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JORDAN NYENYEMBE

## Stewards of God's Mercy: Vocation and Priestly Ministry in Africa



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## STEWARD OF GOD'S MERCY: FORGOTTEN IMAGE OF THE PRIEST

Since his elevation to the chair of St. Peter in 2013, Pope Francis has been steering the Catholic Church toward unleashing the plenitude of God's mercy for humanity and the whole of creation. This is evident in his papacy on several fronts. The first example is through his proclaiming 2015-16 the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Second is his personal lifestyle through which he meets and affirms the marginalized and most wretched of society. Third is his manner of administering the Church: through simplicity, openness, compassion, and fidelity to the Gospel. Fourth is his pontifical magisterial teaching: always diffused through the "grammar of simplicity," devoid of abstract classical terminologies, making his allocations and writings accessible to professionals and ordinary Christians. And a fifth example is through the Church of mercy that Francis presents to the world.<sup>1</sup>

The papacy of Pope Francis is bringing the counsel of the Gospel closer to the people's hearts. His way of leading the universal Church is in line with Jesus's ministry in the Bible. From the beginning of his ministry, Jesus as the priest of the New Testament identified himself as the steward of God's mercy. As the new Moses, Jesus was aware of what Yahweh told Moses about who He was. "The LORD, the LORD God, compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, and abounding in loving-kindness and truth" (Exod 34:6). During his inauguration speech which defined his ministry in his hometown of Nazareth, Jesus puts the practice of mercy at the center (Luke 4:18-19). Committed to the caring apostolate on earth, Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11). This is precisely based on two factors: his life-giving service for the good of the people and his capacity for interrelatedness which enabled him to know his people and them, in turn, know him as well (John 10:14).

Jesus's pastoral leadership is specified through the exercise of mercy. In healing the sick, casting out demons, feeding the hungry, forgiving the sins of the people, restoring the lives of the dead, and eventually in dying on the cross for sinners,

<sup>1</sup> I recommend a reading of Pope Francis, *The Church of Mercy*, (London: Darton, Longman, and Todd, 2014).

Jesus Christ sets up a priestly ministry as an “office of mercy,” precisely as an office of love—*officium amoris* in the language of St. Augustine.<sup>2</sup> Jesus incorporates the priestly cultic office into the pastoral office. Mercy is a response of Jesus to those who critique his compassionate ministry. He tells the Pharisees that “. . . I desire mercy, not sacrifice. I did not come to call the righteous but sinners” (Matt 9:12). He also extends mercy to those who persecuted him and crucified him on the cross: “Father, forgive them, they know not what they do” (Luke 23:34).

Considering Jesus's pastoral leadership, the author of the Letter to the Hebrews describes the High Priest of the New Testament very accurately. “Every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins. He is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness, and so for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself as well for the people” (Heb 5:1-3). We must try to grasp the full meaning of what the author of the Letter to the Hebrews is saying here, that “the true dignity of the priesthood and its true mercy are seen in the midst of weakness.”<sup>3</sup> It is on these grounds that, during the celebration of the Holy Mass, there are additional prayers in the Roman Missal that the priest recites in silence, specifically to remind him that he is a sinner and to encourage him to lead his life as a steward of God's mercy.<sup>4</sup> Looking at the Roman Catholic ministerial priesthood in its service to the people of God in Africa, the image of priests as stewards of God's mercy is eclipsed by a cultic, legalistic, and functionalist image. In the eyes of many of the continent's Catholic faithful, African Catholic priests are defined by their manage-

2 Augustine of Hippo, *Johannis Evangelium Tractatus CXXIV* 123.5, PL 35, 1967, as cited in Francis, *The Church of Mercy*, 97.

3 Rossetti, *Letters to My Brothers*, 74.

4 See Daughters of St. Paul, *The Roman Missal*: The Roman Missal has prescribed additional prayers to be recited by the main celebrant in silence to remind him of being a sinner. Such prayers are recited at the offertory during the washing of the hands: “Wash me, O Lord, from my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin” (508). And after the singing of the Lamb of God, the Agnus Dei, with the congregation, the priest prays in silence either of the following prayers: (1) “Lord Jesus Christ, Son of the living God, who by the will of the Father and the work of the Holy Spirit, through your Death gave life to the world, free me by this, your most holy Body and Blood, from all my sins and from every evil; keep me always faithful to your commandments, and never let me be parted from you” (592), or (2) “May the receiving of your Body and Blood, Lord Jesus Christ, not bring me to judgment and condemnation, but through your loving mercy be for me protection in mind and body and a healing remedy” (592).



ment of parishes and administration of the sacraments, especially the celebration of the Holy Mass. Fifty years after Vatican Council II, and as the people of God celebrate the Jubilee of Mercy to cheer the great Council, the African ministerial priesthood needs a conversion of the heart and a continued renewal.

## GOING BACK TO WHERE WE STARTED

The African Catholic priesthood needs renewal and conversion, because the priestly identity handed down from the missionary Church is infected by “two viruses.” One is from the West, and the second is from African culture. From the West, it is what I call the “virus of the Christendom.”<sup>5</sup> Expatriate missionaries brought to Africa a model of the Church as perfect and triumphalist, and consequently, new converts perceived the Church as rich and autonomous. The priest was its representative, a person vested with divine power to offer a perfect sacrifice for the people. The second “virus,” which is from Africa’s traditional cultural background, is what I call the “virus of chiefdom,”<sup>6</sup> or the “the Igwe syndrome.”

## FROM THE WEST: THE “VIRUS OF CHRISTENDOM”

In this section, I shall highlight two major items: the cultic image of the priest and the negative view of women as an obstacle to ministerial priesthood.

- **The cultic image of the priest**

Emmanuel Katongole, a leading African theologian, opines that the African Church suffers from the burden of its Western legacy, which has rendered “the church’s own social nature questionable, increasingly marginal, and eventually obscure.”<sup>7</sup> It can be said that the African priesthood truly reflects what Katongole notes. After the Council of Trent and in order to counteract the reformers who put much stress on the common priesthood, the preferred model of the priest in the Roman Catholic Church was a cultic model. According to this model, the priest was “mainly an administrator of the sacraments and teacher of the faith.”<sup>8</sup> The

5 Nyenyembe, “New Pentecost.”

6 Ibid.

7 Katongole, *The Sacrifice of Africa*, 41.

8 Hoge, “Addressing the Priest ‘Shortage,’” 144.

association of the priest with the cultic model, while being supported by Heb 5:1 (“every high priest is taken from among men and made their representative before God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins”), ignored its complementary text in Heb 5:2-3 that states “he is able to deal patiently with the ignorant and erring, for he himself is beset by weakness, and so for this reason, must make sin offerings for himself as well for the people.”

In the cultic model, the priest is someone set apart from the rest of the faithful. Ordained ministers were presumably regarded to be superior in holiness, and they alone could act as bridges and mediators between God and humanity. The image of a priest as a dispenser of the sacraments has dominated the era of the missionary church. It has continued to date, thus giving way to destructive clericalism. Priests adhering to the cultic model are less open to working with lay ministers, and this has paved the way for tensions and conflicts between clerics and the laity.<sup>9</sup> Unfortunately, to date, “African Catholicism is over-clericalized, thus leaving less room for involvement of the laity in the affairs of the church.”<sup>10</sup> And therefore, it must be noted that “today’s anti-clericalism is a direct result of the clericalism of the past.”<sup>11</sup>

In some respects, in the cultic model, priests behave as if they are bionic superhumans.<sup>12</sup> As a group of ordained persons “set apart,” they tend to be judgmental, hypocritical, and insensitive to the sufferings of lay people. It must be noted that, in the New Testament, the Pharisees were a group of people who claimed themselves to be “set apart” or “separated.” For this group, holiness stemmed from obeying the law and following the Torah word for word. There were conflicts between the Pharisees and Jesus, and “what angered him [Jesus] most about these people, particularly the religious leaders, were their judgemental attitude, their hypocrisy, and their failure to love.”<sup>13</sup>

Besides cementing clericalism, the problem with the cultic model is that it has privileged clerics, giving the ordained a special status—indeed, like a caste among

9 Ibid.

10 Ogonnaya, *African Catholicism and Hermeneutics of Culture*, 109.

11 Rossetti, *The Joy of Priesthood*, 103.

12 Magesa, “The African Priesthood of the Future.”

13 Hamilton, *When Christians Get It Wrong*, 8.



the people of God. The bishops are at the top of the “caste class” of the ordained. In Stephen Rossetti’s opinion, “the social moat between priests and bishops these days is rather large. You see it especially in large gatherings of priests and bishops. There is little or no intermingling . . . The impression given is that there is a caste society, and priests are part of the lower caste.”<sup>14</sup> Supported by the cultic model, clericalism has worked hand in hand with the clergy’s patronizing attitude in their relationships with the laity. As a result, lay people have tended to see themselves as an appendix group in the Church, a people who relegated to the back bench or the back burner.

The cultic image of the priest channelled dualistic tendencies which split the Catholic faithful between those who are in the sacred sphere—notably, the ordained members—and those in the secular sphere, the laity. The separation between those who are within and those who are without has divided priests into two groups: religious priests (those in religious orders) and secular priests (diocesan clergy). After Vatican II, the title “secular priests” was changed to “diocesan priests,” but those in the religious congregations remained “religious priests.” The dichotomy between a “sacred” designation for the ordained and a “secular” one for the non-ordained has had a negative impact over the years. Lay people have come to feel that the ordained, due to the grace of the sacred order, are made immune from mistakes and errors. “The use of terms such as priests/sacred and laity/secular for God’s children reinforces class/rank distinctions. God has sanctified, chosen, and set apart all the baptized and has stamped and sealed them with the Holy Spirit as God’s children.”<sup>15</sup>

It must be said that putting an emphasis on the distinction between the ordained priesthood and the laity may attract candidates to the priesthood who have rather dubious motives. Seminarians aspiring to become ordained priests may be motivated by the desire to have an “exclusive” relationship with Christ, one which is not enjoyed by the lay faithful. “He may seek sacred powers not possessed by the laity. The sacral priesthood exercises control over the dispensation of sacramental grace and even over the sacramental body of Christ.”<sup>16</sup>

14 Rossetti, *Letters to My Brothers*, 128.

15 Okure, “Church: Family of God’s Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace,” 21.

16 Wood, “Priesthood: Forty Years After Vatican II,” 11.

- **“The Magdalena Syndrome”: Stereotyping women**

The Catholic ministerial priesthood with its cultic image that was brought to Africa propagated the discipline of celibacy and trained the priest to distance himself from women. It should be noted that between the 14th and 18th centuries, negative opinions of women were used to disqualify them from taking part in the work of evangelization. The argument against women was picked up from Aristotle who wrote that *sapientia non viget communiter in mulieribus*: “wisdom is not commonly found in women.”<sup>17</sup>

From Judaism, Christianity inherited a contempt because of a perceived impurity, especially during menstruation (Lev 15:19). Missionaries also misinterpreted St. Paul that women must keep quiet in the Church (1 Cor 14:34). Hence, the Catholic Church has evolved with a suspicion and mistrust of women. The canonization of saints is an example: in the first eight decades of the twentieth century, 75 percent of canonized saints were men, while only 25 percent were women.<sup>18</sup> And least of all represented among canonized saints are married women. This disparity reflects the dualistic assessment that to be female is a handicap, and to be a married woman is to be almost incapable of embodying the sacred. The liturgical calendar perpetuates this bias: three-fourths of the annual feast days honor men, while only one-fourth honor women. “This disparity represents patriarchy at its worst, but I also believe that it represents an essential flaw in the determination of who is holy.”<sup>19</sup> In some places, the contempt about women has resulted in a tendency among priests to treat women not as partners or collaborators but as tempters who pose a danger to the priestly vocation.

## CHIEFDOM, THE “IGWE SYNDROME”: A VIRUS FROM AFRICAN CULTURES

In any given society anywhere in the world, cultural contexts exert much influence, and this seems to be evident in the African Catholic priesthood. The idea of the priest as chief of the people is widespread. Some clerics prefer to be seen as absolute

<sup>17</sup> Kenyuyfoon, *Women and Inculturated Evangelization in Africa*, 73.

<sup>18</sup> Johnson, *Friend of God and Prophets*, 27-29.

<sup>19</sup> Wallace, *Lift Up Your Hearts*, 329.





fathers of the household who are more like customary chiefs (les chefs cotumiers) than pastors. Accordingly, “African bishops and priests love the image of the priest as chief.”<sup>20</sup> In some parts of sub-Saharan Africa, priests are welcomed, after ordination, into the rank of traditional chiefs. This takes place through a cultural rite which installs the newly ordained priest in the elder’s seat and proclaims him leader of the local community. The inculturation of the ministerial priesthood to suit the African social milieu is good. It is socially significant in the sense that it gives a clear message to the newly ordained priest that the people of that particular ethnic group have accepted him as their spiritual leader.

However, there are some difficulties inherent with viewing Catholic priests as chiefs in Africa. This perspective privileges titles, a personality cult, the accumulation of wealth, and patriarchal dominance.

- **The title syndrome and personality cult**

In the model of the African priest as chief, titles carry a great deal of weight. In some places, the pastors of souls still put much emphasis on honor and status. Some expect to be seated in VIP areas during church and civil ceremonies. Others are concerned with being properly addressed with honorary titles related to their ecclesiastical ranks. The Kenyan scholar Odhiambo complains that “. . . in Catholicism, for instance, priests are given titles . . . I am wondering whether this is a part of the Catholic’s modesty. I feel that our present Church leaders have too flamboyant titles.”<sup>21</sup> One problem with the preference for titles is that it sanctions the status quo mentality.

Honorary titles such as “Reverend,” “Lordship,” “Grace,” “Eminence,” “Supreme Pontiff,” etc., are reverential titles borrowed from the secular imperial culture. These are not pastoral titles like “Padre” or “Father,” “Bishop,” or “Pope.” Borrowed from imperial palaces, reverential titles generate asymmetrical relationships, tend to formalize relationships, and freeze fraternal interactions even among peers. Honorary titles usually come with entitlements and privileges, and when this mentality

20 Uzukwu, *A Listening Church*, 130.

21 Odhiambo, “Religious Titles under Fire,” 377.

comes to the Church, the problem of titles must be addressed. For example, one of the criticisms leveled against some African Pentecostals is the way in which their pastors accumulate titles, gifts, and money from their congregations depending on the positions they hold. David Garrard narrates:

. . . when the missionaries were no longer in charge of the church, that numbers of leaders suddenly became bishops or archbishops and took to wearing special apparel when previously they had not worn any distinguishing dress. In some instances, it is possible to find one person with multiple titles: The very Reverend, Archbishop, Doctor, the founder of the Church of Christ . . . The late Benson Idahosa of Nigeria was an example of someone who insisted on the use of all his titles.<sup>22</sup>

In a faith community whose members follow the pedagogy of humility, it is somehow strange that those charged to lead others humbly should entertain honorific titles. Ascribed exclusively to members of the clergy and religious men and women, titles of honor contribute to the marginalization of the laity. In his wisdom and humility, Pope Gregory the Great opposes the practice of honorific titles: “away with these titles, that increase vanity and weaken love. A bishop should be ever a minister, not a master, one who attempts to subdue himself, not his brethren.”<sup>23</sup>

Besides preserving the status quo, a clerical culture that entertains titles also favors an authoritarian leadership. While optimistic about the promise of the African Church in regard to new baptisms, recent studies on global Christianity by scholars like Philip Jenkins, John Allen Jr., and others discredit the African Church for the authoritarian leadership exercised by its hierarchy when compared to other regional churches.<sup>24</sup> African faith communities have not yet eradicated the pyramidal style of relationship. A prime example of this is an incident that occurred at the fall 2001 synod of bishops in Rome when Bishop Victor Corral Mantilla of Ecuador made an impassioned plea that the synodal fathers forgo titles such as “eminence” and “excellency,” and address themselves as “fathers.” As Thomas Cahill narrates,

22 Garrard, “African Pentecostalism,” 237.

23 Cahill, *Pope John XXIII*, 19-20.

24 Jenkins, *The Next Christendom*, 229.



Cardinal Bernard Agre of Ivory Coast, who happened to be presiding, obviously was not paying careful attention, for when Corral concluded, Agre plunged ahead with the traditional Latin formula of acknowledgement, which goes: ‘Thank you, Most Excellent Lord.’ Laughter was immediate and boisterous, when Corral shot back: ‘You are welcome, Eminence.’<sup>25</sup>

Not without reason, William J. Byron, SJ, thinks that the honorific titles for ecclesiastical authorities no longer have the support of our contemporary culture: “I would not be surprised to see a gradual shift over the years from an emphasis on formal ecclesiastical titles to simple and straightforward baptismal names in correspondence and conversation between the faithful and those ordained to serve them from positions of authority in the Church.”<sup>26</sup>

Related to honorific titles is the allure of the personality cult, promoted by the “chief” model in the African Catholic priesthood because the focus is on the power of the individual. It is the figure of the person that draws the administration around itself. One expression of the personality cult is the veneration of the portraits of chiefs. There exists in the Church a tradition of placing photographs of the pope and local bishops in parish offices. In doing so, however, care should be taken not to turn these individuals into idols. In a world flooded with images and where people extol celebrities they admire in posters and photos, the portrait of the crucified One may easily be forgotten.<sup>27</sup>

## MATERIALISM: PROPERTY ACCUMULATION AND THE LEADER

The installation of priests in traditional governing roles may serve only to distract priests themselves. In many places, traditional chiefs and kings ruled as if they were demigods. To this day in Uganda, for example, the feet of King Kabaka are not allowed to touch the soil; men are to lie down so that the king may walk on their backs! Traditional chiefs had rights to the possession of material riches from any place within the area over which he ruled. All women, animals, and other resources

25 Cahill, *Pope John XXIII*, 5.

26 Byron, *Individuarian Observation*, 51.

27 Nyenyembe, *African Catholic Priests*, 80.

were at the chief's disposal. The chief's right to accumulate all materials in this way led him, in many cases, to abuse human rights.

In some tribes, chiefs received all war booty, especially prisoners of war—future slaves. They also received all taxes and an abundance of gifts which they were free to use for their families or distribute it to others.<sup>28</sup> This privilege reserved for the chiefs of accumulating material resources as they wished seemed like “God-given rights to the nobles.” This attitude, when adopted within the African Church, motivates priests and bishops to amass ecclesiastical properties. Ultimately, this mentality hinders them from giving witness to the freedom of the simple life, one absent of materialism. It is crucial that the African Church reject the model of the priest as chief, because “it is not in harmony with the model of the Church as a Family of God.”<sup>29</sup>

- **Patriarchy and masculinity**

Another vice associated with the model of priest as chief is excessive masculinity, which leads to patriarchy. In relationships, excessive masculinity favors domination and control over women. “The excessive male often interprets intimacy only to mean genital sex.”<sup>30</sup> Thus, it follows that observing the discipline of celibacy becomes difficult for the masculine-patriarchal figure of the spiritual leader. As a spiritual guide, instead of “being able to form nurturing, non-genital relationships, he is stuck with one of two extremes, being genitally active or being in cold isolation.”<sup>31</sup> Another negative symptom of the “chief” model is a “masculinity gone awry,” a masculinity that wants to control and suppress critics. It operates under the psychic defenses of “rationalization and intellectualization which are used to an extreme.”<sup>32</sup> The “chief” model dispels healthy competitiveness, clinging to power and the desire to dominate.

There are words of caution which must be added here. We live in an age of gender

28 Kandert, “African Sacral Kingship,” 153.

29 Nyenyembe, *African Catholic Priests*, xii.

30 Rossetti, *The Joy of Priesthood*, 106.

31 Ibid.

32 Ibid.



sensitivity, and some priests have noticed a shift from patterns of ministry that were stereotypically masculine to the currently dominant feminine models. Thus, in some places around the world, the approach to ministry and spirituality has become excessively feminine with little balance from the masculine.<sup>33</sup> There must be a balance between the two: neither patriarchy (masculinity), nor feminism. On the one hand, we have to admit that the age of the autocratic pastor is over, but on the other hand, we also share the concern that a dominant approach to ministry cannot work.

The Christian faithful need the feminine qualities of leadership such as mercy, warmth, forgiveness, and humor. However, these values must be balanced with masculine ministerial values such as firmness, discretion, and boldness; otherwise, difficulties will ensue. Neither the masculine nor feminine model of ministry is to be discarded, and this is crucial because priests exercise an integral human leadership. They are not only to nurture and to include, but they must also challenge and exercise leadership.

## STEWARDS OF GOD’S MERCY: THE WAY FORWARD

From what we have learned above, there is a clear need for priests in Africa to be stewards of God’s mercy. This is truly so given that the life of the Church is played out among humanity through its charitable works. Without works of charity, the Church lies dormant. In the words of Cardinal Walter Kasper, “the church is alive where corporal works of mercy are performed: feeding the hungry, giving drink to the thirsty, clothing the naked, giving shelter to strangers, freeing the captives, visiting the sick, and burying the dead.”<sup>34</sup> In order to address the human being appropriately as an entity with a body and a soul, the corporal acts of mercy must accompany the spiritual works of mercy. “The church is likewise alive where the spiritual works of mercy are performed: correcting sinners, teaching the ignorant, giving good counsel to those in doubt, bearing patiently with those who are burdensome, gladly forgiving those who insult us, and praying for the living and the

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*, 107.

<sup>34</sup> Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 27.

dead.”<sup>35</sup> The New Evangelization demands that the old ways of doing ministry in the Church give way to a more collaborative and engaging lifestyle. Therefore, I propose the following four action steps:

- **Ministerial priesthood: Identifying as part of the people of God**

The African Church, as part of the Family of God, must make the Christian faithful feel at home, offer kindness and solidarity, practice mutual dialogue, and participate in a complimentary trust.<sup>36</sup> For the faith community in Africa to achieve this, the ministerial priesthood must change. It needs to see its place within the people of God and recognize that it exists to serve the community of the baptized. It should not be forgotten that “the diocesan priest’s charism is to live among the people.”<sup>37</sup> This is important because, even if the Second Vatican Council has amplified the baptismal role in sharing in the priesthood of Christ, two significant obstacles seem to have thwarted the progress towards making that a lived reality in African Catholicism. In the first place, during the formation of priests, there continues to be an emphasis on canonical authority, sacramental power, and the ontological distinction of the ordained, and this continues to result in a laity that has not widely understood or received the invitation to a more responsible and participatory role in the Church.<sup>38</sup> And secondly, “the clerical culture [. . .] has not been trained to navigate the challenge of collaboration on a broad scale and by a leadership that has not implemented such a model.”<sup>39</sup> In fact, for many years, clericalism has tended to prevent collaborative ministry and the laity’s care of the clergy and has encouraged a patronizing view of lay people which serves only to infantilize them.<sup>40</sup> The African priesthood must understand itself as being within the Church as family and as the body of Christ. According to Walter Cardinal Kasper, an “ecclesia office is a ministry to the other ministries, which it ‘equips’ for service: it is not meant to suppress and crush the others, but to inspire, motivate, and train them to carry out

35 Ibid.

36 John Paul II, *The Church in Africa*, 63.

37 Rossetti, *The Joy of Priesthood*, 141.

38 Mahoney, “Reflection,” 193.

39 Ibid.

40 Davies and Dodds, *Leadership in the Church for a People of Hope*, 95.



their own tasks.”<sup>41</sup> This requires an appreciation to collaborative ministry, which means “a different way in which the People of God work together to bring Christ to the world and to each other. It should not be restricted to the clergy team or even appointed teams of clergy and laity.”<sup>42</sup>

- **From cultic image to servant leadership**

The identity of the African priest needs to shift from purely the cultic and chief models to that of a servant-leader of the Family of God. In the past, the priest has consistently been seen as an exclusive man at the altar: “focused on the priestly power to ‘confect’ the Eucharistic and ‘administer’ the sacraments, the cultic model encourages an individualistic approach to ministry by emphasizing the priest’s unique sacramental power.”<sup>43</sup> To avoid this, bishops and priests in Africa must embrace “the spirituality of communion.”<sup>44</sup> The ordained must put service at the heart of the priestly office. This shift means that the African Church and its ministerial priesthood should be shaped and driven by the candor of *diakonia*. So far, it is deplorable that the African Church neither has a Pan-African Catholic Donor Agency, similar to that of Misio or Misereor, to practice *missio ad gentes*, nor do the majority of African Catholic dioceses welcome the service of permanent deacons. “The church cannot exist without diaconia, and the church has indeed a particular office for diaconia.”<sup>45</sup> The face of African Catholicism is yet to be shaped by diaconia because, as Walter Cardinal Kasper puts it, “the diaconate is still from being firmly rooted in the local churches.”<sup>46</sup> Once the ministerial priesthood is defined from the perspective of the Church as Family of God, geared toward service, the new clerical image of servant leadership will signal two departures. The first will be a farewell to “the medieval restriction of church ministry to the priestly office, which was understood exclusively on the basis of the priest’s power to consecrate the Eucharist.”<sup>47</sup> The second will be a farewell “to a model of pastoral care in which

41 Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 30.

42 Davies and Dodds, *Leadership in the Church for a People of Hope*, 67.

43 Cozzens, *The Changing Face of the Priesthood*, 7.

44 Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, 153.

45 Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 43.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid., 16.

the community is 'looked after' and 'its needs are provided for,' since it means that all the members of the church share, each in their own way, in bearing responsibility in and for the church."<sup>48</sup>

- **From static-domineering leadership to resurrection leadership**

The African Synod of Bishops, which described the Church in Africa as the Family of God, identified itself indeed as "a Synod of Resurrection and Hope."<sup>49</sup> This identification is set within the mystery of Pentecost,<sup>50</sup> which is geared at new evangelization and "building up the Church as Family."<sup>51</sup> The image of the African priest needs to change from a static cultic model to one moved by the vitality of the risen Lord and his outpouring of the Holy Spirit. Easter is an opportune time to realize the mercy God has given us and to be inspired to become agents of that mercy to others. According to the Gospel of St. John, during his first appearance on Easter evening, Jesus proclaimed to his disciples the message of God's mercy and henceforth empowered the apostles to dispense God's mercy. "Peace be with you," he exclaimed, and then continued with these words: "receive the holy Spirit. Whose sins you forgive are forgiven . . ." (John 20:19-23). The paschal mystery in its plenitude has filled the whole of creation with God's mercy and grace. Grace and mercy are two sides of the same coin: "Grace on one side gives us what we do not deserve; mercy on the other does not give us what we deserve."

Jesus's appearances and encounters after his resurrection demonstrate to us the reality of mercy, and one of the most interesting is his encounter with the doubting St. Thomas. The current impasse on the African continent is due, in part, to the mass of ignorant and illiterate—one might say "doubting"—people. There is a vast number of people who are "not only the materially poor; there are also those starving intellectually and spiritually, and all too often they are left alone in their searching."<sup>52</sup> In his search for truth about the risen Lord, St. Thomas takes a deliberate step to personally discover and understand the One risen from the dead.

48 Ibid.

49 John Paul II, *The Church in Africa*, 13.

50 Ibid., 61.

51 Ibid., 63.

52 Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 22.





As the Gospel relates, when Jesus appeared to the apostles on Easter evening, Thomas was not there. When they gathered the next week, this time with Thomas, Jesus appeared and conversed with Thomas, beckoning him to touch his wounds and to believe. Through the marks of suffering, Christ became known to Thomas, and he spoke about those who had not seen but believed. In this encounter between Jesus and Thomas, we find that “in some senses Christ helps Thomas to move from a conventional faith believed by all, to an individual one in which he takes the truth on board for himself.”<sup>53</sup>

Contemporary African church leaders should lead their congregations from the convention of faith to a deeper understanding and knowledge. Among the skills needed to do this is an ability to listen patiently for the slightly jarring voice of the doubter. Like this risen Lord in his encounter with Thomas, the African priest must “take note of the genuine request of an enquirer to challenge, ask, wonder about, and doubt the conventional corpus of knowledge.”<sup>54</sup> The African Church’s leadership should not limit itself to being simply the watchdog of a didactic process of imparting faith. Bishops and priests need to be able to connect with disciples who, like Thomas, approach them with doubts and hard questions about their faith. “Too often the Church has had a tendency to infantilize and avoid dealing with doubts. Mature leadership will recognize different ways of becoming faithful and exercising faith in everyday life.”<sup>55</sup>

- **Revisiting seminary formation**

The formation of future priests as stewards of God’s mercy calls for major African seminaries to revisit their curriculum. The inherited curriculum and modules of formation do not mold seminarians, for example, to appreciate lay people as partners with the clergy in missionary works. Current intellectual formation in seminaries emphasizes classical theology, based on Aristotelian and Platonic concepts. And spiritual formation follows a puritanical pattern which easily encourages a scrupulosity among seminarians and a scepticism of relationships with the oppo-

53 Davies and Dodds, *Leadership in the Church for a People of Hope*, 166.

54 Ibid.

55 Ibid., 167.

site sex who seem to be perceived as instruments of Satan. The human aspects of formation promote a sense of the missionary Church as elite and perfect. Consequently, seminarians become inclined to practical materialism: "In Nigeria, the way money and wealth are employed as principal indicators of success among priests has reached a level of scandal."<sup>56</sup>

Moreover, African seminaries are tainted by the cancer of "spiritual fundamentalism," which drives seminarians to pharisaic attitudes and to keep their distance from the plights of the poor and, thus, prophetic ministry. As a result, future priests fail to embrace a spirit of collaboration, simplicity, and committed service to the poor. The seminary lifestyle also elevates the students intellectually and spiritually. It brands them with the feeling of being "set apart" to join a special group in the Church. They are trained to become closer with, and even to identify more with, priests and bishops and less with members of the laity. They are expected to exhibit genteel behavior and maintain stability in the comfort zones of the ordained. According to Joseph Ogbonnaya, "because of their comfort, most priests have lost all passion; that is the capacity and readiness to care, suffer, to have compassion, and to feel the plight of their flock."<sup>57</sup>

Traditionally, seminaries in the Roman Catholic Church are known as the "hearts of the dioceses," because of their importance in forming the Church's future leaders. And, therefore, in the same way that a study and understanding of the African ministerial priesthood is indispensable to determining the status of African Catholicism, the training of seminarians is very much indispensable to determining the future of the ministerial priesthood. In Africa, a good number of major seminaries place a great deal of emphasis on canon law. To date, in some seminaries, the main entrances and bulletin boards have a warning to seminarians: *serua ordinem ut te seruabit*, which means "observe the laws and the laws will protect you." Thus, seminaries as places of formation clearly focus on instilling a sense of respect for stipulated laws and authority in the Church. While relevant, this insistence on the respect for law and obedience to authority, if it goes unbalanced, may end up

<sup>56</sup> Uzuoku, *A Listening Church*, 102.

<sup>57</sup> Ogbonnaya, *African Catholicism and Hermeneutics of Culture*, 96.



fostering among seminarians a legalistic understanding of doing priestly ministry. Seminarians must be trained to be passionate for justice. However, as future leaders of the Church, they must be formed to balance justice and mercy. According to St. Thomas Aquinas, “justice without mercy is cruelty; mercy without justice is weakness.”<sup>58</sup> It is important to stress that even if canon law is indispensable, “all application of law in the Church must look to Jesus Christ, the merciful Judge. Its criterion must be the *epikeia tou Christou*, the humanness, kindness, and mildness of Jesus Christ” (2 Cor 10:1).<sup>59</sup> In addition, the academic curriculum and spiritual formation in African seminaries should be designed in such a way as to prepare these future priests to serve the pastoral challenges and new questions of today.

## CONCLUDING REMARKS

The Catholic priesthood is changing, and one factor in that change is the ministerial priesthood that Francis is exhibiting in his papacy. The opening of the Jubilee Year of Mercy strongly promoted the image of the priest as a steward of God’s mercy. And being stewards of God’s mercy puts a number of claims on priests. They are to look to Christ himself, who came not to be served but to serve. They are strongly encouraged to live a life of simplicity, which includes identifying with their own sinfulness and weakness while serving as agents of God’s forgiveness in the sacrament of reconciliation. This awareness will motivate them to practice leadership in the Church as a compassionate ministry, much needed at this time in history when a majority of the people in Africa feel that, in society in general, compassionate leaders are rare. Africans need priests to put into practice and make concrete the beatitude of mercy. By being merciful themselves, priests can properly present the Sermon on the Mount as a message of God’s mercy; after all, “[b]lessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy” (Matt 5:7).

Understanding the priest as a steward of God’s mercy in the world will help the Christian faithful to discover God, the all-merciful Father. This is crucial, because many young men and women today are faced with very difficult situations. The youth in many African countries lack employment, lack support to pay for univer-

58 Aquinas, “Commentary on Matthew 5:7,” 1:74.

59 Kasper, *Leadership in the Church*, 157.

sity and college studies, are disillusioned by unfaithfulness in friendships and marriages, and so on and so forth. Men and women in all parts of Africa experience the reality of sin and evil, and there is a deep desire and need for God's mercy. Nonetheless, there is an appalling trend among the youth and adult Christians of not participating in the sacrament of reconciliation. Some are fearful to go and confess to a priest who they consider to be holy and privileged by God. Others are distracted by the fact that the concept of sin is not popular among the people. One remedy for this misconception and confusion is the priest as a steward of God's mercy who can help revive among the people the interest in the confession sacrament.

Understanding himself as a steward of God's mercy is also likely to help the priest as well to live the spirituality of communion. The physical and spiritual proximity between priest and laity will promote collaboration and mutuality. And fostering dialogue in parish communities will reduce tension and conflict among the people of God. For the African Church to witness the reality of priests who live as stewards of God's mercy, there is a need for renewal in the formation of seminarians and a need for priests, religious men and women, and lay people to participate in this formation process as well.

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