

## POSTSCRIPT

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### ***Tu es Sacerdos in Aeternum – The Priest: A Friend and Servant of God***

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“Every high priest is chosen and appointed from among God’s people to act on their behalf in relation to God” (Cf. Hebrews. 5,1).

#### **Introduction**

The most exciting expression of the true nature of a priest is one that finds its true meaning in the phrase *Servus Dei* – a Servant of God. This expression John E. Rotelle, in his foreword to the book, *The True Priest: The Priesthood as Preached and Practiced by Saint Augustine*, is summed up as ‘Service’. Herein, the Church Father, Augustine understood service as the “true meaning of ordination – service to God in transmitting the message of Jesus to humanity and service to the people of God in helping the power of God’s spirit to enter their lives.”<sup>1</sup>

To this act of service and from a biblical understanding, Gerald O’ Collins, and Michael Keenan Jones express that Priests are chosen by God and not self-appointed. This thought finds its meaning in the Old Testament passages of Exodus 25–30, 39–40; Leviticus 8–9; and Number 1–10, wherein YHWH elected priests (and Levites) to serve as His instruments for the benefit of the chosen people. In the New Testament, Jesus also received a divine mandate to serve as high priest of the new covenant. In the same vein, presenting Jesus as a role model, the letter to the Hebrews 4:1 affirms the human nature of a priest who is chosen from among human communities and placed at

their service, and also seen as one representing Jesus Christ ‘who in every respect has been tempted as we are, yet without sin’. In both instances, the divine purpose of a priest, as a ‘friend and servant’ is to bring about the sanctification through divine worship and the proclamation of God’s word to His people.<sup>2</sup>

To fulfil these above objectives, God calls and chooses priests from specific human and ecclesial contexts, and it is to this end that Pope John Paul II believes that a priest is chosen for the service of the Gospel message.<sup>3</sup> It is to this act of service that this write-up discusses the priest as a friend and servant of God’s people.

### **The Priest: Who is He?**

As expressed by Karl Rahner, a priest, as the name suggests – is an elder, a *presbyter*, in the community, for the community and from the community (cf. Acts 11, Rom 12, 8; Phil 1, 1; 2 Tim 1, 6ff). By and large, however, a priest in today’s world is not of the older generation in the sense of biological age and length of life; but his relationship of service to the community is of importance and essence to the priesthood, to which he is called.<sup>4</sup>

His vocation in the thoughts of John Paul II is a mystery. A mystery, he termed ‘*admirabile commercium*’; a mystery of a wondrous exchange between God and man. So beautiful a mystery that, a man offers himself to Christ to be used as an instrument of salvation, offering himself as it were as another Christ. Without comprehending this mystery of ‘exchange,’ the human mind cannot appreciate how conceivably the word ‘Follow me’ can motivate a young man, to abandon earthly satisfaction for Christ sake, in the certitude that if he pursues this pathway, he will find utter personal happiness.<sup>5</sup>

Consequently, to be a priest according to the teachings of Saint Paul, Matthew Levering writes that it demands above all to be a custodian of the mysteries of God. Saint Paul admonishes that God’s people should regard their priest, as servants of Christ and stewards of the mysteries of God through their words and deeds. It necessitates that as servants and stewards, priests are found trustworthy (cf. 1 Cor. 4, 1 – 2). The concept of steward he holds, cannot be replaced by any other. It is deeply rooted in the Gospel, and it recalls the parable of the faithful and unfaithful steward, as explained in Luke 12, 41 – 48). Just like a steward, a priest is not the owner of the ‘field’, but the one

to whom the owner entrusts his goods so that he will manage them justly and responsibly.<sup>6</sup>

It is to this end that Yves Congar in affirming the mission and functionality of a priest believes in the word of Saint Vincent de Paul, that “the Priest is a man called by God to share in the priesthood of Jesus Christ in order to extend the redemptive mission of Jesus Christ in doing what Jesus Christ did, in the way in which he did it.”<sup>7</sup>

Indeed, in the same way,

“the priest receives from Christ the treasures of salvation, in order duly to distribute them among the people to whom he is sent. These treasures are those of faith. A priest is thus a man of the word of God, a man of the sacrament, a man of the ‘mystery of faith.’ Through faith, he draws near to the invisible treasures which constitute the inheritance of the world’s Redemption by the Son of God. No one may consider himself the ‘owner’ of these treasures; they are meant for us all. However, by reason of what Christ laid down, the priest has the task of administering them.”<sup>8</sup>

He has the sole task of administering to God’s people the sacraments and the word, despite the many contradictions’ he faces in today’s world. These contradictions Pope John Paul II expresses as the:

“increasingly witnessing a powerful thirst for justice and peace; a more lively sense that humanity must care for creation and respect nature; a more open search for truth; a greater effort to safeguard human dignity; a growing commitment in many sectors of the world population to a more specific international solidarity and a new ordering of the world in freedom and justice. Parallel to the continued development of the potential offered by science and technology and the exchange of information and interaction of cultures, there is a new call for ethics, that is, a quest for meaning - and therefore for an objective standard of values which will delineate the possibilities and limits of progress.”<sup>9</sup>

Within these contradictions, the yearning for God and a productive, meaningful bond with the priest is so intense and essential in today’s

world that, where there is a lack of a sincere and resonant proclamation of the Gospel message, there is a growing spread of forms of religiosity without God and the proliferation of churches with few or no real disciples of Christ. For the priest and all God's people, the upswing of these spectacles within given societies and nation is not only a ceaseless motive to scrutinise our consciences as to the sincerity of our witness to the Gospel message but concurrently as a sign of how deep and widespread is our Christian faith and search for God.<sup>10</sup>

In all, though, the priest holds various meaning to different people, he is understood to be one who has no holiness of himself, but just a servant of God's people who acts as a mediator between God and men. Through the gospel message and faithful lifestyle, he dialogues and brings succour to God's people. He is a servant who brings the love and strength of God to those around him and those whom the gospel message brings closer to him. He is also a friend who warms the hearts of those in need, gives consolation to the broken-hearted, comforts the sick, walks even when it means sacrificing his comfort through the dark with those distressed and in difficult situations.

### **The Priest As A Friend And Servant Of God's People**

A priest is and can be called a friend because of his unique relationship with all God's people. Without misplacing his priestly identity, he is called to be a friend not just of the rich alone, but also of the poor. His duty is that of service, and as expressed by Karl Rahner regarding Hebrews 5, 1, "he is 'appointed on behalf of men', and his whole being is pledged to the service of others. He does not exist for himself: he has a function which orientates him with his whole life, his talk, his action, his example, his sacrifice and suffering, to other human beings. He is an apostle - just that, sent to serve."<sup>11</sup>

As a friend, a priest must be a fellow bearer of suffering, Karl Rahner believes:

"Though, it is difficult if as individual, we are vigorous, healthy, successful, enjoying life, and be patient with those who are suffering, whose lot is very different from ours, but it is difficult to avoid getting rid of these people quickly, regarding them simply as

hysterical, stupid, naive or sentimental. Really to share the burden here, to listen, to get interested, to let people say the same things a thousand times, to put up with their whining, this is a great natural gift and at the same time a gift of grace. There must be someone in the world who takes all this on himself, patiently, while being hard with himself, at least in certain particular cases.”<sup>12</sup>

This task belongs to the priest who is a friend and being a friend does not eliminate from the priest adversaries who look for at all cost to find fault in him. As conceived by St. John Chrysostom, “the priest must be armed with weapons of steel-intense earnestness and continuous sobriety of life-and he must keep watch in every direction, in case anyone should find a naked and unguarded spot and strike him a mortal blow. For everyone stands around him ready to wound him and strike him down, not only his enemies and foes but many of those who pretend to love him.”<sup>13</sup>

As a servant of God’s people, everyone wants to judge the priest, not as human clothed in flesh, not as a human having same nature as everyone does, but as an angel, free from shortcoming and defects like others. However, if a priest fails to notice his imperfections, and works towards eliminating them as is likely for every human person on his journey through this earthly life, even the best of his homilies and his good deeds would be of no avail to enable him to escape the words of his faultfinders.<sup>14</sup>

The strength of being a friend to all God’s people for a priest, even in demanding situations, is sustained by a Christ-like and a common love of neighbour. It is in a true and genuine sense a fulfilment of this Christian love of neighbour that a priest gets fulfilment, not just in his core priestly functions, but also in living out as an exemplary human person. For as human by nature, all God’s people are always essentially related to one another, and this nature develops and is communicated in unique ways according to the diverse strata of our human nature. All humans living within the same social environment through mutual understanding are related to one another via the exchange of objective intellectual goods and values, truth and goodness. Together with the priest, God’s people are ultimately related to each other as person to person and united with

one another by the same Holy Spirit, who elevates, sanctifies and nurtures all humans into the life of one God's people.<sup>15</sup>

The above-mentioned demands of being a friend, that is, of relating with God's people, sums up the church's teaching on pastoral charity, which is a priest's total gift of self to the Church in the footsteps of Christ. Christ who '*loved the Church and gave himself up for her*' (Ephesians 5, 25). Relating to God's people through pastoral charity is a virtue by which the priest imitates Christ in his self-giving and service. It is not just what he does, but his gift of self, which manifests Christ's love for His people and determines his way of thinking and acting.<sup>16</sup>

The Church Father, St. Augustine of Hippo in his *Iohannis Evangelium Tractatus 123,5* understands this priestly pastoral charity which characterises the exercise of the priestly ministry as an '*amoris officium*', and Pope John Paul II in elaborating this expressed that: "*the priest, who welcomes the call to ministry, is in a position to make this a loving choice, as a result of which the Church and souls become his first interest, and with this concrete spirituality he becomes capable of loving the universal Church, and that part of it entrusted to him with the deep love of a husband for his wife.*" The gift of self has no limits and is evidenced in the same apostolic and missionary zeal of Christ, the good shepherd.<sup>17</sup>

It is in this apostolic and missionary zeal of Christ that Christian communities are created and in the words of Karl Rahner such communities are:

"based on mutual exchange of saving, redeeming and deifying truth and on mutual benevolence which can touch the salvation - that is, the deepest core - of the other person; and a community of in exchangeable individual persons. This is and remains obviously the supernatural foundation sustaining the priestly relationship to the other person. If it is true that the priest genuinely possesses and fulfils his priestly nature only when he believes, hopes, loves, is justified and holy, then his relationship to the other person must as such be sustained by that infused, divine virtue of supernatural love in the Holy Spirit which justifies man and places him in an intimate relationship to God himself and his neighbour. This

neighbour is really and truly loved in and with God, for God's sake and in the light of God, and can be loved deeply and intimately only through the supernatural deifying power of the Holy Spirit whom God has given to us in the supernatural life of grace."<sup>18</sup>

Within the people of God and the presbyterate, the priestly pastoral charity requires and demands in a particular and specific way that a priest relates with his fellow priests, united in and with his particular bishop, for it necessitates that a priest continuously work in the bond of communion with his bishop and with his brother priests, lest, his efforts of self-denial for the sake of the gospel be in vain.<sup>19</sup>

This implies that "whenever a priest becomes unconscious through the vice of pride; that is failing to appreciate humility in his priestly vocation, this most radical relationship with Church authority, and to his fellow-men which exists in God Himself [...], he will also fail to come up to the requirements of his work as a priest. It follows likewise that all inner vitality, closeness, personal esteem for the other person must be included in the 'heart to heart' of Christian love of neighbour."<sup>20</sup>

To this love of neighbour which should emanate from that of loving Christ and His Church as a trademark of the priestly pastoral charity and true friendship with God's people, Karl Rahner believes:

"should be sustained by supernatural love and, up to a point, represents a quite specific fulfilment of this love. The priest in his mission formally and explicitly wills his neighbour's salvation, his supernatural union with God, and thus expresses and makes official the inner core of love of neighbour, which is to love him in as much as God loves him. From this standpoint too we see how the merely authoritative, official, institutional factor not only does not define and cannot constitute by itself the relationship of the priest to men, but that this real, warm, vital, selfless, genuine love for the other person as such belongs to the priestly relationship to men."<sup>21</sup>

In his dealings, a priest must see things without prejudice and must love God's people with a priestly spirit, and in labour and sacrifice

fulfil his function within the totality of human life and human history as God's sent. By so doing, he fulfils his priestly vocation of service and his proper destiny. For in loving others and showing such love in service, he finds Him, who has called him to embrace the priestly vocation.<sup>22</sup>

A priest is not a mini-god and should not pretend to know all. As God's servant "he need not feel threatened in his self-consciousness, self-confidence and self-respect, if there are things in science which he does not understand, if he is not up to date in matters of art,"<sup>23</sup> he must never fail to nurture God's people through exemplary lifestyle. For this reason, which is "for the nurturing and constant growth of the People of God, Christ the Lord instituted in his Church a variety of ministries, which work for the good of the whole body. For those ministers, who are endowed with sacred power, serve their brethren, so that all who are of the People of God, and therefore enjoy a true Christian dignity, working toward a common goal freely and in an orderly way, may arrive at salvation."<sup>24</sup> Such is the life and task of a priest which makes him utterly and genuinely human, and through this task, he must be able to win souls for God. As an individual, a priest must try to be convincing when he comes up against the critical attitude of others. Small and insignificant, he can effectively win over the other only by displaying in the light of his Christian faith that it is worthwhile to be a Christian. In this status quo, he must be credible also as a human person.<sup>25</sup>

To be human in a Christian way does not only entails conforming to the material world (Rom 12, 2) but also implies that those we encounter as Christians have the chance to realise that being a Christian is not something contrary to human feelings. In this sense, the priest of today must be truly human.<sup>26</sup> Being human entail embracing all aspects of the priestly formation and as expressed in the words of Karl Rahner:

"The priest of today must be somehow educated in a broader sense without on that account, pretending to be expert in everything. People expect the priest to be an educated man. Since we took our final examinations, studied philosophy and theology, we have acquired a certain amount of education, but it is not this that people expect of us today. Our education must be more human, and more generally must be



linked with an interest in just those things which interest modern man. We do not need to know everything. We cannot be atomic physicists, psychologists, palaeontologists, sociologists, literary experts and politicians in our spare time. However, it would sometimes be more reasonable to read a newspaper or to settle down with a novel than to play cards. We must be genuine, educated human beings. This also means that our education must not be merely intellectual, but a personal formation of the whole man - including his emotions.<sup>27</sup>

As a friend and servant of God's people, the priest must be a man of prayer and to a considerable extent, must be one who loves and is not self-seeking. However, without prejudice to the priestly official and mandatory powers, the priest of today, can exercise his calling only when his human nature is evident, and when he is humanly credible and brings his faith to bear in his daily activities of life. He must, therefore, be seen by others as a loving, a selfless and a good man. To these latter attributes and good qualities, no priest would want to be excluded, that is being a good man. However, the question today is how is the priestly life making an effect within the society? As a priest, one must continuously ask himself: Is my heart and love, really in the priestly work? If not, then even in the Sacred priesthood one can just be a 'blaring gong or reverberating cymbal' (cf. I Cor 13, 1).<sup>28</sup>

### **The Priest: His Relevance of Being a Friend and Servant in Modern Times**

In modern language, to be relevant as a friend and servant of God's people, there are some principles that cannot be avoided which aid the priest to better understand his chosen vocation within the context of a changing society. This essay wishes to advance two basic principles which affect the fabric of our society (Nigeria) today, which arguably are pathways for personal growth and evangelical fidelity, not just those who have been in God's service, but also as a guide for those in formation.

The first principle is that the kingdom of God must be the focus of the gospel message – Christ who has called us centred his

mission on the proclamation of the kingdom of God (cf. Mk 1, 14 – 15), making, therefore, the Gospel message free for all God's people, by giving himself even to the poor of the poorest. This implies for the priest that, the focus of the universal purpose of the kingdom of God carries along with it a moral implication that enables not just to give oneself in charity to others as stated above, but to be responsive in attitude to the plight and situation of God's people. This responsiveness demands a change of personal lifestyle, a change in the extravagance of material possession.

To bring this to light, focusing on the gospel message requires that a priest eschew the many forms of prosperity gospel messages that characterise the Church today all in the name of fame and money. Such a prosperity message, which is a 'brainwashing' of God's people who are supposed to be served, is spiritual enslavement for material gains and does not dignify the human person.

Being a friend and servant of God's people calls priest today (and priest to be) to renounce the appearance and the reality of wealth and to uplift the spiritual life of God's people through the gospel message and not to make them more miserable in their endless effort to seek and find God. Hence, as Pope John Paul II puts it, "the kingdom which Jesus inaugurates is the kingdom of God. Jesus himself reveals who this God is, the One whom he addresses by the intimate term 'Abba,' Father (cf. Mk 14, 36). God, as revealed above all in the parables (cf. Lk 15, 3– 2; Mt 20, 1–16), is sensitive to the needs and sufferings of every human being: He is a Father filled with love and compassion, who grants forgiveness and freely bestows the favours asked of him."<sup>29</sup> To this gospel message, a priest is called to be faithful.

The second perspective is the use of authority and power and seeking of notable titles like Jesus warns in Matthew 23: 7 of the scribes and Pharisees, *who love to be greeted with respect in the marketplaces and to be called 'Rabbi' by others*. This principle requires the radical message of equality among the people of God and being God's people manifest a principle of life, solidarity, dignity and love for people especially parishioners who must be treasured and respected as made in the image and likeness of God. What this implies is that the Church to which a priest shares a part is a community of brothers and sisters, where no one can raise himself or herself above others, whether by sort of sacred authority, or teaching

or administration. It goes further to explain Jesus message in John 13, 12–1, when he washed his disciples' feet, telling them that no-one should dominate others because the only person who has and shows real authority is the one who serves others.

As regards the use of authority and power Machteld Reynart expressing the thought of Herman Steinkamp in his book *Die Sanft Macht der Hirten – The Soft Power of a Shepherd* holds that within individuals and communities, “power is always present but often hidden. Power can take, for example, the form of loving care and service, of self-giving and self-sacrifice, of social support or well-intended guidance.”<sup>30</sup> Such power Michel Foucault calls pastoral power. For him, it is a “power that fully penetrates and shapes the life of an individual subtly. Foucault viewed it as a new form of power in modern society that no longer can be understood as a hierarchical form of power, characterised by a direct exercise of power by authorities, or described in terms of sovereignty. Foucault used the image of the ‘shepherd/pastor’ as a model for this form of power.”<sup>31</sup>

In defining a true shepherd which a priest in nature should be and the pastoral powers he commands, Machteld Reynaert with reference to Michel Foucault writes that:

“a shepherd is a person who gathers, guides and leads the herd and who assures the herd’s well-being, even if this drives him or her to extremes. The shepherd is responsible for and has to focus on the entire ‘herd,’ but this is only possible when no ‘sheep’ escape. Everything that the shepherd does has to be done both for the benefit of the herd and each sheep. The shepherd has to assure both the general well-being of the herd and the individual salvation of each sheep.”<sup>32</sup>

It is to this end of being a good shepherd and pastor, that the priest must know the people in all their various classes, the rich and poor alike; he must know the world of the past and today, but, what is more, he must pattern his life on the new emphasis in the image of his vocation as a priest, a minister of service to God and the people of God.<sup>33</sup>

### **Conclusion**

The priest is a gift from God's people to God's people and "without priests the Church would not be able to live that fundamental obedience which is at the very heart of her existence and her mission in history, an obedience in response to the command of Christ: 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Mt. 28,19) and 'Do this in remembrance of me' (Lk. 22,19; cf. 1 Cor. 11,24), i.e.: an obedience to the command to announce the Gospel and to renew daily the sacrifice of the giving of his body and the shedding of his blood for the life of the world."<sup>34</sup>

Conclusively, if one takes a closer look at what modern-day Christian expect from their priests, all we see, in the end, is that they have but one high expectation: they are thirsting for Christ above everything else. Their economic, social, and political needs are all summed up in their spiritual needs. From every and in every priest, God's people ask for Christ and have the right to receive Christ, primarily through the proclamation of God's word.<sup>35</sup>

In all, a priest must not try to connect others to God and be left out of God's connection. He must, therefore, develop and continue to develop his human personality and priestly qualities to be a fit instrument for the tasks of today, and at the same time he must manifest a sense of community, and nothing on his parts must matter more to the people of God he is called to lead than the priest's personal and living relationship with the Master who has commissioned him.<sup>36</sup>

### **Endnotes**

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<sup>1</sup> Michele Cardinal Pellegrino, *The True Priest: The Priesthood as Preached and Practiced by Saint Augustine*, (New York: Augustinian Press, 1988), p. 7

<sup>2</sup> Cf. Gerald O' Collins, SJ and Michael Keenan Jones, *Jesus Our Priest: A Christian Approach to the Priesthood of Christ*, (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010), p. 7.

<sup>3</sup> Cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n, 5.

<sup>4</sup> Cf. Edward Quinn (ed), Karl Rahner, *The Priesthood* (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), p. 106.

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Matthew Levering (ed), *On the Priesthood, Classic and Contemporary Texts*, (USA.: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, Inc, 2003), p. 134.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 133.

<sup>7</sup> Yves Congar, “*Le sacerdoce du Nouveau Testament: Mission et culte*” cited in Guy Mansini, OSB, and Lawrence J. Welch, *The Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Prebyterorum Ordinis*, in Matthew L. Lamb and Matthew Levering (eds), *Vatican II, Renewal within Tradition* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 208.

<sup>8</sup> Matthew Levering (ed), *On the Priesthood, Classic and Contemporary Texts*, pp. 133 – 134.

<sup>9</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n, 6.

<sup>10</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>11</sup> Edward Quinn (ed), Karl Rahner, *The Priesthood*, p. 137.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> Matthew Levering (ed), *On the Priesthood, Classic and Contemporary Texts*, p. 32.

<sup>14</sup> Cf. *ibid.*

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Edward Quinn (ed), Karl Rahner, *The Priesthood*, p. 137.

<sup>16</sup> Cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n, 23.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>18</sup> Edward Quinn (ed), Karl Rahner, *The Priesthood*, pp. 138 – 139.)

<sup>19</sup> Cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n, 23.

<sup>20</sup> Edward Quinn (ed), Karl Rahner, *The Priesthood*, p. 139.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>22</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 146.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 142.

<sup>24</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, n, 18.

<sup>25</sup> Cf. Edward Quinn (ed), Karl Rahner, *The Priesthood*, p. 150.

<sup>26</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, p. 151.

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, pp. 151 – 152.

<sup>28</sup> Cf. *ibid.*, pp. 156 – 157.

<sup>29</sup> *Redemptoris Missio*, n, 13.

<sup>30</sup> Machteld Reynaert, *A Web of Power: Toward a Greater Awareness of the Complexity of Power*, in: Annemie Dillen (ed), *Soft Shepherd or Almighty Pastor? Power and Pastoral Care*, (Eugene, Oregon: Pickwick Publications, 2014), pp. 8 – 9.

<sup>31</sup> *Ibid.*, p. 9.

<sup>32</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>33</sup> Cf. Angelo Fernandes, *Vatican two Revisited* (India: Gujarat Sahitya Prakash, 1997), p. 79.

<sup>34</sup> *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n, 1.

<sup>35</sup> Cf. Matthew Levering (ed), *On the Priesthood, Classic and Contemporary Texts*, p. 139.

<sup>36</sup> Cf. Angelo Fernandes, *Vatican two Revisited*, p. 79.

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