

PRIESTLY IDENTITY AND NEW EVANGELIZATION: RESOLVING DEFICITS IN PRIESTLY IDENTITY THROUGH AUTHENTIC PATROLOGY.

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Abstract

The catholic priesthood has got a character with which the priests are easily marked out, even since antiquity. No matter the historical development of the priesthood, this character remains substantially intact. The consciousness of the character is also a source of great impetus for enthusiastic evangelization. However, one of the major challenges bedeviling the catholic priesthood in Nigeria is the crisis of identity. This plays out strongly in the minimal level of zeal displayed in the pastoral ministry, witnessing to Christ. It has been a clog in the wheel of the new evangelization, which remains almost only in theory and the fruit of its practice is elusive. What explains this crisis of identity? Is it really because we are product of our society? Is it the change in outlook in the course of history? Could it be because the priesthood has had some development? Does the historical development cause essential change leading to loss of identity today? This paper sets out to reveal yet another nuance to the issue of crisis of identity among priests in Nigeria, which is the seed-bed of the problems limiting ‘catholic evangelization’ on the Nigerian soil. This is because; the growth of any of the Church’s agenda relies to a large extent on her priests, who are the close pastors of the people. We shall submit that authentic patrological formation would help to ameliorate this menace, if not eradicating it totally. To achieve this, the method of exposition is employed.

Keywords: Patrology, Identity, Crisis, Evangelization and Formation.

Preliminary and Useful Insight

We are aware that the only antidote to the endemic poison of our society that has held people hostage and put them in fetters of ignorance is the communication of truth. That is why Jesus Christ says that you shall know the truth and the truth shall set you free (Jn 8:12). The reality of the level of ignorance and deception concerning the meaning of human body resulting to the perversion of the truth of sex and sexuality, the intelligent understanding of human origin and summit of human existence and unnecessary mistaken mentality of the essentiality of human life are arbiter of the aspiration and thirst of men of this age for the teaching of the truth. No one can really know the truth unless he is taught, no one can be taught unless there is a teacher (Rom. 10:14ff). The task of announcing the gospel truth in an evangelizing manner and missionary disposition has become emergent than ever before, in the age of relativism and the desire for unguided freedom and this is a loud and laudable awakening from clerical slumber.

The congregation for the clergy puts this in a particular perspective saying: "We are aware that no missionary activity can be realistically undertaken without the enthusiastic support of priests, who are the first and most valued collaborators of the Order of Bishops."¹ And so, "All priests are called to become aware how especially urgent it is for them to receive formation at the present time: The new evangelization needs new evangelizers, and these are the priests who are serious about living their priesthood as a specific path toward holiness."² We can say, relying on the aforementioned documents that the Church relies so much on priests for the task of new evangelization. This is because they are evangelizers by their own right and virtue of their ordination and they are also supposed to be trainers of evangelizers and personnel for evangelization because, the word evangelization captures concisely the entire missionary activity of the followers of Christ.

Evangelization has to be understood then as the announcement and transmission of the message of Christ that is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16).

The term evangelization has a very rich meaning. In the broad sense, it sums up the Church's entire mission: her whole life consists in accomplishing the *traditio Evangelii*, the proclamation and handing on of the Gospel, which is "the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes" (Rom 1:16) and which, in the final essence, is identified with Jesus Christ himself (cf. 1 Cor 1:24). Understood in this way, evangelization is aimed at all of humanity. In any case, to evangelize does not mean simply to teach a doctrine, but to proclaim Jesus Christ by one's words and actions, that is, to make oneself an instrument of his presence and action in the world.³

Paul VI says: “Evangelization means bringing the good news into all the strata of humanity and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new”⁴ Ronald says: “evangelization, of course, comes from the Greek root ‘to proclaim good news’, and it has been particularly used by Christians in every age to speak of the missions *ad gentes*, that is, outreach to all peoples the world to bring them to Christ.”⁵ That is why the Pauline ambition is “to preach the good news not where Christ has already been known ...but as scripture says: those not told about him will see and those who have not heard will understand.” This does not only mean going to a geographical location that was not accessible for the past missionaries, but entails the inculcation, appropriation and internalization of “the mind of Christ” (I Cor. 2:16). So, Joseph Okojie writes: “Evangelization aims at penetrating and uplifting a given culture by the word of God. It is the acceptance of Christ’s call and a deep response to the invitation of the Trinity to the work of love and a commitment to continue this work in everyday life.”⁶

Evangelization then, is crucial and irreplaceable. It is central to the life of the Church and all her activities since antiquity. In this recent age⁷ particularly, the pontificate of Pope St. John Paul II reawakens the consciousness of evangelization in our own age when he was speaking of New Evangelization. “What was new about evangelization?”⁸ The new evangelization is not the announcement of a new message, but a new way of the announcement – a new way that is characterized with a new disposition of vigorous resilience. Will this be possible without great recourse to tradition of the Church?

Those who are familiar with wine and all that concerns it have convincingly argued that the longer it stayed the better. In like terms the longer the catholic tradition, having experienced several cultures, people and time, the better for evangelization of peoples. St. Paul speaks of the credence of the sacred tradition in the context of the liturgical celebration of the Eucharist in his first letter to the Corinthians chapter 11: “this is the tradition of the Lord that I received... (I Cor. 11:23). The author of the letter to the Hebrews urges: “remember your leaders who taught you the word of God. Consider the end result of their lives and imitate their faith. Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. Do not be led astray by all kinds of strange teachings.” (Heb. 13:7-9). the consideration of the end result of the lives of our past leaders in faith is aided by the study of the fathers, which is technically referred to as patrology. Patrology like patristics is used to mean the study of the Fathers.⁹ The word patrology was synonymous with patristics, which is used to designate the works of ancient Christian writers. In recent times, it refers to an organized manual on the patristic literature.¹⁰ Here, we

want to use the term patrology to refer to the whole life and works of the Fathers.

The Gist of the Problem of Priestly Identity Crisis

We have said earlier that priests are supposed to be at the fore front of the Evangelization. More deeply, let us say that young priests are believed to be the protagonists of the new evangelization. The employment of the youthful hue and vigour is appropriate especially in the areas described as young Churches. However, what is experienced in some instances is perturbing, concerning the disposition of some priests. To this effect, Charles Hammawa laments:

Some young priests are bereft of a proper sense of mission. Their concept of priestly ministry is limited to the works assigned and Masses allocated to them. They are not interested in the total well-being or the temporal good of the Church. The ecclesiology is so deformed that their comfort is the primary issue to them.¹¹

The resultant effect of this is that the announcement of the gospel suffers and the people continue to be in want. That is why Ambrose Agu retorts:

“...unfortunately, today, in many places, the Gospel is not proclaimed with due force and veracity. It is not exposed level of its radical and disturbing implications. When this is done, the pastor or minister of the Gospel is excoriated as being conservative, unnecessarily strict or not in touch with present realities. The tendency for many pastors is to shield the people from the disturbing and pungent truth of the Gospel message. They tell the people what they would want to hear and dilute the force of the message handed on to them. Sometimes, a message is avoided entirely if it is considered a contradiction of the spirit of the time.”¹²

Corroborating this, Anselm Jimoh calls the prevalent menace a lack of pastoral commitment. He also offered the effect of this disposition of some young priests. He says:

The observed lack of pastoral commitment, moral probity, inordinate materialistic tendencies, over-socialization of matters of faith and spirituality, frequent display of disobedience to Local Ordinaries/Superiors on the part of the priests, and other observable misdemeanors which coincidentally are more common among the younger generation of priests is disturbing...¹³

Today, instead of yearning to win the whole of the world for Christ, the happenings in our society appears to be overtaking us and exerting much influence on us. The spirit of avarice, which may be seen as the sin of the old, is now common among the young. This we must say beclouds the vision of evangelization and pastoral initiative that is greatly missionary. There is no other better time to shun the empty promises of the world so that we may purify it. “Yet increasing it appears that more and more young priests are taken up with buying cars the day after their ordination...”¹⁴ and “pastors and priests are getting swallowed en mass and the virtue of comportment and decency no longer has a place in our life.”¹⁵

It is an understatement to say that some priests do not evangelize, they even disturb the mission. John Aniagwu says: “Many priests are giving counter witness.”¹⁶ Substantiating this, Hassan Kukah writes: “given the poverty of our society, it seems that materialism on the part of many priests and religious has become the greatest threat to our mission.”¹⁷ Particularly of young priests, who should “spear head” new evangelization because of the gift of youthful strength, it is advised: “formators need to take account of what happens in parishes when young priests get there... an exalted and glamorous priest will weigh too heavily on the mission of the Church. The young priest must not be gullible to think that the one who endorses his every whim is the one who supports his ministry.”¹⁸

Relying on the impetus created by St. Paul, Oredipe calls for new missionary drive when he wrote: “surely then, the memory of St. Paul will inspire a new missionary drive in the Church for the benefit of the whole of humanity.”¹⁹ In like manner, Ambrose Agu speaks of new pastoral courage in the following terms: “this concern must be seen in his zeal to reach out to the people outside the Church. This concern calls for the special attention of the pastors and ministers of the Church.”²⁰ He continued: “the duty of a pastor does not end with leading the flock to pasture and protecting it. He has also the onerous task of going out in search of the straying and the lost sheep and bringing it back to where it belongs ... and this requires special pastoral courage and zeal, which of course is the only way the pastor can foster faith and call to faith in the world of today.”²¹ And so, Aniagwu complains: “there is proclamation by written word...But many do not do it. They simply do not write. They are either too timid to do so or they do not have the time.”²²

It is true that the general theme of this conference focuses on the formation to the priesthood, let us speak commonly at this moment so that other young persons may have the issue to ponder on, since the task of evangelization per se, is of all who are “baptized and sent.”²³ Dwight Longenecker underscored the fact that our disposition towards

evangelization is too minimal. He has this to say: “We Catholics skate around this one muttering catchphrases like ‘The New Evangelization’ and we trumpet the few evangelization enterprises that are going on, and we self-righteously quote St. Francis (who never actually said it), ‘Preach the gospel at all times. Use words if necessary.’”²⁴ He did not fail to enumerate some of the reasons for such disposition generally by Catholics which include; cultural Catholicism, over-sacramentalism, ignorance, social gospel and professional Catholicism.²⁵

Catholics tend to be shy about evangelizing. And, it shows. The decline in Sunday Mass attendance is best described as a plummet. Seventy-five percent of Catholics went to Mass weekly in 1955 Gallup reported. That dropped to about 39 percent according to data collected between 2014 and 2017; which was down from 45 percent between 2005 and 2008. It’s a disturbing trend and one that Msgr. Thomas Richter, pastor of Queen of Peace Church in Dickinson, wants Catholics to do something about. He addressed this issue as the featured speaker last month at the University of Mary’s St. Hildegard Lecture series, explaining that evangelizing is primarily the job of laity.²⁶

In 2013, the Barna Group did a large survey on the importance of Christians who share their faith. The group which had the lowest number of people who actively shared their faith was Catholics. Here is the truly sad part. They only polled those they designated as ‘people who said they have made ‘a personal commitment to Jesus Christ that is still important in their life today’ and who also indicated they believe that when they die they will go to Heaven because they had confessed their sins and had accepted Jesus Christ as their savior.’ This means they polled the best and most engaged Catholics who have had an encounter with Jesus. They found that only 1 out of every 3 Catholics agreed with the statement, ‘I, personally, have a responsibility to tell other people about my religious beliefs.’ Additionally, only 1/3 of Catholics who have encountered Jesus and chosen to follow him agreed with the statement, ‘During the past 12 months, I explained my religious beliefs to someone who had different beliefs, in the hope that they might accept Jesus Christ as their Savior.’ This means we Catholics in the USA are TERRIBLE at evangelization - the core mission of the Church! We aren't Christians to merely get ourselves to heaven. We are Christians to get others.²⁷

Notwithstanding, the urgency of evangelization today cannot be overemphasized. The perversion in the world today has made those who learn not to understand and possession has constantly led to impoverishment. The announcement and the encounter with the truth are evermore demanded. Thus, the urgency of evangelization today is as prevalent as at the time of Jesus, when they were advised not to even salute anyone on the road. Cardinal Dulles made this observation

concerning the disposition for evangelization even after the Second Vatican Council: “The commentaries on Vatican II published in the first decade after the council generally overlooked the centrality of evangelization. They focused attention on collegiality, ecumenism, dialogue and social teaching.”²⁸ But now is the acceptable time to wake up with great enthusiasm for the work of new evangelization.

Resolving Deficits in Priestly Identity through Authentic Patrology.

We speak of the apostolic foundation in the Church not just from mere human calculations or wisdom, but because the Lord built the Church on the apostle that He named Peter, the rock. Therefore, the faith of the Church is foundational and this permeates her activities. The proper understanding of the missionary mandate and evangelization requires that we get in touch concretely with those to whom the message is handed over on behalf of the generation that will come to believe Christ through their teaching (Jn 17:20). Chinua Achebe wrote: “a man who does not know where the rain began to beat him cannot say where he dried his body.”²⁹ Here, we have to present the lasting values of patrology through which we encounter the Fathers and even learn from them in order to prepare candidates in formation for the all important task ahead. The Congregation for Catholic Education instructs:

Observation of the present condition of the Church reveals how the needs of the church’s pastoral mission and the emergence of new currents of spirituality call for healthy nourishment and reliable source of inspiration. So many efforts seem sterile, but there is a fresh breath of true wisdom and Christian authenticity that flowed from the patristic works. It is a breath which contributed recently to the resolution of numerous liturgical, ecumenical, missionary and pastoral phenomena, which were noted by the Second Vatican Council and which are considered a source of encouragement and light by the church today.³⁰

In a letter to Fulton Sheen, a priest wrote: “I am convinced that many of our people are searching for many of the old devotions which many of the parishes have done away with, and this is very often because we priests cannot be bothered putting ourselves out.”³¹ These old devotions motivate the faithful for the missionary activities. Patrology helps us to encounter the depth of these devotions, some of which are handed down by the apostles themselves and are inspired by the Lord and His Spirit. A good example of such devotions is the elongated Lenten spiritual practices of the Rites of Christian Initiation of Adults and other prayerful pedagogy that accompany the rites. This is also not common again in our Churches. Another is the adoration of the Lord in

the Blessed Sacrament, which some parishes have also done away with. But these and many others enliven our soul.

The inspiration they (the Fathers) offer in terms reflection, and contribution to the explanation of the mysteries communicated through the Scriptures is lasting. To this effect, Pope Benedict XVI in his *Verbum Domini* advised that pastoral or missionary activities be inspired by the Scriptures.³² The understanding of the Sacred Scriptures, just as the familiarity with it, is in no little measure germane to the work of evangelization. As a matter of fact, the Scripture is the code for every missionary activity. In it we find the example of the Lord Himself being on mission to evangelize and also learn his principles and strategies which can never fail us. But without the proper understanding, we can do little or nothing humanly speaking. Thus authentic patrology helps us to have better understanding of the Scriptures, when we encounter the insight offered by the apostles and the Fathers, such that they continue to challenge and spur us for missionary actions. “The living Tradition is essential for enabling the Church to grow through time in the understanding of the truth revealed in the scriptures...”³³ The second Vatican Council Fathers offer immense insight:

Hence there exists a close connection and communication between sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture. For both of them, flowing from the same divine wellspring, in a certain way merge into a unity and tend toward the same end. For Sacred Scripture is the word of God inasmuch as it is consigned to writing under the inspiration of the divine Spirit, while sacred tradition takes the word of God entrusted by Christ the Lord and the Holy Spirit to the Apostles, and hands it on to their successors in its full purity, so that led by the light of the Spirit of truth, they may in proclaiming it preserve this word of God faithfully, explain it, and make it more widely known. Consequently it is not from Sacred Scripture alone that the Church draws her certainty about everything which has been revealed. Therefore both sacred tradition and Sacred Scripture are to be accepted and venerated with the same sense of loyalty and reverence.³⁴

As important as the Scriptures may be, our knowledge is equally nourished by the study of the Holy Fathers and other Doctors and monuments or Tradition. In order, moreover, that they may give apt answers to questions posed by men of this age, it is necessary for priests to know well the doctrines of the magisterium and the councils and

documents of the Roman pontiffs and to consult the best of prudent writers of theological science.³⁵

Evangelization is intrinsically traditional since, evangelization entails the handing over of the faith. To hand over is traceable to the Latin word *tradere*, meaning to handover. It is therefore, historical and traditional. “The new head of a worldwide federation of traditional Catholics has stressed that if the New Evangelization is to be effective, it’s vital that the faithful know and understand the Church’s roots, history and tradition.”³⁶ “In our Christian mind, the Fathers are always linked to tradition having been both its protagonist and witnesses. They are closer to its source in their purity... the Fathers are therefore witnesses and guarantor of authentic catholic tradition.”³⁷ Just like we have written earlier, no Christian evangelizer is going to announce a new gospel as St. Paul wrote to the people of Corinth (I Cor. 3:11), the primordial message of Christ but with a new style, dedication and vigour. Patrology then helps us to understand that primordial message of Christ as we study the works and life of those who were with them from John’s baptism till when the Lord was taken up (Acts 1:22).

Therefore, it is clear that (for) seminarians regular familiarity with the work of the Fathers can only strengthen their spiritual and liturgical life by shedding particular light on their vocation by rooting it in the long tradition of the Church bringing it to a direct communication with its origins in their wealth and purity.³⁸

Another important reason for patrology is that the Fathers have bequeathed to us the authentic method of grafting the faith into cultures. They grappled with the heresies of the pagan cultures and were able to impress the faith in the heart of these cultures, although not without difficulty. They were successful. If inculturation that we clamour for today must be successful, we have to consider the Fathers who have done it in the past. The Fathers have helped to answer the question of how the faith can be explained in the “wisdom and philosophy of people.”³⁹

There is yet another pivotal point to be mentioned concerning the rich patrimony that patrology introduces us to that we may be helped in our mission of evangelization. This is the arena of Catholic Christian spirituality. “... Given this lively spiritual sense, the image of themselves that the Fathers offer us is that of men who are not only learning but above all are experiencing divine things. Most of the time, they are specialists in supernatural life who communicate what they have seen and experienced in their contemplation of divine things, what they have known through the path of love.”⁴⁰ Any evangelizer who does not learn from the spirituality of the Fathers may not be faithful and successful. The Fathers are to be our spiritual models after the mind of Christ. St. Paul says; imitate me as I imitate Christ. Due to the intellectual poverty

that some young persons have concerning the lives and works of the Fathers, they have come to choose other spiritual models of this age. It shows in the liturgical assembly that they lead. Yet, the Fathers have more to offer in spirituality than the Pentecostal pastors of this age. Authentic patrology will help in resolving this lacuna.

Conclusion

This paper calls for an urgent appreciation of spiritual mentorship, father figure and role modeling. This paper is also a clarion call for renewal towards enthusiastic evangelization. As Paul VI says: “to make the Church of the twentieth century ever better fitted for proclaiming the Gospel to the people of the twentieth century”⁴¹, this paper aims at making the Church in the twenty-first century better active for the proclamation of the gospel to the people of the twenty-first century. “As in early times, today too Christ needs apostles ready to sacrifice themselves. He needs witnesses and martyrs like St. Paul.”⁴² To actualize this desire of Christ we need to be constantly be inspired by the Fathers, who were the first recipient of the message of Christ and served it in its purity. Thus, in the training of a candidate to the priesthood, authentic patrology should be an epicenter of their formation. This will continue to reinvigorate these young evangelizers, buoyed their spirituality and boost their evangelical morale through pastoral outreach. We wish to submit therefore, that with authentic patrology, the misplacement of priority that has led to a kind of identity crisis, being a clog in the wheel of new evangelization, will be reduced to bearable decimal, if not totally eradicated.

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