

# **THE PRIEST, FAMILY AND MINISTRY: CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS.**

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## **Abstract**

No doubt the family plays a great role in the life of everyone such that without God and our family, we may not have come into being. However, it is obvious that the family has the tendency both to make and mar us when it becomes dysfunctional to its responsibility. Hence this paper aims at exploring the challenges and prospects of the family in the life and ministry of a priest. Using the methods of triangulated interview and hermeneutics, the paper exposes the challenges encountered by priests in the attempt to balance the tension between their family influence and their ministry while delineating the prospects towards mitigating such challenges in order to ensure greater success in the priestly ministry. To achieve the stated aim, the paper gives conceptual analysis of the major terms such as; the priest, family, ministry, e.t.c. While commending good family formation before seminary formation, the paper exposes some family challenges to include; poor parental upbringing, wrong choice of material support than spiritual support, *Umunna* training syndrome, e.t.c. The effects of such challenges include; misappropriation of Church fund, family over burden and trauma, Lack of concentration, e.t.c. The paper proffers some prospects capable of mitigating these challenges to include; radical return to the Eucharist, confidence in the unity of the church (under the bishop, the brother priests and lay faithful), ecclesiastical discipline, integrity and sincerity, modesty of life, e.t.c. The implication of the paper is that in spite of the grievous challenges as exposed, a priest who adheres to the prospects as appealed herein would undeniably be assured of a fruitful ministry unscarred by these challenges.

## Conceptual Clarifications

The word priest has both Greek and Latin derivative as *πρεσβύτερος* (presbyteros) and *sacerdos* respectively which mean an “elder”.<sup>1</sup> A priest is a religious leader authorized to mediate between humans and divine in order to perform the sacred rites of a religion such as sacrifices, propitiation, e.t.c. Each religion has particular rites of transformation to the priesthood. Hence this paper discusses priesthood in general but has a particular interest in Catholic Priesthood. A Catholic Priest is one who is consecrated or set apart and invested by Christ Himself for His Church. The laying of hands by the bishop, with the consecratory prayer constitutes the visible signs of ordination to the Catholic Priesthood.<sup>2</sup> The sacrament of ordination creates a specific ontological bond which unites the priest to Christ who is the High Priest and Good Shepherd<sup>3</sup>. Hence he becomes *alter Christus* and participates in the ministry of the essential salvific actions<sup>4</sup>.

The ministry of the priest is that of service<sup>5</sup> and mercy manifest in the offices of teaching, sanctifying and ruling in practical continuation of the salvific work of Christ who is the head and in communion with the bishop.<sup>6</sup> This is further articulated as follows;

by divine institution, some among Christ’s faithful are through the sacrament of Holy Orders, marked with an indelible character and are thus constituted sacred ministers; thereby they are consecrated and deputed so that, each according to his own grade, they fulfill, in the person of Christ the Head, the offices of teaching, sanctifying and ruling, and so they nourish the people of God<sup>7</sup>.

Family as a basic social unit herein referred has multiple or inclusive meaning as follows:

- the immediate blood affiliation of a priest which has a necessary and unavoidable role in his coming to being/life and a meaningful existence in the African worldview.
- as a social unit of brotherhood with the lay faithful and the presbyterum with the bishop as the head.

Hence this paper sets to investigate the implications of the basic social unit of the priest in his ministry. This investigation explores the challenges imposed by various social units a priest

belongs and enquires the prospects capable of making the priest overcome these challenges while keeping faith with his calling as a priest.

### **Priestly Ministry and Family Challenges**

Occupational hazard is a reality in every field of life. The priesthood is not left out or immuned from occupational hazards. Christ our head had a dose share of hazards during his life and ministry on earth. Christ battled with family challenges from conception, birth, ministry and death. His conception was conventionally a biological scandal, his birth was dehumanizing with the accompanying trauma of flee for security from Herod, his ministry was that of rejection from his own people which culminated in his shameful death on the cross, e.t.c. It becomes an ontological contradiction should a priest expect immunity from family challenges in his ministry.

The family has primary responsibility of basic formation before the seminary formation augments what the family has done. Hence a failure from the family responsibility makes seminary formation mere sessions of damage control. The family formation foundation offers a candidate for priesthood the attitudinal disposition for formation. It offers the surface for social interaction and foundation for formation. No doubt the Holy Spirit offers 100% formation of a priest. However, without equivocation, the Holy Spirit gives the family the opportunity to contribute 50% formation of a priest while the seminary and others scarcely give 50%. It is supposed that from birth to the point of handover of formation to the seminary a child would have gained from his family the needed attitudinal disposition to formation, psycho-social surface for environmental interaction, e.t.c. Hence the family creates a fertile ground in a child; making the child malleable and docile for seminary formation to be planted successfully.

Doleful is the experience of a candidate who has not gained the required malleability and docility to formation from the family before seminary formation. Besides the direct intervention of the Holy Spirit in such candidate, seminary formation remains unproductive because the whole process seems like building a house without foundation. A child who has not learnt to obey the father and mother can only pretend in the seminary for a while and if he scales through; will certainly not respect his parishioners and his allegiance to the bishop will be a false pretence. A child who has not developed values of integrity, honesty/sincerity and high self esteem from the family/guardian will certainly not protect the integrity of the priesthood; develop the tendency of

misappropriation of church fund, display strong doubt on his capacity in the management of the temporal goods of the church and not show real signs of dignity to the Holy Eucharist, e.t.c. Such candidate can at best be described as a garden of clerical scandal.

On the other hand, besides value formation in the candidate, the family imposes some threats to the ministry of a priest. Among such threats include poverty and abuse of office. When from a very poor background, the family members have the tendency to misunderstand the position of a priest from such family to be a financial messiah. Unfortunately, it boomerangs so much so that such priests begin to misbehave and mismanage church fund as family life security. Another scene is when a seminarian is trained from the extended family purse following sales/lease of common properties; land, house, e.t.c. Such extended family members believe they are making a holy investment in a priest who will not disappoint them.

It is disheartening that the said investment sees ordination as the maturity time when the priest begins to yield the *expected* dividends. In a particular situation, a priest was invited to his family meeting. Upon commencement, the agenda was announced that the meeting was an opportunity to state the family needs while the priest takes his own share of responsibility. Therein he was assigned three persons to train from Primary through secondary school to University and the family head concluded, “*onye azuru ya zuo ndi ozo*” (one who is trained has the responsibility of training others and should do as much). This can be regarded as status reductionism whereby the family reduces and exchanges the supposed spiritual support of the priest to material support.

In the same vain, lots of false idols of the mind compound family challenges in the ministry. These idols of the mind breed from peer group, cultural institutions, social security questions, e.t.c. Members of the same peer group share experiences and common place slogans that impede gravely on priestly ministry such as *a na-ama mma si n’ulo puo ezi* (one’s goodness should manifest first at home before going public), *make I settle my family then settle down to do my work, establish umunne gi maka na I ka nka ighota ije n’oru Fr.*, (establish your family members because you will rely on them at old age), e.t.c . Other idols of the mind warranted by the need for social security include; competition on flashy cars, residential houses, city houses for rent, skimming for big/rich parishes, branded businesses, e.t.c. Another very salient idol threatening the priesthood is the African cultural institution on family and child bearing which makes some

traditional Africans describe priests as *efulufu* (foolish man). The traditional Africans believe that life should be seen as *amuta gi imuta onye ozo* (since you were born by someone, you should give birth to another person), *Ama echile*, (perpetuity of lineage), e.t.c. This was so serious that some families in times past go to marry a wife for their priest even in his absence. This is because celibacy is a scandal to the traditional African understanding of marriage institution.

Though as serious these challenges may be, surrendering to the idols has inescapable consequences to the candidate such as; misappropriation of Church fund to meet up, family Overburden/engagement and trauma, lack of concentration, pastoral unavailability, infidelity to the vow of obedience, poverty and celibacy, personality disorder such as bipolarism, e.t.c.

### **Prospects to Family Challenges in Priestly ministry**

Some of the most exalted institutions and offices both in the traditional and modern setting are the family and priestly ministry respectively. Unfortunately, these institutions have experienced serious attacks and challenges that need urgent attention. Nevertheless, this paper has considered how the former has in itself constituted source of challenges and attack on the latter. In this section, the paper offers *very important* prospects towards mitigating the adverse effects which family challenges impose on priestly ministry.

The epi-centre of the priesthood is the Eucharist such that both seem inseparable in their ontology. Hence one of the most important prospects towards mitigating the adverse effects of the stated challenges is a radical return to the Eucharist as the source and summit of the entire Christian life<sup>8</sup>. This is made obvious in the Igbo adage; *ngwere hapu elu osisi aka a kpara ya* (lizards only have the tree for security and lose such security on leaving the tree). Priestly spirituality requires a climate of proximity to the Lord Jesus Christ, of friendship and personal encounter with Him, of shared ministerial mission, of love for and service to, His Person in the person of His Body and Spouse which is the Church. To give oneself to the ministerial service implies a profound love for the Lord Jesus Christ. Hence

this pastoral charity flows especially from the Eucharistic sacrifice. This sacrifice is therefore the centre and root of the whole life of the priest, so that the priestly soul strives

to make its own what is enacted on the altar. But this cannot be achieved except through priests themselves penetrating more intimately through prayer into the mystery of Christ<sup>9</sup>.

The norm of ecclesiastical discipline is another unavoidable factor towards mitigating the family pressure and challenges to priestly ministry. When the norms of ecclesiastical discipline are observed, tensions are avoided which otherwise would compromise the unitary pastoral effectiveness which the priest needs so as to fulfill his mission of teaching and sanctifying the people of God<sup>10</sup>. A conscious and sincere effort towards keeping the norms of ecclesiastical discipline saves one from many troubles. These include the clerical vows of obedience, poverty and chastity/celibacy. Even one who had a truncated family formation can make dogged effort in this regard to surmount such foundational problems thereby maintaining his balance as a priest. This entails keeping to one's superior or Episcopal directives on pastoral administrations at the centre and the particular places of assignment where one has the duties of governing and sanctifying the people. One's obedience ought not to be a pretence but borne from deep love for God and the church.

The priest is specifically empowered to be a man of communion<sup>11</sup>. By his vocation, he unites and serves the double dimensions of Christ's pastoral function; reconciling us with the father and with one another.<sup>12</sup> Hence the priest is the mediator between God and his people and among the people themselves. In this respect, one must bear in mind that despite the autonomy of parishes, they cannot remain isolated from the diocese. Parishes are living members of the one and only Body of Christ, the one and only Church.<sup>13</sup> Hence priests must of high necessity keep with this unity of the church in the parishes and at the diocesan levels. Most importantly, he needs to maintain the requirement of ecclesiastical communion with the bishop and the presbyterum.<sup>14</sup> Like Christ, 'cut off from me you can do nothing'; cut off from the bishop, a priest can do nothing. Hence there ought to be no compromise in the communion with the bishop and the presbyterum in the monthly recollections, meetings, visitations, physical and social media interactions with fellow priests (on whatsapp personal and groups chats, facebook, twitter), availability as the bishop pleases, e.t.c. These will keep the priest in form with healthy mind and body while boosting the identity of the church as the home and the school of communion.<sup>15</sup>

There is need to establish integrity of identity. Such integrity of identity is sufficient to recover a faulty foundation in family formation. By a conscious effort and personal development, one can make up for the fundamental lack in family formation. Priestly identity is three dimensional: pneumatological, Christological and ecclesiological. This primordial theological structure of the mystery of the priest, who is a minister of salvation, can never be overlooked if he is adequately to understand the meaning of his pastoral ministry in the concrete circumstances of the parish<sup>16</sup>. He is the servant of the Church through Christ in the Holy Spirit. Through Him, with Him, and in Him, the priest becomes the servant of mankind. His very being, ontologically assimilated to Christ, constitutes the foundation of being ordained for the service of the community. This high integrity balances the lack in self esteem and contentment such that one ought not to join the cheap gossip of “parish and perish priests syndrome” or constantly desire to be pitied nor constantly complaining either about the parish support staff, parishioners, or the bishop who posted him there. These will go a long way decolonizing the family based idols of the mind challenging the priestly ministry.

The same disposition for communion will help a priest value division of labour in the parish family. Wrong formation makes one think he knows it all. The church is an organically structured community of faithful with lots of investments of charisma. The ministerial function of service to the community, which is based on configuration with Christ, demands a knowledge of, and respect for, the specific role of the lay faithful, and the encouragement of every possible means of having all assume their proper responsibilities. The priest is at the service of the community. He is also sustained by his community. He needs the specific contribution of the laity not only for the organization and administration of the community<sup>17</sup>, but also for faith and charity.

It is of high importance for the priest to be a man of dignity, modesty and command respect. The popular children slogan states; “packaging makes a gentleman”. The priest must be careful with the impression he sales out to the family members both as blood affiliates, parish family and presbyterum family. This is manifest in the use of language, dressing, social life, prayer life, e.t.c. A little child once said; “the difference between a saint and sinner is packaging”. The same people who make priests blush with beautiful names when they are too noisy, extravagant, and

immodest with language or appearances in the guise of zippy youthfulness are the same people who puncture their integrity with unpriestly names behind the priests.

Similarly, the right impression ought to be given to family members from the onset to help them understand the person of a priest and the limits of his operations. This right impression will help to control status reductionism whereupon they fail to see a priest as a spiritual support in the family but a financial messiah. Even when a priest is trained by extended family members, a good impression leads to better understanding and avoidance of personality misrepresentation. In as much as a priest has right to support the family in his little way; there ought not to be a shift from ordinary to extra ordinary material support.

You are addressed the way you dress and your language defines your person in the public. A priest must be gentle and moderate in dressing and preferably in clerical wears especially when necessary. Wrong impressions are sold out when priests do not handle the sacraments with utmost carefulness and when the necessary decorum is not maintained such as cracking unconnected and costly jokes during the mass and other sacraments, noise making around the altar during masses especially with other concelebrants, abusing people from the pulpit, not being passionate and sympathetic in handling parishioners, use of vulgar/foul language on people, e.t.c. For instance, during homily, a priest saw a parishioner sleeping and asked him from the pulpit, “who knows what you were doing with your wife all through the night that you are sleeping during mass”. In as much as this statement may be true of the situation, it is scandalizing, foul, embarrassing and liturgically odious.

No doubt majority of the mentioned challenges are handled with “get meaningfully busy”. “Get Busy” is a necessary slogan to handle much of the challenges in priestly life and ministry both family motivated and other forms of challenges in the priesthood. There are lots of particular apostolates one can define oneself. One can develop particular pastoral commitment in sick call, pastoral visitation, counseling, special youth apostolate, special catechetical programmes in the parish, pious society programmes, sacramental celebrations, e.t.c. Others find interest in farming in support of parish projects. Others engage in social activities like music, skill acquisition, e.t.c. Others take to further studies and researches to equip them assume lecturing jobs, e.t.c. This



should be a choice motivated by one's interest. There are lots of things to be done, discover yours **TODAY** and get busy!

## **Conclusion**

The paper has made sincere effort to explore family challenges to priestly ministry while at the same time stating some prospects capable of mitigating these challenges. The family is the basic social unit a priest belongs which has the responsibility of initial formation and right attitudinal disposition before the seminary formation. It is obvious that the absence of right family formation makes seminary formation unproductive and seemingly sessions of damage control. Parents are highly encouraged to imbibe desirable qualities in their children to make them malleable and docile enough for formation. Hence a child ought to develop the tools of sincerity, honesty, high self esteem, integrity, e.t.c.

Nevertheless, the priest is not immuned from the possible hazards and challenges from this basic social unit where he belongs either by blood affiliation or as a pastor in the parish or in the presbyterum. Such challenges include; status reductionism whereby the person of the priest is reduced from a spiritual pillar to family financial messiah who is expected to begin yielding dividends after ordination. Another challenging factor of the family is the traditional African value on child bearing and absence of which defines a man as a fool in the superlative degree. This is because celibacy is a scandal to the traditional African understanding of marriage institution.

No doubt these challenges impose inescapable consequences such as misappropriation of Church fund, family over burden/engagement and trauma, lack of concentration, pastoral unavailability, infidelity to the vow of obedience, poverty and celibacy, personality disorder, e.t.c. However, the paper proffers some prospects towards abating the challenges and the unavoidable consequences of family challenges to priestly ministry. Some of these prospects include; radical return to the Eucharist as the source and summit of the entire Christian life<sup>18</sup>; faithfulness to ecclesiastical discipline and clerical vows of obedience, poverty and chastity/celibacy; ecclesiastical communion with the bishop, parish and the presbyterum<sup>19</sup>; integrity of identity and self esteem; division of labour and respect to the specific role of the lay faithful; modesty in use

of language and dress code; “get busy” slogan; e.t.c. Hence faithfulness to these prospects will go a long way mitigating family challenges to priestly ministry.

## END NOTES

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<sup>1</sup>Barbette Stanley Spaeth, *The Roman goddess Ceres*, (Texas: University of Texas Press, 1996) pp. 4–5, 9, 20

<sup>2</sup> Catechism of the Catholic Church (CCC) nos. 1537 – 1538.

<sup>3</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation; *Pastores dabo vobis* (25 March 1992), n. 21: l.c., p. 689.

<sup>4</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, Directory for the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Tota Ecclesia* (31 January 1994), n. 7.

<sup>5</sup> JOHN PAUL II, ADDRESS TO THE PLENARY SESSION OF THE CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Priest, Pastor, and Leader of the Parish Community*, Friday 23 November 2001)

<sup>6</sup> Can. 519

<sup>7</sup> Can. 1008

<sup>8</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 11

<sup>9</sup> SECOND VATICAN COUNCIL Decree *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, n. 14.

<sup>10</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Constitution *Sacrae disciplinae leges* (25 January 1983): *AAS* 75, II (1983), p. XIII.

<sup>11</sup> CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, Directory for the Ministry and Life of priests *Tota Ecclesia* (31 January 1994), n. 30.

<sup>12</sup> Mt 20,28; Mark 10, 45; Lk 22, 27.

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<sup>13</sup>Nikolaus Schöch, “Super-priests and 21st Century Challenges” Zenit Interview, ROME, 3 SEPT. 2009 (ZENIT), <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/superpriests-and-21st-century-challenges-9246>

<sup>14</sup>Canon 532

<sup>15</sup> JOHN PAUL II, Apostolic Letter, *Novo Millennio ineunte* (6 January 2001), n. 43

<sup>16</sup> Post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Pastores dabo Vobis* (25 March 1992), pp. 695-696.

<sup>17</sup>Nikolaus Schöch, “**Super-priests and 21st Century Challenges**” Zenit Interview, ROME, 3 SEPT. 2009 (ZENIT), <https://www.ewtn.com/catholicism/library/superpriests-and-21st-century-challenges-9246>

<sup>18</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, 11

<sup>19</sup>Canon 532