

THE VOCATION, MINISTRY AND MISSION OF THE CATHOLIC PRIESTS AND RELIGIOUS MEN AND WOMEN IN CHURCH MISSION IN AFRICA FRANCIS APPIAH-KUBI & LEO ANDOH KORSAH¹

ABSTRACT

The traditional doctrine of the Catholic Church describes the priest as Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments and Leader of the Christian community. His functions are therefore tripartite in nature, consisting respectively of teaching, sanctification and governance. The priesthood is God's gift for the Church. It is one of the seven sacraments of the Church which not only confers grace but power to preside over the holy sacrifice of the Eucharist and to forgive sins. In this study, we employ qualitative and quantitative methods of research with the use of primary and secondary sources for data collection. The study uses descriptive research design in a social survey, with the Catholic Ecclesiastical Provinces of Accra, Cape Coast and Kumasi as the case study. Non-probability (quota and purposive) sampling technique was used to select a sample size of 450 respondents from the three ecclesiastical provinces with each province assigned a quota of 150. Out of the 450, 300 were retrieved and carefully analysed manually and descriptively. The views of other 30 seminary formators from the three provincial seminaries were solicited through one-on-one interviews. The study reveals the complex nature and difficulties associated with vocations to the priesthood and religious life in Africa, a continent saturated unfortunately with poverty, marital issues, tribalism/ethnocentrism, corruption and other numerous vices, but at the same time a continent full of hope for African Christianity.

Key Words: Vocation; Mission; Ministry; Holy Orders; Evangelical Counsels; Religious Men and Women; Catholic Priests; *Persona Christi*

INTRODUCTION

In the course of history and as the Church evolves and moves within the centuries of her existence till today, she is confronted with multifaceted challenges that push her to determine, define and strategize her missionary axiology in this rapid changing world². In this perspective, W.J. William rightly recognized that Christian ministry “continued to develop and to be adapted in the succeeding moments of history”³. The Church therefore must consider its place, identity and function, in response to these ever-challenging issues of her evangelizing mission in the world. It implies that the whole Church is called to urgent and constant apostolic commitment which is both personal and communitarian, renewed and generous. In this perspective, Priests and Religious men and women must recognize and appreciate the urgency and the importance of their call and to hasten their preparations, with renewed apostolic spirit, towards the evangelizing mission of the church in Africa.

The sole mandate of the universal Church is mission. The church is missionary par excellence, and this is in line with the perspective of the Great Commission: “Go into the world and preach the Gospel to the whole creation” (Mk 16:15). Such is the mandate that the risen Christ gave to his Apostles before ascending to his Father: “And they went forth and preached everywhere” (Mk 16:20). The Second Vatican Council reiterates this in its dogmatic constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, (LG) that “the pilgrim Church is missionary by her very nature, since it is from the mission of the son and the mission of the Holy Spirit

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² W.J. Bausch, *A New Look at the Sacraments*, (Connecticut, Twenty-Third Publications, 1983), p.245

³ W.J. Bausch, *A New Look at the sacraments*, p. 245. Cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Formation of Priests in the circumstances of the present day*. (London: Catholic Truth Society, 1992), #6

that she draws her origin, in accordance with the decree of God the Father”⁴ The duty of evangelizing all peoples constitutes the essential mission of the Church in Africa. Evangelizing is in fact the grace and vocation proper to the Church, her deepest identity. Pope Paul VI could strongly affirm: “She (The Church) exists in order to evangelize”⁵. Born from the evangelizing mission of Jesus and the Twelve, the Church is in turn sent forth. “Depositary of the Good News to be proclaimed ... having been sent and evangelized, the Church herself sends out evangelizers. She puts on their lips the saving Word”⁶. This confirms the fact that the whole church is missionary and the work of evangelisation is the basic duty of the people of God”⁷. The Church proclaims the Good News of Christ not only by the proclamation of the Word which she has received from the Lord, but also by the witness of life (cf. 1 Pet 2:15).

In Africa, Evangelization should insist not only on the proclamation of the Good News of Jesus Christ, the Word of God but equally on concrete witnessing⁸ to the life Christ, crucified, died and risen, the Way, the Truth and the Life. It is important that the mission of the Church in Africa should be centred on a transforming encounter with the person of the living Christ. The proclamation ought to bring about this overwhelming and exhilarating experience of Jesus Christ who calls each one to follow him in an adventure of faith. The Church’s proclamation can only be the Word of God in that it is a testimony about the Word, concerning the self-revelation of God in God’s Word. The priests, religious men and women play critical and vital roles with respect to the mission of the church, which constitutes their vocation. They are the core agents to carry out the responsibility of the missionary activity of the church. It is therefore important to emphasize that the role of priests is ultimately derived from the ministry of preaching the word and from the central place of the Eucharist in the life of the Church.

Vocation to the Priesthood and Religious life

The word *Vocation* is direct translation of the latin word, *vocationem*, which literally means “calling” or being called⁹. It is a personal call offered freely and must be accepted willingly. Though the Christian vocation is a gift from God to humanity, the family contributes to the individual’s realization of his vocation to the priesthood by bringing him up in the faith. In support of this opinion, Bushman in his commentary on the Second Vatican Council’s decree on formation of priests, *Optatum Totius (OT)* points out that “a vocation to the priesthood has as its foundation a vibrant faith which ideally develops in the family”¹⁰, which the Council describes as “initial Seminary”¹¹. This presupposes a mature faith commitment to Christ and his Church as a foundation upon which to build. The Second Vatican Council in its decree on the apostolate of the laity, *Apostolicam Actuositatem (AA)* reiterated that the vocation to the Catholic priesthood is a gift from God that is never bestowed from outside or independently of the Church. Ideally, insists the document, it begins in a Catholic home, where among other things, the essential connection between Christian life, the apostolate and service are learned¹². In his Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, John Paul II reiterates the Church’s teaching to affirm that the priestly vocation “is a call, by the Sacrament of Holy Orders received in the Church, to place oneself at the service of the People of God with a particular belonging and configuration to Jesus Christ and with the authority of acting ‘in the name and in the person’ of him who is the Head and Shepherd of the Church”¹³. He insists that each priest receives his personal call from the Lord Jesus Christ through the Church as a gracious gift¹⁴.

⁴ *Ad Gentes (AG) #2; Lumen Gentium (LG) #1*

⁵ Paul VI, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Nuntiandi* (8 December 1975), n. 18.

⁶ CONGREGATIONS FOR THE ORIENTAL CHURCHES, FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES, FOR THE EVANGELIZATION OF PEOPLES, FOR CATHOLIC EDUCATION (eds.), *Developments in the Pastoral Care for Vocations in the Particular Churches: Past Experiences and Plans for the Future. Final Document of the Second International Congress of Bishops and Others Responsible for Ecclesiastical Vocations*, Rome, 10-16 May 1981 (2 May 1982), n. 41.

⁷ *AG #35*

⁸ Paul VI, Exhortation apostolic, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, (Rome, Libreria Editrice Vaticana 8 December 1975) #21, cf. *AG #12*

⁹ Cf. <https://www.etmonline.com> assessed 30/11/2019

¹⁰ Trouve M.L., (Gen. Ed.), *The Sixteen Documents of Vatican II*, (Introductions by Douglas G. Bushman); (Boston; Pauline Books & Media, 1999), p.328.

¹¹ *OT #2*

¹² *AA #11; 30*

¹³ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*: #35

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, #35

The vocation to priestly or religious life is characterised primarily by a divine initiated dialogue through which the individual responds. God is the one who first takes the initiative to call the individual¹⁵. This is evident in how he called the prophets of old (Jr 1:4-5) and how Jesus called the disciples who later became the apostles (Mk 3: 13). The vocation therefore to the ministerial priesthood is to be understood within the context of Christian identity as a disciple of Christ. Pope John Paul II attested without ambiguity that the “history of every priestly vocation, as indeed of every Christian vocation, is the history of an inexpressible dialogue between God and human beings, between the love of God who calls and the freedom of individuals who respond lovingly to him.”¹⁶ The Gospels present vocation as a marvellous meeting between God and human beings (cf. Mk 3:1). This is the mystery of being called, the mystery that involves the life of every Christian, but which is manifested with greater clarity in those whom Christ invites to leave everything to follow him more closely. Christ has always chosen some people to work together with him in a more direct manner for the realization of the Father’s plan of salvation. Before calling his disciples to a task, Jesus invites them to put everything aside, to live in profound communion with him, indeed to ‘be’ with him.¹⁷

God calls people in order to transform them into true proclaimers of and witnesses to his saving presence in the world. This experience is an example which shows the need to be travelling companions of the risen Christ, setting out on a way of life that takes nothing for granted, but yields in openness to the Mystery of God who calls. Christ the Shepherd is the origin and model of priestly ministry.¹⁸ Christ has decided to entrust some of his disciples with the power to offer the Eucharistic sacrifice and to forgive sins.

Having sent the apostles just as he himself had been sent by the Father, Christ, through the apostles themselves, made their successors, the bishops, sharers in his consecration and mission. The office of their ministry has been handed down, in a lesser degree indeed, to the priests. Established in the order of the priesthood they can be co-workers of the episcopal order for the proper fulfilment of the apostolic mission entrusted to priests by Christ.¹⁹

The priest, as well-attested by the doctrine of the character of Sacred Orders, is configured to Christ the Priest who enables him to act in the person of Christ the Head and Shepherd.²⁰ W.J. Bausch remarked justifiably that his being and his acting in ministry come from God’s faithfulness, marked by the spiritual gift that, in the Sacrament of Orders, dwells in the priest in a permanent way and distinguishes him from the baptized who share in the common priesthood²¹. The priest, in fact, inasmuch as he is united to the episcopal order, shares in the authority with which Christ “builds up, sanctifies and rules his Body, the Church.”²² Bonaventure Kloppenburg sees the priest as the “man chosen by God, the visible sign, the means and the living instrument of Christ the eternal Priest amid the community of believers. Through the special sacrament he receives, the priest ontologically qualifies to build, sanctify and role the Church in the name and person of Christ with authority”²³ Such a definition captures the essential elements or features of the ministerial priesthood whose authority is one of service and not of dominion. The priest must therefore exercise their office publicly²⁴ for the Church and humanity in the name of Christ.

The Life and Ministry of Priests, Religious Men and Women

It is remarkably important to note that the Second Vatican Council in *Lumen Gentium*, presents the Church as the messianic people of God in which three fundamental groups of members contribute to her life and

¹⁵ N. Halligan, (OP)., *The Sacraments and their Celebrations*, (New York, Society of St. Paul, 1986), p. 142-143.

¹⁶ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, # 41.

¹⁷ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, # 34.

¹⁸ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, # 23.

¹⁹ *PO* # 2; *LG* # 28.

²⁰ *PO* # 2.

²¹ W.J. Bausch, *A New Look at the Sacraments*, (Connecticut, Twenty-Third Publications, 1983), p. 244.

²² *PO* #2.

²³ B. Kloppenburg, *Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, (Chicago, Franciscan Herald Press, 1974), p.292.

²⁴ B. Kloppenburg, *Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, p. 288

mission according to their *call, gifts and duties*. These three fundamental groups of members are the Ordained²⁵, the Laity²⁶ and the Religious Men and Women²⁷.

The priests, religious men and women, in their respective call and charism may live their own life but not for themselves, nor in contradiction with the teachings of the Catholic Church. Their life, according to the Second Vatican document, *Perfecta Caritatis (PC)* should be in consonance with the dictates of the Gospel²⁸. The Church according to the Second Vatican document, *Presbyterorum Ordinis (PO)* calls her priests and religious to a life of perfection. She invites them to embrace voluntary poverty²⁹, celibacy³⁰ and obedience³¹ to God through the church, whose direct representative in this context is the pope, bishop, superiors or any other Christian.

In this perspective, priests are obliged to work towards attaining this perfection in a special manner because of their ordination. In affirming this opinion, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council assert that priests are bound to acquire that perfection in special fashion. They have been consecrated by God through the sacred power of Orders (ordination) and made living instruments of Christ the Eternal Priest. As a result, they are able to carry on in time and space the marvellous work Jesus Christ in rendering the entire humanity whole.³² Since every priest in his own fashion acts in place of Christ himself, he is enriched by a special grace, so that, as he serves the flock committed to him and the entire People of God, he may better grow in the grace of him whose tasks he performs, because to the weakness of our flesh there is brought the holiness of him who for us was made a High Priest “holy, guiltless, undefiled not reckoned among us sinners (Heb, 7:26)”³³. Consequently, the Church urges all her priests and men and women in religious life to make every effort to attain growth in holiness to enable them become consistently better instruments in the service of the whole people of God, using for this purpose those means which the church has approved.³⁴

The priest’s identity like every Christian identity has its source, the Blessed Trinity, which is revealed and is communicated to people in Christ, establishing, in him and through the Spirit, the Church as “the seed and the beginning of the kingdom.”³⁵ The apostolic exhortation *Pastores Dabo Vobis* presents the Church as mystery, communion, and mission: She is mystery because the very life and love of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit are the gift gratuitously offered to all those who are born of water and the Spirit (cf. Jn, 3:5) and called to relive the very communion of God and to manifest it and communicate it in mission³⁶. In this apostolic exhortation, John Paul II strongly emphasizes that the Church herself appears as a mystery of vocation, is a people made one by the Unity of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit³⁷. It is within the Church’s mystery, as a mystery of Trinitarian communion, that every Christian identity is revealed, and likewise the specific identity of the priest and his ministry. Indeed, the priest, by virtue of the consecration³⁸ which he receives in the sacrament of orders, is sent forth by the Father through the mediatorship of Jesus Christ, to whom he is configured in a special way as head and shepherd of his people, in order to live and work by the power of the Holy Spirit in service of the Church and for the salvation of the world.

Thus, the nature and mission of the priests, religious men and women cannot be defined except through this multiple and rich interconnection of relationships of the Blessed Trinity which forms the basis of the communion of the Church, as a sign and instrument of Christ, of communion with God and of the unity of all humanity³⁹. In this situation the ecclesiology of the church family of God becomes decisive for understanding the identity of the priest, his essential dignity, and his vocation and mission among the

²⁵ LG, Chapter 3

²⁶ LG Chapter 4

²⁷ LG chapter 6

²⁸ PC #2

²⁹ PO #17

³⁰ PO #16

³¹ PO #15

³² PO #2; #12; #13

³³ PO #12

³⁴ LG #42; PC #2; PO #7

³⁵ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, #35

³⁶ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* #35

³⁷ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* #35

³⁸ M. Schmaus, *The Church as Sacrament, Dogma 5*, (London, Sheed and Ward Inc, 1975), p.186

³⁹ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 23.

people of God in Africa and in the world. Reference to the Church is therefore necessary, even if not primary, in defining the identity of the priest. As a mystery, the Church is essentially related to Jesus Christ. She is his fullness, his body, his spouse. She is the “sign” and living “memorial” of his permanent presence and activity in our midst and on our behalf. The priest finds the full truth of his identity in being a derivation, a specific participation in and continuation of Christ himself, the one high priest of the new and eternal covenant.⁴⁰

Ministerial priesthood should thus be distinguished in essence from the common priesthood and is at its service.⁴¹ Indeed, according to E.J. Gratsche, et al. “the ministerial priest, by the sacred power he enjoys, teaches and rules the priestly people; acting in the person of Christ, he makes present the Eucharistic sacrifice, and offers it to God in the name of all the people”.⁴² Walter J. Burghart conceives the priest from four perspectives: first as a disciple of Christ called to be with and to follow Christ; second as an apostle, called to be sent, thirdly as a presbyter responsible for the pastoral care of the Church, and lastly and fourthly as a presider over the Eucharist, which is not his total task but it is the central preoccupation of the priesthood⁴³.

Indeed, inasmuch as it is necessary that the Church herself is called together by the risen Christ, priests are given the ability by the Sacrament of Orders⁴⁴ to be effective instruments for the building up of the Church, by means of the proclamation of the Word, the celebration of the sacraments and guiding the People of God.⁴⁵ Evangelization consists of proclamation, witness, dialogue and service. It is based on three inseparable elements: preaching the Word, sacramental ministry and leading the faithful⁴⁶. Preaching would be senseless unless it includes continuous formation of the faithful and participation in the sacraments. Likewise, participation in the sacraments without sincere conversion of heart, full acceptance of the faith and of the principles of Christian morality is also meaningless. From a pastoral perspective, the primary action of evangelization is, logically, considered to be preaching⁴⁷. From the perspective of intentionality, however, the primary element of evangelization must be celebration of the sacraments, especially of Penance and the Blessed Eucharist⁴⁸. The integrity of the pastoral ministry of priests in the service of evangelization is to be found, however, in a harmonious fusion of both of these functions.

Challenges facing Priests, Religious men and women in mission in Africa

It must be recognised, in principle that the religious state is essential part of the Church’s very life and is a factor in her holiness. All religious men and women have a distinguished place in the house of God. One outstanding feature that characterises the identity of the life and ministry of priests, religious men and women is the Evangelical Counsels; consisting of vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.⁴⁹

Concerning the first vow, which is poverty, the Church demands that the life of her priests, religious men and women should not be marked by affluence and at the same time, the Church does not call them into extreme abject poverty. The Church encourages that as part of their lives they should not focus on money or be overly indulged in monetary affairs but should only be concerned with what would enable a decent living. In brief, the Church invites all her priests, religious men and women “to embrace voluntary poverty by which they are more manifestly conformed to Christ and become eager in their sacred ministry. For Christ, though he was rich, became poor on account of us, that by his need we might become rich [...]. By living this form of life, priests, can laudably reduce to practice that spirit of poverty commended by Christ”⁵⁰.

From our research conducted we realised that two hundred and ten (210) priests and religious representing seventy per cent (70%) of the respondents included loving their state of poverty as a challenge. For them, as missionaries to their own, poverty becomes an actual and crucial issue due to demanding pressure from

⁴⁰ LG #28

⁴¹ LG #10

⁴²E.J. Gratsch, et al., *Principles of Catholic Theology*, (New York, Society of St. Paul, 1981), p.191.

⁴³ W. J. Burghardt, (SJ), “What is a Priest?” in M.J. Taylor (Ed), *The sacraments; Readings in the contemporary sacramental Theology*, (NY, Society of Saint Paul, 1981), pp. 157-160

⁴⁴ M. Schmaus, *Church as Sacrament*, p.186

⁴⁵ PO # 4-6:

⁴⁶ LG # 28.

⁴⁷ PO # 5, 13, 14; cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, # 26

⁴⁸ PO # 5, 13, 14; cf. John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, # 23, 26, 48.

⁴⁹ CF. PO #7; PC #12, #13, #14

⁵⁰ PO #17

their respective families to make financial contributions. According to them in times of financial difficulties, members of their families demand financial support especially to cater for school fees, health bills, contribution towards family funerals and even money to start a trade. Thus, financial demands and social constraints become a burning issue for the African priest or religious as the African is a communal being and the detachment from one's biological family, clan or people, and shunning away from certain family responsibilities constitutes counter production against one's family. However, despite such apparent difficulties, the priests, Religious Men and Women, should not forget that this pastoral charity is the mystery of God's merciful love for sinners and that it makes possible for priests to have special solicitude for the poor. A priest's gift and labours can contribute to satisfying a love that would embrace everyone in need⁵¹.

The second vow which is chastity/celibacy is recognized and appreciated by the Church as a gift from God that must be accepted willingly and freely. However it is imposed on all who enter into sacred Orders of the Latin Church as a priestly way of life in accordance with the Second Vatican Council teaching, which stipulates that all priests who in following the example of Christ must "freely receive sacred celibacy as a grace of God, that they magnanimously and wholeheartedly adhere to it, and that persevering faithfully in it, they may acknowledge this outstanding gift of the Father which is so openly praised and extolled by the Lord (Mt 19:11)"⁵². Celibacy, therefore is recognized by the Catholic Church as suitable for priestly life as it enables priests to be more committed and dedicated to Christ and his work with undivided heart. Other religious men and women who are not priests also have it as a demand to keep to the vow of celibate-chastity⁵³.

We remarked during the interviews that one hundred and ninety-two (192) representing sixty-four per cent (64%) of respondents considered chastity as a challenge. For them chastity should always begin from the mind, it is a challenge to always make the conscious effort to keep the mind pure regardless of what the eyes may see and also advances that may be made by people of the opposite sex. Interestingly and paradoxically, we noted that this vow appears to be awkward in the eyes of the African Traditional societies, yet at the same time it is deemed cherished and respected. Nevertheless, most priests, Religious men and women, though have embraced and still live as celibates, the struggle in mind and body is not only a serious issue to be addressed but also and more importantly it demands a constant assiduity and incessant daily effort conscientiously.

Obedience, the third and the last vow is very essential in the life of priests and religious men and women. Among all the three promises or vows that characterize the priestly life and taken at the diaconate ordination, it is only obedience which is taken again at the priestly ordination.⁵⁴ Priests make this promise of obedience again to any bishop translated into the diocese. The essence of obedience is emphasized by urging priests "to dedicate their own will by obedience to the service of God and their fellow men. In a great spirit of faith, let them receive and execute whatever orders the Holy Father, their own bishop, or other superiors give or recommend"⁵⁵.

About two hundred and seventy (270) priests, religious men and women in Ghana, representing 90% of the respondents, consider the vow of obedience to God through their bishops, superiors, parish priests and older priests and religious as a big challenge. For them it is very difficult to obey and discern the will of God through obedience to authority or superiors. Still in connection with obedience, respondents see it as a great challenge to maintain appropriate relationship with authority without showing signs of disobedience. Most respondents confirm the assertion of Addai-Mensah that "the vow of obedience is the most difficult"⁵⁶ among the three, for, it limits the freedom of priests as full mature human beings.

Nevertheless, the vows themselves are as more in relation to a total love of God. "The purpose of the religious vows is to scale the heights of love, a complete love and dedicated to Christ under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and through Christ offered to the Father"⁵⁷. *Lumen Gentium* highlights these points indicating that the consecrated life is indispensable element of the church's life; "thus the state which is

⁵¹ PO # 6

⁵² OT #10; LG 42; 44

⁵³ PO #16

⁵⁴ Cf. N. Halligan, (OP), *The Sacraments and their celebrations*, (New York, Society of St. Paul, 1986). pp. 137-146

⁵⁵ PO #15

⁵⁶ P. Addai-Mensah, *Do Diocesan Priests have Spirituality? A Ghanaian view*. (Takoradi: St Francis Press Ltd, 1997), p. 37

⁵⁷ LG #43; cf. PC #12; 13; 14.

constituted by the profession of evangelical counsels, though it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, nevertheless, undeniably belongs to its life and holiness.”⁵⁸ The Church teaches that the consecrated life is not human construct, but comes from the Lord. “The Evangelical Counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience are based upon the words and example of the Lord”⁵⁹. Therefore, faithful to their profession and leaving all things for the sake of Christ (Mt 10:28), religious are to follow Him as one thing necessary, listening to his words and solicitous for the things that are His⁶⁰.

Concretely, priests who are to minister to the people of God and not angels cannot pursue their ministry without extending such a relationship to and with the laity. Both priests and the laity must develop and maintain a healthy relationship with mutual respect for each other. Priests are spiritual directors and shepherds so they must be available, approachable and accessible to the laity. They must develop and maintain a kind of relationship that would command respect and filial and fraternal trust from the laity. The relationship between priests and laity should encourage the latter to play her role in the mission of the Church. In view of this, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council admonish priests to “sincerely acknowledge and promote the dignity of the laity and the part proper to them in the mission of the Church. And they should hold in high honour that freedom which is due to everyone in the earthly city”⁶¹. Moreover, and fundamentally, priests should recognize that they are brothers to the lay faithful and that they are called to be at the service of their own brothers and sisters in the Church Family of God. We would like to reaffirm also that both diocesan and religious priests are committed to the ministry of the Word, Sacraments and a pastoral ministry while the religious who are not priests are committed to other works of charity and services that may be assigned to them.

The priests have the sacred duty to proclaim the Word of salvation through which “the spark of faith is lit in the hearts of unbelievers and fed in the hearts of the faithful”⁶². The proclamation of the Word may take different forms such as formal preaching during Eucharistic and Para-liturgical celebrations and witnessing of life as a priest. The Second Vatican Council observes the importance of the Gospel proclamation to all; therefore, priests are debtors to the teaching of the truth of the Gospel to others. And so, whether by entering into profitable dialogue they bring people to the worship of God, whether by openly preaching they proclaim the mystery of Christ, or whether in the light of Christ they treat contemporary problems, they are relying not on their own wisdom for it is the word of Christ they teach, and it is to conversion and holiness that they exhort all men⁶³.

The ministry of the Word prepares the grounds for the Sacramental ministry of the priest. It is only when the Word is proclaimed that people come to faith and would be able to receive the Sacraments⁶⁴. The ministry of the Sacrament strengthens the faithful who are on pilgrimage on this land and draws them closer to God. Vatican II affirms that “By Baptism men are truly brought into the People of God; by the sacrament of Penance sinners are reconciled to God and his Church; by the Anointing of the Sick, the ill are given solace; and especially by the celebration of Mass they offer sacramentally the Sacrifice of Christ”⁶⁵.

By virtue of ordination, the priest is entrusted with a pastoral ministry as he shares in the office of Christ the shepherd, and head of the Church. In exercising his pastoral ministry, the priest is expected to teach his flock the faith of the Church and ensure that individual members of the flock are led to the Holy Spirit who would enable them to live the faith. Living the faith entails not living according to the desires of the self but surrendering the personal will to the demands of the teachings of Christ. Different categories of people make up the flock, the priest is obliged to treat all with exceptional kindness in imitation of the Lord and render equal pastoral care for all. It is required of the priest to pay attention to the needs of the youth, married couples and parents. The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council suggest a kind of preferential pastoral care for the poor and the weak in the community. They emphasized that “although they have obligations toward all men, priests have a special obligation to the poor and weak entrusted to them, for our Lord himself showed that he was united to them, and their evangelization is mentioned as a

⁵⁸ LG #4

⁵⁹ LG #43

⁶⁰ PC #5 ; cf. 1Cor. 7 :32

⁶¹ PO #9

⁶² PO #4

⁶³ PO #4

⁶⁴ B. Kloppenburg, *Ecclesiology of Vatican II*, (Chicago, Franciscan Herald Press, 1974), pp. 281-282

⁶⁵ PO #5

sign of messianic activity. [...] and above all, priests must be solicitous for the sick and the dying, visiting them and strengthening them in the Lord”⁶⁶. The pastoral ministry of the priest is not limited to the individual care of the faithful, but it is extended and culminated in uniting the entire faithful to establish a church that would live in charity with one another and in unity with the universal Church. This is very crucial, and it is lamentable that a priest becomes a principal factor for the division of the Church instead of a unifier.

Aside the challenges that the Evangelical Counsels pose in the life and ministry of the priests, it emerged from our research that the priests are also confronted with questions of loneliness, stress and misunderstanding especially the aged. The attitude of some laity towards the priests equally appears to be unacceptable and discouraging. Despite such behaviours as gossiping and peddling of falsehood about priests and religious, they (priests or religious men and women) must maintain appropriate relationship with them since they are to follow Christ and be his witnesses⁶⁷. They must recognize that in the Church, which is a family of God, both the laity and clergy are brothers and sisters, and each has his/her specific role to play towards the growth and fulfilment of the mission of the church.

During the Second Synod for Africa, the synod fathers expressed the expectations of the church from the Religious men and women in the following words: “The Church expects from them authentic witnessing of religious life within their communities, characterized by racial, regional and ethnic differences”⁶⁸. With their common life they proclaim that God does not make distinctions between people and that we are all his children, members of his family, living in harmony in diversity and peace. Africa, confronted with many problems, challenges and difficulties such as poverty, hunger, ethnic conflicts, economic and political instability and corruption, priest, Religious men and women are at the forefront in the mission of establishing peace, reconciliation and justice⁶⁹. But to successfully accomplish this mission, African religious men and women must retrieve the mystical dimension of their consecration, which is often rendered less visible by the desire to “do” rather than to “be”. Despite the many human needs of our people, the significance and importance of consecrated life in Africa today cannot be based on the numerous apostolates or works, no matter how essential they may be, but fundamentally on being men and women totally dedicated to God. This is the basis of the prophetic witness which our church and society seriously demand from us today.

CONCLUSION

The priest receives his vocation from the Church, trained by the church, ordained by and for the Church and sent forth on mission by the Church. John Paul II could therefore teach that the Church, by her nature is a “*vocation, a begetter and educator of vocations*”⁷⁰. Consequently, the vocation and ministry of the priest and the religious men and women are first and foremost ecclesial. This emphasizes the fact that, the vocation, ministry and mission of priests, religious men and women are critically appreciated within the context of the church. As indispensable co-workers of the bishops in the work of *mission ad Gentes*, the priests, Religious men and women are to build up the Christian community by living in truth and joy their priestly commitment, celibacy in chastity and detachment from material possessions as well as bearing witness to Christ through obedience to their bishops and superiors in simplicity, humility and filial love.

To round up, we would like to emphasize that the African priests, religious men and women are invited to assume an important mission in the formation of a new African culture that does not call for a retrospective journey to traditional culture nor its complete abandonment, but rather for a critical re-reading and re-assessment of the past, an objective analysis of the present and an optimistic projection into the future in the light of the Gospel as the message of life, love and hope. They are expected to be men and women of dialogue between their culture and the Gospel, to promote a new Christian culture born from this dialogue. In this context, community life itself, as a place of multicultural and intercultural encounter, becomes an evangelising factor of a culture often conditioned by blood or parental affinities, tribalism, alienation and violence. Through intercultural dialogue and exchange, African religious men and women become prophetic signs and instruments for an integral and liberating mission in Africa.

⁶⁶ PO #6

⁶⁷ Cf. Pope Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, (Nairobi, Paulines Publications, 2011), #136

⁶⁸ *Africae Munus* #108; #117

⁶⁹ M. Cheza, *Le Synode Africain, Histoire et Textes*, (Paris, Karthala, 1996), p. 226.

⁷⁰ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, #35

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