. My people are bent on turning away from me. To the most high they call, but he does not raise them up at all. How can I give up, Ephraim? How can I hand you over O Israel? How can I make you like Admah? How can I treat you like Zeboiim? My heart recoils within me; my compassion grows warm and tender. I will not execute my fierce anger, I will not again destroy Ephraim; for I am God and no mortal, the Holy one in your midst and I will not come in wrath.

Here, we see how God calls Israel. Israel hesitantly sinned against God. God decided to punish him,

but he repented. And then God changed His mind: "...I am God and not man." If God were a man, Israel would have been punished for his transgression. In Deuteronomy 21, we have the verdict of man when it comes to such cases of sin. The passage reads:

If someone has stubborn and rebellious son who will not obey his father and mother, who does not heed them when they discipline him, then his father and mother shall take hold of him and bring him out to the elders of his town at the gate of that place. They shall say to the elders of his town, "this son of ours is stubborn and rebellious. He will not obey us. He is a glutton and a drunkard." Then all the men of the town shall stone him to death. So you shall purge the evil from your midst; and all Israel will hear, and be afraid (Deut. 21:18-21).

Humanly speaking, condemnation is the only punishment that the child (Israel) would have received from God. This may appear unacceptable but Old Testament teaching has exposed it so that the punishment must be commensurate: the serious the crime, so also is the punishment. Hosea wrote against such background. Note the point of difference: he says that is not man's way of doing

it, but God's paternal way of doing it. God does not follow man's ways rather man tries to follow God's way and so God changed his mind from punishing Israel. For according to Hosea 21, God is God not man. This point is emphasised concisely by prophet Isaiah when he said:

My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts from your thoughts (Is 55:8-9).

God loves us so much so that even in our wickedness, he calls us to repentance and salvation. Ezekiel brought out this in his thirty-third chapter. Ezekiel said:

As I live, says the Lord God, I have no pleasure in the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from their ways, for why will you die, O house of Israel? (Ezekiel 33:11).

This example is very good in our understanding of God's love in its authentic form, even in the case of a wicked sinner; love surpasses all our sinful habits.

In the New Testament, we see that Jesus Christ

is a gift of love. He is a gift of love from Love himself, God (cf Jn 3:16). And 1 John 4:8 tells us, God is love and whoever does not love does not know God. In the parable of the lost sheep, we see how our most loving father, demonstrates the vitality of one lost sheep to Him. Under normal circumstances, who will leave ninety-nine sheep to look for the lost one? But God does, which is to say how God wishes to have us back from the distant land of perpetual sin. God's love is also pictured in the parable of the prodigal son (Lk 15:11-32), a masterpiece of a parable, which sets seal on the teaching of Jesus on the mercy of God. In the parable, the loving father runs out to meet his son when he saw him from afar, returning home. In his confession, the boy said: "Father, I have sinned against God and against you, I no longer deserve to be called your son" (V.21).

Here too the mercy of God under the imperfect image of an earthly father is demonstrated and exposed.

In the parable of the prodigal son too, we have an instance of the human way of looking at sin. This is brought out clearly in the reaction of the elder son on the return of his prodigal brother. He saw no reason why a party was thrown in celebration of the return of a reckless brother who lavished his resources in a life of debauchery. Some of us too may think like the elder brother,

but we are human, not God, and we are entitled to our own way of looking at it. However, do not concentrate on the boy's sin. Look beyond the sin to the importance of the boy's safe return. God does not look at our sin but the fact that he has won us back for himself. God knows that being human, you are weak, and He does not concentrate on your shortcomings but He always consider the possibility of you becoming a better person. So do not allow your sin to prevent you from experiencing the joy of being saved once again.

In the parable of the prodigal son, we see how the mercy of God is brought out in the image of the forgiving father. As with Hosea, the story shows that God's attitude toward the sinner is dominated by his everlasting love for man even in spite of man's failures. How important it will be if, we too learn God's ways and repeat His words when a brother, or a sister steps on our toes and say I forgive because this is God's way and not man's.

As spiritual Fathers, we are God's ambassadors meant to bring His good news of love to people. We can only do this if we have seen what reconciliation really means in ourselves. The priest in his attitude and practice has to be a constant example of how to love his neighbour, obey and follow that second commandment

which is like the first to love our neighbour. The difficulty with Christian charity is that you are expected to love people who by every standard do not deserve it. And it is not easy, but this is one of the crosses we have to bear as the Lord's disciples. There are people you will not find any difficulty loving because they are so nice. Conversely, there are other people that you have to force yourself, do certain violence to yourself to be charitable to them. They do not relate with you, they do not socialise or attend meetings. Even burial ceremony of a fellow priest's parent, you do not see them. When the parent of such a priest dies, what are you supposed to do? Pay him in his own coin? No! Do not pay evil with evil. Be good to such a person. Christian charity demands love shown him.

According to Msgr Gotan,

... whatever it is, no matter how insubordinate, no matter how irritable one is, no matter how defiant and uncompromising one is, no matter how unpalatable one's words turn out to be, no matter the posture of disobedience one adopts, the priest needs a sheltering tree, someone ... sympathetic and empathetic to unburden him.

Such people need brotherly deliverance and we

can only do this by showing him love tenderly. Once we try to tolerate, accommodate and fraternally treat difficult people in our midst, there will be unity among us with walls of peace built such that no demon in hell can destroy.

Our Lord's Prayer makes it clear that our own forgiveness depend on our forgiveness of others. Without forgiving others, who have hurt us, God will not forgive us. And it is only when we forgive others that we experience true freedom. Pope John XXIII when he was the Patriarch of Venice did something that was quite fatherly that could help our better understanding of this point. According to him, he learnt that one of his priests was living a rather worthless life and had been found in places where no priest who hold the priesthood in high esteem should be seen. John had every opportunity, power and reason to penalise him. But did not. One day, he waited outside that place, where the priest was accustomed to visit. When the priest saw him, he grew pale but John took him by his arm and as if nothing were amiss, gently, like Christ requested him to go with him to his private chapel. The Patriarch knelt down before the priest and said, "please Father hear my confession." When the priest had absolved him, the Patriarch put his arm around his shoulder and said: "my son, I will like you to meditate on the gifts, God has forgiven you to forgive men's sins

even those of your own Archbishop. May this encourage you to avoid sin as much as possible in your life out of gratitude to Christ.” This lesson is very important for us. Very important in the sense that no one of us have any reason to hurt his fellow priest or refuse him forgiveness. Even when you have every reason or power to punish a priest, always consider the options that will be more fatherly like Pope John XXIII. Beware! “An eye for an eye, will make the world go blind,” said Mahatma Gandhi.

We preach readiness to make preparation for evil and compensation for injury or insult as signs of metanoia. And the overall picture of us should be that of a loving and forgiving father. When we show compassion and love to fellow human beings, we not only witness to the merciful heart of Christ, but also promote a more humane society. For in religious parlance, mercy transcends justice. Mercy is an indispensable element in building and consolidating mutual relationship among people in a spirit of brotherhood.

Beloved priests, a passionate appeal from this annual retreat is that anyone of us keeping malice with his fellow priest should sincerely forgive and be forgiven. Forgiveness renews, deepens and strengthens relationships. The one who forgives becomes more lovable and the one who is forgiven

becomes more loving. Between the two, bitterness is petered out and harmony restored. A crucial question is who should forgive who and when? The simple answer is put in a question for us. If not now, when? If not by me, who? So, now is the appropriate time to cast to the flames our bitterness and make peace.

CONCLUSION

When I was told to come and direct this year's annual retreat, I took some time thinking about what will make my topic of discussion. In the process, I discovered that it is vital for us to look at what the Catholic Church stands for. How all of us priests ought to live our lives as heralds of God's salvific gospel. This was quite spectacular for me. In the sense that it is only a return to the roots that can help us redirect our steps in order to contend with the challenges of the times, for the challenges of our priestly ministry are enormous and they call for introspective contemplation. Unless we know what we were ordained for and think of how to do it very well, without pharisaically being obstacles to people's attainment of salvation, many of us will constitute a nuisance not only to the Church but to the world at large. And this will be catastrophic. In fact, it is the worst thing that will happen to us after making great sacrifices. Jesus even warned about it:

Occasions for stumbling are bound to come but woe to anyone by whom they come! It would be better for you if a millstone were hung around your neck and thrown into the sea than for you to cause one of these little ones to stumble

(Lk 17:1-2).

All priests have vital role to play in the task of social transformation. We have thousands of people before us every Sunday. A greater majority of these people are poor, ignorant and distressed. In our regular homilies, the prophetic calling of priests challenges us not only to exhort and comfort but also to encourage and empower the weak and faint hearted. Our lives must be a source of hope to the distressed. Our Eucharistic celebrations must not only be a pledge of eternal salvation, but also a promise of reprieve in this world. Our lives must be a resounding witness to Christ, who came,

To preach the good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and the recovery of sight to the blind; to set at liberty those who are oppressed and to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord (Lk. 4:18).

We must let our unique love for and consecration to Christ, shine out and be reflected in our commitment to the well-being of those who are so dear to Christ – the poor, the sick, the despised, the widow, the orphan, the prisoner, the stranger and victim of political and religious victimisation. We must also aim at overcoming

individual and structural evil and transforming our society with the sheer power of love, that power of love which Christ redeemed humanity from the throes of death. We must be unequivocally committed to the promotion of the greater humanisation of the world which Pope Paul VI calls the civilisation of love.

As priests, we cannot close our eyes to the hunger plight of victims struck by disaster, communal crisis and injustices done to many people around us. We cannot turn a deaf ear to the cries of frustration from people victimised for one reason or the other, or to the cries of people we have injured by our own acts of violence to human rights and dignity. We cannot be silent when we should speak boldly in defence of the discriminated, of fairness, of sharing the goods of the world with the poor. It is our responsibility to seek the oppressed, marginalised and impoverished people of our society to support their quest for justice. We have to reach out to the unwanted and the unloved and reaffirm their dignity. We have to listen to the cries of the wounded and poor and lift them up with compassion.

Brothers in Christ, we live in a very corrupt and highly degenerating society. The Church is the only organ that can instrumentalise the positive changes that our society needs. But if we do not

stand well, the evil structures of the society will influence us, paving way for lost of the truth of the gospel. For instance, when a priest becomes a renowned politician in our country today, Nigerians look at him the way they look at our deceitful politicians. And we must all know that it is only when we acknowledge Jesus before others that he can acknowledge us before God (Matt. 10:32). If we get entangled by mundane things that we lost the courage to proclaim the gospel in spirit and in truth, then why do we become priests? A priest who has lost the sense of right and wrong is a wolf in sheep clothing. I mean the devil in disguise. Can you afford to be a brigand in the ministry? A thief of souls for satan? As for me, the essence of my priestly ordination can never be defeated. What about you? Brother, be wise! Today is your day of decision.

While we are concerned about what is happening to the Catholic Community in Nigeria, we must never lose sight of what is happening in the wider world. As of now, it is obvious that there is a battle raging for the control of souls. We see this not only in what some Pentecostals are doing, but in Islam and other religions of the world. Can we afford squabbles in such a situation? No! As a family, we must work together to ensure that the souls within the Catholic ford are safe. We must be prayerful and make our parishioners prayer

warriors to be able to avert the diabolic arrows that satan is hauling at the Church.

All of us must strive to cultivate the virtues of humility, justice, love and compassion, which will encourage the flock to be open and honest towards us and to exercise our charisms with zeal and enthusiasm. You must zealously preach the gospel of love, which constitutes the axis from which all religious acts flow. We have to make them know that it is the fire of love that enables one to love God in the privacy of his or her heart, and to accept the gift of his or her neighbour in love. Pope Paul II testified to the clear fact that today's world is not in need of more teachers. Rather he said, what the modern man or woman need is authentic witnesses to the love of God in Christ. As John of the cross, the greatest of all Christian mystics says: "In the last in the final moment, we shall be judged on love."

We must reiterate our faith in the Lord and the fact that the Church is primarily His, and we His shepherds have feet of clay. Indeed, the scandals happening in America for instance are helping our people to come to terms with our human frailty and they will also help bring some of us down from our high horses of pride and arrogance. These realities should reaffirm our faith in God and make us commit ourselves to the real tasks of the Church in seeking the truth.

Also, in trying to contend with the challenges of our Church, it is important to have the proper concept of the Church. It was clearly spelt out in Vatican II documents especially *Lumen Gentium*: the Church as people of God, made up of members with different status and mission. That same concept of the Church came out clearly in the document, *Christi Fidelis Laici*. It is only an integral Church that can fully represent Christ and carry His message forcefully and effectively around the world today. That means that the Church must move as fast as possible as a body. The great challenge is how do we ensure that this happens? We need channels of communication across the board that will get people to understand where we are and where we are going. There is need for more formal fora for serious joint discussions and planning that would include the clergy and laity.

Our leadership must be transparent and accountable. Catechism and Bible study must also be taken seriously, since the lay people have a very poor knowledge of the word of God and the teachings as well as doctrines of the Church. Master-slave relationship should not be found among us and the laity. We must all be united and work as a team to accomplish the mission of the Church. You must be aware of the perilous dangers of going into carnal relationship with the opposite sex. Beware of your boys in the house,

and some ravenous wolves among the laity. And be careful in lending out money to your parishioners. Take good care of your health, and always watch your weight, for obesity is not a sign of enjoyment but ill health.

You must always take time to look at Church documents and source for information on latest happenings in the universal Church. Above all, we must all curtail the wave of materialism and concentrate more on the spiritual. Finally, we must always be guided by the Magisterium, in order to be in tune with the Church. And always remember to pray for our departed priests.

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