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Catholic Priests and Divine Mission of the Church: A Nigerian Response

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Abstract: Priests as ministers of the new people of God on mission inherited an important office as members of the hierarchy to further the mission of the Church. This duty they strive in various ways to carry out with all their strength. They do the work not as gods but as humans, showing that at some times their human nature may prevail in their actions but the Church is there to redeem their actions. This study examined Catholic priests and divine mission of the Church in Nigeria. At the end, the study calls for the mission of the Church is not viewed solely as that of the Priest, rather it is that of the Church, comprising both the hierarchy, the Religious and the Laity, with the Trinity supplying the grace and the Blessed in heaven sharing with the pilgrim Church an exchange of spiritual goods

Keywords: Catholic priest, Church, Divine mission, Laity, Trinity.

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INTRODUCTION

With the fall of human race in Adam and Eve the whole world was shrouded in darkness. All hope of salvation seemed to have been lost (Gen. 3). Yet it was not the will of God that the humankind should be lost forever (Lament. 3:31-33). In view of this he promised salvation to his people through the prophets whom he sent to be their guide, turning their hearts back to him (Ezeanya & Ajah, 2021). He tells them: "Rise up in splendour! Your light has come, the glory of the Lord shines upon you. See, darkness covers the earth, and thick clouds cover the peoples; but upon you the Lord shines, and over you appears his glory" (Is. 60:1-2).

This promise was meant to be fulfilled in the coming of Jesus Christ who is the mediator between God and his people, for God has said "for Zion's sake I will not be silent, for Jerusalem's sake I will not be quiet, until her vindication shines forth like the dawn and her victory like a burning torch" (Is. 62:1). Coming into the world Jesus identified his mission from the Father in the prophesy of Isaiah concerning him:

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring glad tidings to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim liberty to captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim a year acceptable to the Lord (Lk. 4:18-19)

Throughout his stay on earth Jesus zealously carried out the mission of the Father for the salvation of the world. "He went about doing good and healing all those oppressed by the devil, for God was with him"

(Acts. 10:38). On the accomplishing his work on earth, and while he was about going back to his Father he intended the mission to be continued. For this reason he instituted the Church on the rock of Peter (Matt. 16:13-20) and in various occasions sent out the apostles and the disciples on mission (Mk. 3:13-19; 6:7; Lk. 10:1-12). It is the Lord's wish that this mission of witnessing be carried to the ends of the earth (Acts. 1:8). His standing promise in support of the mission is "behold, I am with you always, until the end of the age" (Matt. 28:20).

In faithful response to the mission of the Lord the Church, institutionally directed by the hierarchy, has advanced several grounds and modes for identifying with and carrying out the mission. Among such activities, from which this work tries to identify the involvement of Priests in the divine mission include the following:

- Proclamation
- Catechesis
- Witness
- Liturgy
- Koinonia/Communio

A survey of their contents and actions shows clearly the response of Priests to the missionary vocation and highlights the prospects for the Church in Africa.

Proclamation

This entails the identification with the word of God by officially announcing it for people to hear it

(Ezeanya & Ajah, 2021; Eze *et al.*, 2021; Ajah *et al.*, 2020; & Ajah & Onyejebu, 2019). The Church which finds herself in the secular world is the universal sacrament of God in Christ for the salvation of the whole world (Ugwuoke *et al.*, 2020; & Ezeanya, 2010). It is the will of God to show himself to the world, and this he did in the person of Jesus Christ who came to proclaim the good news of salvation. The Church has the ministry of proclamation or teaching as very central in her mission and purpose (Eze *et al.*, 2020; Ajah *et al.*, 2020; & Ajah, 2018). The Lord's command is:

Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you (Matt. 28:19-20).

This call was made for all the members of the Church in line with each person's status and circumstances, the hierarchy and the laity alike. Canon 204 § 1 says:

Christ's faithful are those who, since they are incorporated into Christ through baptism, are constituted the people of God. For this reason they participate in their own way in the Priestly, prophetic and kingly office of Christ. They are called, each according to his or her particular condition, to exercise the mission, which God entrusted to the Church to fulfill in the world.

The second paragraph of the same canon above indicated, "This Church, established and ordered in this world as a society, subsists in the Catholic Church, governed by the successor of Peter and the Bishops in communion with him." With the Bishops as the leaders of the Church the chief role of proclaiming the word of God falls "principally" on them (cf. Can. 756). "It belongs to Priests, as co-operators of the Bishops, to proclaim the Gospel of God..." (Can. 757). Other members of the Church also witness in other special ways: Deacons in "service" (Can. 757), members of institutes of consecrated life, by bearing "particular witness" (Can. 758), the laity by their "words and by the example of their Christian life" (Can. 759).

The different states of life in the Church as shown above reflect the descending order of inherent responsibility of proclaiming the word of God. This is in view of the primary of the proclamation of the Gospel message in the mission of the Church. Priests (including Bishop) therefore inherited the highest responsibility of witnessing to the mission of proclamation (Ajah *et al.*, 2021; & Ajah *et al.*, 2020).

Proclamation of the Divine Word has two broad dimensions, which include preaching and catechesis. "Preaching is the proclamation of the good news of salvation. It is the spoken announcement of the saving message of God carried on in the Holy Spirit."⁴

Catechesis, on the other hand, "is that form of the ministry of the word which is directed to those who have heard the gospel message and responded in faith. It looks to making that faith living, explicit, and operative" (Ezeanya & Ajah, 2021; Eze *et al.*, 2021; Ajah *et al.*, 2020; & Ajah & Onyejebu, 2019).

Preaching is different from catechesis in the sense that preaching is directed to those who had not heard the gospel message before, who still needed to hear it to give faith response as a neophyte, while catechesis, on the other hand, is directed to those who are already Christ's faithful, who however need to keep their faith in constant nurture and growth. Catechesis therefore cuts across all ages of the faithful, from those of infant age to those in their oldest age.

Priests in Nigeria champion the cause of proclamation in different means and ways, which include the use of slides, electronic and press media. Particularly, homily, outreach ministries, dialogue with the traditional religionists, parish catechetical ministry, seminars, consultations and Catholic education are employed extensively in the mission. They do this in view of the growing need to properly orientate the society already soaked with inter religious conflicts born out of tribalism and ethnocentrism which have eaten deep into the fabrics of the societal stability (Anthony *et al.*, 2021; & Areh *et al.*, 2020). The lukewarmness of many faithful Catholics and the fallenness of some others have also necessitated the urgency of the Priestly proclamatory action. Some of these people switch off to the faith as a response to register their disapproval of what they take as too much parental pressure unto pious actions, others backslide in view of the difficulty in keeping with the demands of the faith, especially as regards avoiding sexual intercourse, abortion, and other sexual misconducts (Enweonwu *et al.*, 2021).

African culture gives religious ministers a high place of honour in the society due to the people's strong attachment to religion, which finds expression in their open identification with the holy. This aids the missionary activities of the Church in proclaiming the good news. Priests in Nigeria take this advantage to reach the nooks and crannies of the society with the salvific message.

Homily presents a good opportunity for the Priestly proclamation of the good news. Concrete issues bordering on the local context are addressed so as to "incarnate" the word of God in the hearts of the people (cf. Can. 767). Christian doctrine is also delivered in such a way as would not be alien to the people's situations (cf. Can. 769). Other issues are addressed as they come up, and Priests often arrange a special type of preaching that accommodate a sharing of spiritual wealth among the faithful to heighten the people's enthusiasm for the spiritual life. This differs

slightly from the formal approach to preaching but they are not entirely exclusive (cf. Can. 770).

In view of the fact that not all the faithful are able to come to the Church to hear the message of salvation, Priests also take the message to the different places where the faithful could be found with convenience (cf. Gen. 771). Markets, motor parks and busy streets are used in this regard. It is interesting to note that the famous Onitsha main market, which is ranked the largest market in Africa, has already been “Catholicized” with the kerygmatic ministry of Priests. The electronic public address system of the loud speaker has been used to get all the people in the market connected in such a way that they can always hear a Priest preaching from one point. The faithful themselves now organize themselves in groups within the market place to observe the Church’s hours of prayer. The Angelus time is not distracted with the business of the market as everybody in the market must stand still until the prayer is ended. This is a breakthrough in the proclamative ministry of Priests in the cultural area, and it has spread to so many other places.

Traditional religionists are those that still hold unto the religion of their forefathers that is not infiltrated by the formal Christian beliefs. The followers are not pagans or idol worshippers as some often misunderstand them to be, instead they still share the belief in one God just as in Christianity, and in addition they also believe in other numerous local deities⁹ that join the spiritual communion that spells favour for the humankind. This may even be seen not to be totally different from the Christian outlook in the communion of the saints. In the traditional religion Priests are highly honored and given a listening ear as mediators between the gods and humans. Believers in this religion also see Catholic Priests in line with the reverence they owe the traditional Priests as they immediately compare the both as messengers of God (Nnam *et al.*, 2021; & Nnamani *et al.*, 2021). This prepares a fertile ground for the Catholic Priests in taking the gospel into dialogue with believers in the traditional religions. Experience has shown that believers in the traditional religions often needed an appropriate evangelization to discover the relatedness of the Christian message to the noble traditional beliefs. The effect is that very many of them become believers in Christianity after some dialogue with Catholic Priests and other agents of gospel proclamation.

Sunday evenings provide a good opportunity for catechetical activities in most parishes in Nigeria. The faithful already observe the free-from-work obligation of the Lord’s Day, and Priests use the time to catechize them on the deeper meanings of the week’s readings and relate them to the mystery that is celebrated in the liturgy especially the Eucharist. “Catechetical Instruction illumines and strengthens the

faith, develops a life in harmony with the spirit of Christ, stimulates a conscious and fervent participation in the liturgical mystery and encourages men to take an active part in the apostolate” (Vat. II, *Gravissimum Educationis*, 4). Priests often use this opportunity to allow questions from the faithful on the issues they fail to understand about the Church or reality in general. In this way the faith of the believers is fortified for greater good and witnessing to the divine mission.

The Church for the catechetical work has issued several major documents. They include the following:

- General Catechetical Directory (1971)
- Evangelization in the Modern World (1975) (an Apostolic Exhortation)
- Catechesis in our Time (1979)
- Catechism of the Catholic Church (1992) and
- General Directory for Catechesis (1997)

From these documents Priests have written commentaries, simplified forms of catechism books and some question and answer materials for better imbibing of the lessons. Children are often prepared in such a way as to learn the digested catechisms by rote. Some enthusiastic lay people are also trained together with parish catechists to help the teaming numbers of those preparing for the reception of the different sacraments, especially Baptism, the Eucharist, Confirmation and Matrimony.

Many dioceses today have either a catechetical center, a pastoral center or a school of evangelization where catechists are often assembled for an up-to-date orientation to the demands and prospects of the evangelical mission. Seminars and other on-going formation exercises are also arranged by Priests both for themselves and for the Religious and the Laity in those centers mentioned above so that all the faithful are carried along in the fortification for answering the call to the ministry of the Divine Word.

Priests create office days and hours when they sit in the parish office to be consulted by any faithful intending to discuss any issue. Both temporal and spiritual matters are discussed in this forum, and Priests use it to attend to their clients in their levels and moments of need. They become all things to people to make the word of God have its home in their life. Sacred Scripture, Tradition, and the Magisterial teaching which form the tripod of theology are the basic tools employed by the Priests in the consultative and pastoral work. The effect is that after the whole encounter both the Priest and the client feels stronger to witness to the good news. They can then say respectively with Paul “woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1Cor. 9:16).

Catholic education is another approach given to the mission of proclamation by Priests in Nigeria.

“Give us the child at his infancy”, the Catholic Priests would say, “and when he is seven years old you cannot take him away from us again”. Through formal education the Catholic Church has made a tremendous success in her mission in Nigeria. Catholic Priests fought and made sure that religious and moral education is included in the curriculum of schools controlled by the government (cf. Can. 799) just as it is done in the ones owned by the Church. This helps to ensure the holistic formation of students. Meanwhile, with the take-over of Church owned schools by the government of Nigeria, the Church today embarks seriously on providing many other new schools affording Nursery/Primary, Secondary and Tertiary education to people. With this Catholics are prepared well in the tenets of the Church to be more conscious of their dignity and responsibility so as to be more eager in taking active part in both social, economic and political life of the society (cf. Preface to *Gravissimum Educationis*).

Several historical facts and figures show that the Catholic Church has continued to grow from strength to strength in Nigeria due to the untiring evangelical works of Priests (Areh *et al.*, 2020). Today the Catholic Church is enjoying an overflow of boom in Nigeria. Indigenous Priests and religious are sent on mission to other parts of the world to evangelize, including Europe and America. The Nigerian hierarchy has formed the Missionary Society of St. Paul (M.S.P), as a charitable missionary outreach through which Priests and religious may be sent to evangelize other areas of greater evangelical and pastoral needs. “Such is the force and power of the word of God that it can serve the Church as her support and vigor, and the children of the Church as strength for their faith, food for the soul, and a pure and lasting fount of spiritual life” (*Dei Verbum*, 21). The motivational principle for all the activities of the Priests in the ministry of the Divine Word is the Pauline dictum:

How can they call on him in whom they have not believed? And how can they believe in him of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone to preach? And how can people preach unless they are sent? As it is written, “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring the good news!” (Rom. 10:14-15).

The ministry of the Divine Word lays the foundation for a thorough witness of life since, as we have seen, faith comes from hearing. The Priests are not left out even in the mission of witnessing as the next article can show.

Witness

The witness of life and action justifies as fruitful the faith in the word of God received and proclaimed. So much has been preached and taught but witnessing judges the level of conviction and belief. An

adage has it, “I cannot hear what you are saying because what you are, speaks louder.” For Franklin, “none preaches better than the ant, and she says nothing.”¹² The Lord’s command is “you will be my witnesses” (Acts. 1:8) so that “this is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn. 13:35). Priests bear witness to the mission of the Church through their probity of life and actions. The faithful readily follow such Priests they feel lead them to God through a life of holiness and love.

Priests in various dioceses in Nigeria have several recreational and fraternal gatherings to help them share views on the field work and exercise the constant call of Christ on his apostles, whenever they finished some arduous work, to come away by themselves to a deserted place and rest a while (cf. Mk. 6:31). They also organize some Vocation Association meetings with the Religious, Seminarians and Aspirants to uplift zeal for the mission and exhibit certain entertainment and extra-curriculum activities that attract the attention and volition of the people to the religious folk. They enhance among people the biblical dictum of “*ecce quam bonum et quam iucundum habitare fratres in unum*” (behold how good and pleasant it is for brothers to live in unity) (Ps. 133:1). With this so many people are in love with the Catholic Priesthood in Nigeria.

Charity is another avenue through which the Priests witness to the mission of the Church. James challenges the faithful:

Demonstrate your faith to me without works, and I will demonstrate my faith to you from my works. You believe that God is one. You do well. Even the demons believe that and tremble. Do you want proof, you ignoramus, that faith without works is useless? (James 2:18-20).

Priests and the presbytery are normally taken as sources of charity among the people. The notion of “Father Christmas” as the generous donor of gifts, blessings and pleasantries at memorable feasts and solemnities traces its orientation in Nigeria to the reality of Priestly charity. The Caritas Organization from the Vatican with its humanitarian services to Nigerians during the civil war gave Priestly charity its highest boost in the country. As a follow up, Priests in Nigeria always keep a fund and material store for charitable actions in their pastoral areas. Pious organizations like St. Vincent de Paul, St. Anthony’s Guild and others are organized and popularized by the Priests to champion charitable activities in line with the demands of their respective apostolate.

The rapid and constant growth of the Church in Nigeria is the fruit of relentless efforts unto martyrdom of the Priests who dedicate their lives to witnessing to the gospel message. In his Angelus of

March 6, 1994, Pope John Paul II acknowledged this when he explained the constant growth of the Church in Africa and Madagascar as the “result of a way also marked by martyrdom and enriched by the generous fruits of holiness (Ugwuoke *et al.*, 2020; & Nnam *et al.*, 2019). The Pope also furthered the same belief in his homily during the Holy Mass of the Beatification of Cyprian Michael Iwene Tansi when he urged Nigerians to keep up the authentic and dynamic zeal exercised by Fr. Tansi in witnessing to the gospel of Jesus Christ, which he said is the best way to bring about the much needed reconciliation in Nigeria.¹⁴

The soutane extensively worn by Priests in Nigeria is a wonderful witnessing to the love of Jesus Christ and his message. Celibacy in itself is a total rejection of self and a witness to the truth of the gospel that in the heavenly kingdom those privileged to be there neither marry nor are given to marriage, instead they are like the angels in heaven (cf. Matt. 22:30). People highly feel the presence of Christ when they see Priests in their soutane. The privileges and concessions they grant them show their great love for the Priestly witness. To stay without marriage in the African culture for no serious cause is a taboo as it entails a break and conscious termination of one’s lineage and name. Nigerian Priests understand fully the implication of their option for celibacy and happily embrace it. There is no witnessing that may be higher than that from popular assessment.

It is rather unfortunate that often some Priests who live and work together within a parish or presbytery misunderstand each other and engage in certain spiteful activities that tend to go contrary to their mission, and thereby scandalizing the lay faithful who look unto them for emulation. This type of situation proves to all that Priests are still human; grace does not change nature, rather builds on it; Priests are sinners taken from among sinners for a special ministry of witnessing to the word of God and the sacraments as sacred ministers; moreover God does not choose the qualified but qualifies the chosen. This lesson actually prepares the mind of the faithful to appreciate more the struggle undertaken by Priests to keep fit to the mission of witnessing. Rather than make the faithful lose hope and decamp from following it often makes them to appreciate the fact that the call to holiness and sanctity of life and for proper witnessing is for all and not just for the Priest. They are therefore encouraged to put in their efforts and charismas to the universal call of Christ and even help the Priests to live their lives in the manner proper to their state.

Liturgy

“The word *leitourgia* in classical Greek means a function (*ἔργον*) undertaken on behalf of the people (*λαος*); fitting out a ship, preparing a feast or doing any public service.”¹⁵ The same notion of public service that characterized the ancient Greek liturgy also gives the

liturgy of the Church a character of public service today. Liturgy is a public sacred act of worship given to God by the Church. “It is the liturgy through which, especially in the divine sacrifice of the Eucharist, “the work of our redemption is accomplished,” and it is through the liturgy, especially, that the faithful are enabled to express in their lives and manifest to others the mystery of Christ and the real nature of the true Church” (*Sacrosanctum Concilium*, 2).

Liturgy is the source and summit of all the Christian life and demands proper care and approach to lead the faithful worshippers to fuller actualization of the grace it imparts. Just as circular drama gives joy and satisfaction to the spectators when it is well done or performed, liturgy also aids the faithful to a better appreciation of the divine life and action when it is well celebrated. Norms of liturgy have been laid down in several liturgical books and canonized by the Church’s law (cf. Can. 838). In view of its delicacy in relation to the sanctification and salvation of the faithful through prayer, works of penance and charity liturgical activities are needed to be in harmony with the laws of the Church (cf. Can. 839).

Priests received from Christ a unique mandate of being the ministers of the word and the sacraments especially in the Eucharistic celebration. In their ministration they exercise the sanctifying office that the Church received from Christ the Lord, while other members of the faithful in accordance with their state also share in the sanctifying office (cf. Can. 835). Liturgical actions, being the life of the Church, are not private, instead the whole body of the Church is concerned, with Christ as the head and the faithful (the Church) the members. It is a sacrament of unity (Can. 837). The unity brings out the mind of Christ for his Church “that they may all be one, as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they also may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me” (Jn. 17:21). The liturgical assembly, which marks the unity of the new people of God gathered in prayer in the name of Jesus through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit for the glory of the Father and the sanctification of humanity, demands an active participation of all the faithful. It is the Priest’s duty to make sure that this active participation is maintained throughout a liturgical activity.

The general work of the Priest is liturgically identified as a minister ordained to the ministry of the Word and the Sacraments (cf. *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 1, 5). To him is entrusted the duty of seeing that the spiritual nourishment and the salvation of the souls of the faithful are ensured. The Priests proclaim the word of God in the liturgical assembly and the word prepares the faithful for a more fruitful reception of the sacraments. The Church has seven sacraments that include Baptism, Penance, Holy Eucharist, and

Confirmation, Holy Orders, Matrimony and Anointing of the sick.

The sacraments, which form the bedrock of liturgical celebrations, are visible signs of inward grace instituted by Christ for the sanctification of mankind. Every sign has an information it conveys. The signpost points us to where we are looking for but does not go to that place with us, showing that a sign is different in character from the reality it signifies. The sacraments however are different from ordinary signs in the sense that they both signify the reality of the spiritual events taking place and also accomplish such events in the souls of the recipient. The water of baptism and the words of the minister, for instance, signify the spiritual cleansing of the person being baptized and also accomplish that cleansing in the person.

Sacraments in general sanctify the recipient and confer grace known as sanctifying grace. Each of the sacraments, in addition to the sanctifying grace also confers the particular sacramental grace when there is no obstacle placed to the reception of grace by the recipient. The sacramental grace of each sacrament leads to the sanctifying grace that draws God's help to a person and enhances union with God through the effects of the particular sacrament received. In that sense, the sacramental grace of baptism makes us to live as the children of God, which is a sanctifying grace; confirmation helps us to deepen our faith in God and gives us the readiness to defend it at all cost. Other sacraments in the same way have their respective helps for the recipients. Three elements are essential in a sacrament: the matter, the form, and the intention of doing what the Church does on the part of the minister of the sacrament.

The Priests of Nigeria being aware of the depth of the demands of the liturgical life deepen themselves in the knowledge of the teaching of the Church, and consequently prepare the faithful well for the reception of the sacraments. They seek out ways of making the sacraments meaningful to the life of the people through appropriate inculturation and catechesis where necessary. The Catholic Institute of West Africa in Port Harcourt Nigeria today studies theology with special attention on contextualization. Liturgy is ordered in such a way as to accommodate the values of the people so as to carry them along in a thorough active participation. Different dioceses send their Priests to the institute to be formed in the contextualization approach to theologizing. This aids a more meaningful and fruitful participation in liturgy in the different dioceses. Those trained in the institute are often called upon to help in the formation of future Priests of the local Church and also in the on-going formation of fellow Priests and other Church workers.

As the faithful gather at the celebration of liturgy, especially the Eucharist, the Priests catechize them very

well on the mystery the sacred action signifies and actualizes or re-enacts. On the whole, the Priests through liturgy pasture the flock of Christ, feeding them with the word of God and sanctifying them with the sacraments. The strong is made stronger and the weak is helped to be strong.

Communio (Koinonia)

The theology of *Communio* or *Koinonia* is a novelty of the new ecclesiology of the Second Vatican Council that highlights the coming together of Christ's faithful for the promotion of the common mission of the Church and the mutual help to one another in the pilgrimage to the Father's house. Jesus himself started this approach at the beginning of his public ministry where he decided to gather together some willing men to help him advance the mission for which he came into the world.

As he passed by the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting their nets into the sea; they were fishermen. Jesus said to them, "come after me, and I will make you fishers of men." Then they left their nets and followed him. He walked along a little farther and saw James, the son of Zebedee, and his brother John. They too were in a boat mending their nets. Then he called them. So they left their father Zebedee in the boat along with the hired men and followed him (Mk. 1:16-20).

Jesus wanted some companions for the work and he went about calling those to do the work with him in unity of purpose for a better result. *Koinonia* therefore highlights the fact that although we are different individuals we all share in the life and love of the trinity and that of our neighbour. We "share in the same charity towards God and our neighbours, and we all sing the one hymn of glory to God. All, indeed, who are of Christ and who have his spirit "form one Church and in Christ cleave together" (L.G. 49; Eph. 4:16). The companionship we share as pilgrims on earth does not even stop here on earth but extends to those of our members who have paid the supreme price and transited to the next world. We still share with them the exchange of spiritual goods.

Koinonia is etymological traced to the Greek *Koinon*, the adjective of which is *koinos*, meaning common as opposed to private; legally it is considered in the bond of contract which holds different parties together and the agreement between them, binding. In the ecclesiastical setting it came up from the Acts of Apostles where the believers in Christ shared things in common "all who believed were together and had all things in common; they would sell their property and possessions and divide them among all according to each one's need" (Acts. 2:44-45). The communal life of the believers was sustained by the body and blood of Christ that they received in the Eucharist. "The cup of blessing that we bless, is it not a participation in the

blood of Christ? The bread that we break, is it not a participation in the body of Christ? Because the loaf of bread is one, we, though many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (1Cor. 10:16-17).

Since the Eucharist makes us one in Christ, and forms us into a family of God with the bond of giving and receiving from the gifts of one another, we ought to extend the blessings to all the aspects of the life of the Church as a mission to be furthered. The Priest has his role to play in this family of God just as the religious and other members of the faithful. The Priest, who is a member of the Church hierarchy to whom the governance of the body of Christ, the Church, or the institution is entrusted, has it as a mission to protect this unity and communal living.

Priests in Nigeria embrace this mission in different ways. Church unity is a point of great importance. The local and universal Church *Ad Intra* is helped to focus on the divine Lord and Master, and *Ad Extra* the different Churches are helped to proper dialogue and understanding.

Peace is an essential element in the progress of any institution; Priests strive for the resolution of conflicts among Christ’s faithful. The Justice, Development and Peace movements in the different dioceses in Nigeria are a good example of the efforts of Priests at ensuring the peace and welfare of the Church and her members. Social teaching of the Church is advanced to orientate the faithful on the tenets of peaceful co-existence.

Priests also show the charity that characterize *koinonia* in their ready disposition to be sent on mission lands where there are fewer Priests and harder works of the apostolate. They share their convenience and are charitable with their leisure and volition. Dioceses with greater number of Priests today send some of their Priests to other dioceses in greater need. Some diocesan Priests in Nigeria even volunteer to be sent to other countries for the common and more equitable enjoyment of the spiritual goods by the faithful.

Africa is known in the universal Church as the land where there exists a strong family tie among the people. The family of God ecclesiology is best practiced and understood in Africa because it has already formed part of their psyche and understanding of reality. Nigerian Priests therefore advance this family of God theology and image of the Church wherever they find themselves, and it aids a lot of mutual co-operation of the faithful in the mission. Inculturation is also an avenue of advancing the spirit of *koinonia* as it makes the gospel message incarnate in the life and culture of the people. In this way the mind of God and the Church for Africa in relation to the mission is conscientiously attended to.¹⁶

EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION

The Church as the sacrament of Christ implies that Christ wants the Church to be the visible extension of his hands and feet in the work of saving souls and bodies. The mission received by the Church from Christ is the same mission Christ received from his Father. Hence the end point of the mission of the Church is the doing of the will of Christ to the glory of the Father by the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

Priests as ministers of the new people of God on mission inherited an important office as members of the hierarchy to further the mission of the Church. This duty they strive in various ways to carry out with all their strength. They do the work not as gods but as humans, showing that at some times their human nature may prevail in their actions but the Church is there to redeem their actions as they function “*in persona Christi*” (in the person of Christ) as his chosen ministers of the Divine Word and the Sacraments.

There is the need that the mission of the Church is not viewed solely as that of the Priest, rather it is that of the Church, comprising both the hierarchy, the Religious and the Laity, with the Trinity supplying the grace and the Blessed in heaven sharing with the pilgrim Church an exchange of spiritual goods. All are then encouraged, each in accordance with his state, to strive to make successful the mission of the Church.

“Pull Him Down” spirit often characterizes the approach of some members of the Church rather than helping others to prosper and succeed. This has caused the downfall of many highly charismatic messengers of the good news who through human envy and jealousy had been crippled and dinged from flying higher. The spirit of *communio* or *koinonia* should help members of the Church to understand that we all are collective victors in the Lord when any member of the Church comes out in flying colours. No one enjoys success alone just as the downfall of any member of the Church is the collective failure of all the members alike. We shall be our brother’s keepers, respecting and rewarding excellence among our members.

Though beset with many difficulties and financial predicaments the Church in Nigeria through the Priests still struggles to make good marks in answering the universal mission and vocation of the Church. Sister Churches in other more privileged societies and cultures should do more to encourage the Church in Nigeria, while the Church in Nigeria should also struggle harder to harness a lot of the abundant human and material potentials and endowments which God has blessed her with. All these should be put in place in the response to the call to mission.

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