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**CONSECRATED LIFE,
THE GIFT OF CATHOLIC PRIESTHOOD
AND
FORMATION IN THE INTERNAL FORUM**

A Publication of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria

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A Publication of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria

Motto: *Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service
with Faith and Reason*

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For contributions and all correspondence, please write to:

The Editor,

The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life,

P. O. Box 2832, 400001, Enugu, Nigeria

Email: voyagecmsn@gmail.com

Tel. (+234) 042-251858; (+234)9077214109

Website: www.tcvafrica.org.

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Editorial

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Formation, Politics and Preferential Option for the Poor

The Christian vocation and mission call everyone to recognise Christ's identity, deepen our faith in Him, and grow in Christian identity and maturity. This journey toward a fullness of life can be pursued through the consecrated life, the priesthood, or as a lay faithful. It requires commitment to formation, prayer, and a preferential love for the poor, among other things. This volume presents scholarly studies on some aspects of these themes.

Establishment of Religious Institute and the Necessary Formation

In Africa, especially in Nigeria, there's a growing increase in vocations to consecrated life, with many establishing institutes for aspirants who feel called and desire to live this way of life. The Holy Spirit is the principal architect and sustainer, the primary animator and source, of the consecrated life, inspiring people and playing several profound roles.¹ However, as Thaddeus Anyaegbu, a Dominican canon lawyer, explains, establishing such associations in the Church with the intent to become institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life requires careful canonical procedures.

The *theological meaning of the "sealing of the Holy Spirit"* in the sacrament of Confirmation has important implications for the vocation and mission of consecrated life. While Confirmation is often understood primarily as a sacrament of Christian maturity and spiritual strengthening, many theological

¹ Cfr. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, nn.1, 14-19, 24, 63, 84.

studies do not adequately explore its deeper pneumatological, Trinitarian, and vocational dimensions. Addressing this gap, Ijekeye's study explores the theological implications of the "sealing of the Holy Spirit" concerning consecrated life. It presents this sealing as a mark of divine ownership, consecration, identity, mission, authenticity, security, and protection, rooted in the Spirit's role within the economy of salvation.

The *Catholic Priesthood* is also a special gift of the Holy Spirit; and it is a mystery, and a channel of worship and thanksgiving to God. Azebeokhai advocates for a proper understanding of this gift, recognising its beauty and attractions, as well as re-examining processes for assessing vocations to the priesthood in the Church. He emphasises the holistic formation required of candidates, acknowledges the challenges the priesthood faces today, and suggests ways to overcome these obstacles.

While the holistic formation of Priests and Consecrated Persons is necessary and urgent, one specific pastoral area that requires particular care within the Major Seminaries and Houses of formation in Africa is *formation for the internal forum* (including the forum of conscience). Internal forum includes both sacramental forum (which is bound by an absolute divine seal: Cann. 983, §1; 984; 1386) and extra-sacramental forum (including, for example, spiritual accompaniment, pastoral discernment, seminary formation guidance, dispensing occult impediments, lifting secret censures), which requires deep natural secrecy and respect for a person's right to privacy under canon 220. Umanah proposes integrating a dedicated course on "Formation for the Internal Forum" into the *Ratio Studiorum* of the *Ratio Nationalis* and enhancing awareness of the canonical and pastoral competencies of offices such as the Diocesan Penitentiary, the Missionary of Mercy, and the Apostolic Penitentiary. These initiatives intend to protect the sanctity and privacy of the confessional and of spiritual direction, and to promote the Church's supreme mission: *salus animarum*, the salvation of souls (can. 1752). Still, in practice, this study may raise questions about the feasibility and implementation of

proposals, but also encourage those responsible to find creative and innovative ways to form priests and consecrated persons for the internal forum.

Christian Identity and Preferential Option for the Poor

Conscience acts as an individual's moral guide, and there is a deep connection between conscience and the preferential option for the poor. Moral theology teaches that following one's informed and well-formed conscience is the ultimate moral obligation. When individuals recognise systemic injustices or immediate needs through their conscience, the preferential option for the poor becomes a compelling moral imperative to take action. This principle establishes a framework that prioritises the needs of the poor and vulnerable. The conscience does more than provide ethical guidance. Having a well-formed conscience is also necessary to apply it effectively in real-life situations.

Anselm Jimoh, a Nigerian philosopher, reviews the *preferential option for the poor* in Pope Leo XIII's Encyclical Letter, *Dilexi Te* (I Have Loved You), emphasising its relevance for the Church in Nigeria. This principle is theologically rooted in Scripture, the life of Christ, and the traditions of the Church. This option does not imply exclusivity. While God's love is universal, this principle emphasises the dignity and rights of the poor and marginalised, with a focus on justice. Jimoh calls on the Catholic Church in Nigeria to adopt a practical, grassroots approach and to sincerely prioritise the needs of the poor and marginalised. More efforts are needed to implement policies that take into account their impact on and support for vulnerable communities. It is essential to recognise that serving the needs of the poor is not just an act of charity but a genuine encounter with Christ, who identified with the marginalised.

What precisely is Christ's identity, and how is it reflected in the Christian identity?

Uwanaka Eberechukwu explores *Christ's identity* as the incarnate Word (John 1:14) and its implications for *Christian identity*. This includes embodying Christ's teachings and participating in His suffering and resurrection, emphasising obedience and sacrificial love as expressions of the essence of Christian life. Christ's universal identity affirms the equal dignity of all peoples. In the diverse and pluralistic contexts of Africa, this universality encourages interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence while preserving Christological distinctiveness.

Authentic Prayer and the Role of Clergy in Politics

Following the example of Christ, Christians recognise that prayer plays a fundamental role in their lives and in their relationship with God. However, it is essential to understand the nature of prayer and to distinguish it from magic. Authentic prayer within the Christian tradition is an act of worship that arises from divine ordinance; it fosters a vital, personal, and covenantal relationship between God and man in Christ. The Cameroonian theologian Mirabel Kenduanyi addresses the question, "What is the *difference between prayer and magic?*" She distinguishes between authentic prayer and magic, criticising the influence of materialism on faith and worship in many African churches. She advocates for a return to genuine prayer, emphasising love as a crucial safeguard of religion against superstition and inauthentic prayer. She apparently aligns with St. Henry Newman's conviction: "We believe because we love."²

Michael Umoh raises concerns about the *clergy's role in politics* and their ability to inspire a nation towards leadership and national change, particularly as Nigeria approaches the 2027 General Election amid significant crises. He analyses the tensions in contemporary Catholic priestly life, highlighting the

² Newman, J. Henry *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before: The University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843*, 163.

restrictions placed by Canons 285 §3, 287 §2, and 747 against active partisan engagement. Umoh emphasises the need for a balance between ecclesiastical neutrality and the prophetic duty to address structural sin, advocating for social responsibility and prophetic leadership. He contends that the canonical boundaries do not imply social indifference or pastoral cowardice. However, he acknowledges the multifaceted pressures on the pastors of the local Churches, whose rectories often become the primary social welfare hub during times of crisis amid hyperinflation and widespread insecurity. The clergy face the threats of pastoral burnout and partisan entanglement. To navigate these issues, he proposes a framework of "political charity" that should align with the Catholic Social Teachings.

Pope Leo XIV's First Anniversary of the Pontificate

Finally, *The Catholic Voyage* marks, in 2026, the first anniversary of the pontificate of Pope Leo XIV, a pope who is deeply rooted in Augustinian spirituality³. On this occasion, this volume presents two studies: one, a reflection by Abeyasingha, highlights the Pope's priorities since his election in 2025. The other article by Fidelis Agala and Joshua examines the historical impact of three Popes named Leo. Abeyasingha's reflection explores the theological, pastoral, and social priorities that have emerged since the Pope's election. Leo XIV's pontificate emphasises interior conversion, communal charity, truth, unity, and service. At the same time, he engages with digital evangelisation, social justice, ecumenism, and the Church's mission among the poor. Hence, it is suggested that Leo XIV's papacy integrates contemplative depth, intellectual clarity, and pastoral responsiveness in a rapidly changing world. The second article emphasises the evolution of the Leonine Magisterium and its relevance to addressing challenges. It examines three

³ Prof. Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, OSA, & Dr. Emeka Xris Obiezu, OSA (Editors), *Pope Leo XIV: Son of Saint Augustine* (2025).

Formation, Politics and Preferential Option for the Poor

Popes named Leo, with a focus on the commencement of Pope Leo XIV's pontificate. While the Church has always been blessed with many spiritual and material gifts, it has faced challenges and combated unorthodox teachings that oppose authentic Church teachings on faith and morals. The different Magisteriums of the Church have adapted to various epochs while remaining faithful to the truth. Consequently, the authors examine the benefits of the Leonine Magisterium for the Church in Africa, identifying doctrinal and social challenges such as false teachings, the prosperity gospel, syncretism, and factionalism as obstacles to authentic Christian witnessing. African Christians hope that Pope Leo XIV's Magisterium will usher in a new era of renewal for the Church and Society in Africa.

We invite you to join our journey! Subscribe to our journal and to our YouTube channel, "*The Catholic Voyage-Africa*." You'll find a wealth of engaging and thought-provoking reflections and enriching resources.

Enjoy the reading!

Oseni Ogunu, OMV

Editor-in-Chief

Focus

Ius In Foro Interno: The Necessity of Formation in the Internal Forum (Cann. 130; 240) Within Major Seminaries in Africa

Emmanuel Isidore Umanah, JCD¹

(ajenumanah@gmail.com)

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¹ Fr. Emmanuel I. Umanah, JCD, is a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Ikot Ekpene, Nigeria, ordained in 2020. He holds a Doctorate in Canon Law from the Pontificia Università Urbaniana in Rome (2025) and a diploma in the Canonical Administrative Praxis from the Dicastery for the Clergy (2020). He has equally completed various trainings in safeguarding, *delicta graviora*, the formation of seminary formators, and formation for the internal forum. Fr. Umanah's pastoral work and academic assignments have taken him across the globe, including various postings in Nigeria, Europe, Asia, and the United States of America. He has served as a seminary Dean of Students, a lecturer in Latin and New Testament Greek, a spiritual director for international pilgrimage agencies, and a retreat moderator for seminaries in Nigeria and Rome. Additionally, he has been extensively committed to the decorum of sacred celebrations, having served as a Master of Ceremonies at the Pontificio Collegio Urbano, and at the Pontificio Collegio San Pietro in Rome of the Dicastery for Evangelization, as well as Liturgy workshop facilitator for the Society of the Divine Word (SVD) at the Centro *Ad Gentes, Nemi*, Rome. He also served as a *Peritus* for the Diocesan Synod on Synodality in Ikot Ekpene. An active researcher and writer, his recent publications focus on liturgical decorum and canonical structures, including his doctoral thesis, *The Seminary, Time and Place of Formation: Challenges of the Church in Nigeria* (2025), and a relevant study titled, "Abuse of Sacred Vestments in the Social Media" (2024).

This Paper was originally presented at the Third Annual Conference of the Association of Anglophone African Students of Canon Law, Pontifical University of St Thomas Aquinas (Angelicum), Rome, May 22, 2026.

Abstract

In an era dominated by mass communication, the sanctity and privacy of the confessional and spiritual direction are facing a quiet crisis. Even with the best pastoral intentions, some priests in Nigeria and across Africa are taking to social media to share stories from their ministry, inadvertently threatening the sacred boundary of the *forum conscientiae*. Our Major Seminaries are already doing an excellent job in the formation of seminarians in Canon Law, Moral Theology, and Sacramental Theology. However, there is an urgent need to be more intentional and well-structured regarding formation in the internal forum.

This paper draws a clear line between the sacramental forum, bound by an absolute divine seal (cann. 983, §1; 984; 1386), and the non-sacramental forum of spiritual accompaniment, which requires deep natural secrecy and respect for a person's right to privacy under canon 220. It further presents practical social media case studies, indicating how well-intentioned but misguided public posts risk violating confessional confidentiality and compromising pastoral trust. *Quod auditur in foro Dei semper manere debet in foro Dei!*

Consequently, the present work proposes the integration of a separate, one-semester course called "Formation for the Internal Forum" into the *Ratio Studiorum* of the *Ratio Nationalis*. It also calls for a better appreciation of the unique canonical and pastoral competencies of the Diocesan Penitentiary, the Missionary of Mercy, and the Apostolic Penitentiary, to safeguard the sanctuary of

conscience and serve the Church's supreme mission: *salus animarum* (can. 1752).

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Introduction

A priest is only entrusted with the pastoral care of souls after his suitability has been ascertained by his Local Ordinary (cann. 149 §§1,2; 150; 521, §§2, 3). For this reason, positive arguments are required before the Sacred Orders are conferred on a candidate (cann. 1029; 1030; 1051, 1°; 1052, §1). The suitability of candidates for the Sacred Orders is not merely a matter of academic excellence; it cuts across the human, spiritual, academic and pastoral

dimensions.² All these go to show the seriousness with which the Church treats the pastoral care of souls.

In his exercise of the pastoral care of souls assigned to him, the priest acts *in persona Christi Capitis* (in the person of Christ the Head). He exercises the prophetic office of Christ in teaching (*munus docendi*),

² Cf. SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM OECUMENICUM VATICANUM II, *Decretum Optatum Totius* (28 octobris 1965), n. 1, in *AAS* 58 (1966), p. 713-714. English Translation in A. FLANNERY (ed.), *Vatican Council II. The Conciliar and Post-Conciliar Documents*, St Pauls, Mumbai 2007, p. 627. Henceforth, as *Optatum Totius*. See also IOANNES PAULUS PP II, *Adhortatio apostolica Pastores dabō vobis* (25 martii 1992), n. 60, in *AAS* 84 (1992), p. 763. Henceforth, as *Pastores dabō vobis*; CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Gift of Priestly Vocation, Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (8 December 2016), LEV, Vatican City 2016. Italian text in EV 32, nn. 1755-2065. Henceforth, as *The Gift of Priestly Vocation*. B. N. Ejeh examines the requirements for the suitability for an Ecclesiastical Office in B. EJEH, “The Principle of Suitability in the Provision of Ecclesiastical Offices in the 1983 Code of Canon Law,” *Ius Ecclesiae* 20 (2008), pp. 569-592; while E. B. Okonkwo examines the suitability of Candidates for the Priesthood in E. OKONKWO, “Suitability of Candidates for Admission to Major Seminary and Integral Formation: An *Excursus* in the Light of Cann. 241§1 and 244 CIC 1983,” in A. BOSSO – E. OKONKWO (eds.), *Quis custodiet ipsos custodes? Studi in onore di Giacomo Incitti*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2021, pp. 195-214. See also B. N. EJEH, *I chierici nel popolo di Dio: Profilo giuridico*, Marcianum Press, Venezia 2017; and G. INCITTI, *Il sacramento dell’Ordine nel Codice di Diritto Canonico: Il ministero dalla formazione all’esercizio*, Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2021.

the priestly function in sanctifying (*munus sanctificandi*), and the kingly function in shepherding (*munus regendi*) the faithful entrusted to his care. For this reason, it can be affirmed that the pastoral care of souls derives from the three-fold ministry of Christ (*tria munera Christi*).

In recent times, the pastoral care of souls in the internal forum has been challenged by various factors, especially the quest for publicity and relevance in a media-dominated society. Damages have been caused to this forum, formally called the forum of the conscience,³ through media publicity, albeit most times with good intentions. But great damages can, sometimes, arise even from the best intentions. The present work seeks to take precautionary steps in the formation of candidates for the priesthood in Nigeria, and Africa at large. Conscious of the fact that most seminaries (if not all) in Nigeria (and Africa by extension) are already committed to the formation of their candidates in the areas of Sacramental Theology, Moral Theology,

³ In the 1917 Code of Canon Law, the internal forum (*forum internum*) used to be described as the forum of conscience (*forum conscientiae*). Cf. V. POOTHAVELITHARA, “The Mode of Exercise of the Power of Governance in the Internal Forum,” in *Iustitia* 12 (June 2021) 1, pp: 65-94. See also M. RODRÍGUEZ, “Forum internum – Forum externum: En torno a la naturaleza jurídica del fuero interno I,” in *Revista Española de Derecho Canónico* 23 (1967), pp. 253-331; ID., “Forum internum – Forum externum: Naturaleza de la Jurisdicción del fuero interno II,” in *Revista Española de Derecho Canónico* 24 (1968), pp. 339-364; J. I. ARRIETA, “The Internal Forum: Notion and Juridical Regime,” in *Studia Canonica* 41 (2007), pp. 27-29.

and Canon Law, this study calls for a more intentional and well-structured formative Course on Safeguarding and the Formation for the Internal Forum in Nigerian seminarians. It may also prove useful for the ongoing formation of priests in Nigeria and Africa at large.

This paper does not claim to offer a comprehensive lecture on the Internal Forum or the Apostolic Penitentiary; neither does our proposal claim to substitute the independent courses of Canon Law and Theology in the seminaries. It does not pretend to offer generic solutions to individual problems associated with the internal forum. Instead, it presents the contents and nature of the internal forum with its competent Roman dicastery while calling for its inclusion in the *Ratio studiorum* of seminaries as a separate discipline at the end of the initial formation.

Part I: The Internal Forum

Most of the time, when we speak of the Internal forum, many people immediately think of the Sacrament of Penance. Of course, the Sacrament of Penance falls within the internal forum; but the internal forum is not exclusively about the Sacrament of Penance. What has come to be known today as the *forum internum* is a fruit of ages of terminological evolution. The Apostolic Penitentiary is the Roman Dicastery/Tribunal that handles matters of the internal forum. This part of our presentation shall offer a brief canonical study of the internal forum.

Historical/Canonical/Magisterial Evolution

The historical and canonical evolution of the internal forum is a journey from a strictly penitential context to a sophisticated exercise of the Church's power of governance. Its Biblical roots lie in the "Power of the Keys" (Mt. 16:19; Jn. 20:23)⁴ and the tension between the visible community and the law written on the heart (Rm. 2:15). While Roman law had already provided a framework for public jurisdiction (*Praetor non iudicat de internis*),⁵ it was actually the medieval period that consolidated the formal distinction between the *forum externum* and *forum internum*. In fact, it has been affirmed that the rise of the Apostolic Penitentiary as the "Tribunal of Conscience" was essential in resolving conflicts between public

⁴ "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven." See also APOSTOLIC PENITENTIARY, *Note on the Importance of the Internal Forum and the Inviolability of the Sacramental Seal* (June 1, 2019). Henceforth, as *Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary*: "In the jealous custody of the sacramental seal and the necessary discretion linked to the extra-sacramental internal forum and to the other ministerial acts shines a particular synthesis between the Petrine and Marian dimensions of the Church. With Peter, the bride of Christ [the Church] guards the ministry of the institutional "power of the keys" until the end of history; like Mary Most Holy, the Church keeps "all these things in her heart" (Lk. 2:51b), knowing that the light reverberates in every man and that, in the sacred place between personal conscience and God, it must be preserved and defended."

⁵ "Cogitationis poenam nemo patitur." ULPIAN, *De officio proconsulis* 10, in JUSTINIAN, *Digest* 48.19.18.

ecclesiastical discipline and the private realm of the soul,⁶ particularly in “occult” or secret cases.

The Council of Trent acted as a definitive magisterial turning point by dogmatically defining auricular confession and the absolute necessity of the sacramental seal. This established the internal forum as the primary *locus* for the healing of the soul, distinct from the coercive nature of external tribunals. Moving into the 20th century, the 1917 *Code of Canon Law* frequently employed the term *forum conscientiae* (can. 196),⁷ emphasising a subjective and often exceptionalist approach to the law. However, P. Erdő observes that

⁶ Cf. J. ICKX, ““Ipsa vero officii maioris Poenitentiarum institutio non reperitur”? La nascita di un tribunale della coscienza,” in M. SODI – J. ICKX (eds.), *La Penitenzieria apostolica e il Sacramento della Penitenza: Percorsi storici-giuridici-teologici e prospettive pastorali*, LEV 2009, pp. 19-44. See also C. FANTAPPÈ, “Un dicastero per il foro interno: la riforma della curia romana di San Pio X,” in M. SODI – J. ICKX (eds.), *La Penitenzieria apostolica e il Sacramento della Penitenza*, pp. 171-193.

⁷ “Potestas iurisdictionis seu regiminis quae ex divina institutione est in Ecclesia, alia est fori externi, alia fori interni, seu conscientiae, sive sacramentalis sive extra-sacramentalis.” (The power of jurisdiction or government which is in the Church by divine institution, is divided into that of the external forum and that of the internal forum, or the forum of conscience; the latter is either sacramental or extra-sacramental).

this period sometimes struggled with a lack of clarity regarding how the acts of the internal forum affected public standing.⁸

Also important are the Second Vatican Council's structural distinction between the visible and invisible Church and the moral distinction between the internal forum and the external forum. Precisely, in *Gaudium et Spes*, the Church reaffirms the words of Pius XII that the Conscience is "the most secret core and sanctuary of a man. There he is alone with God, whose voice echoes in his depths."⁹ In *Dignitatis Humanae*, she teaches that man "is not to be forced to act in a manner contrary to his conscience. Nor, on the other hand, is he to be restrained from acting in accordance with his conscience, especially in religious matters."¹⁰ This, according to the Conciliar fathers, is because "the exercise of religion, of its very nature, consists before all else in those internal, voluntary and free acts whereby man sets the course of his life directly toward God. No merely human power can either command or prohibit acts of this

⁸ Cf. P. ERDŐ, "Foro interno e foro esterno nel diritto canonico: Questioni fondamentali," in *Periodica* 95 (2006), 3-35.

⁹ ID., *Constitutio pastoralis Gaudium et spes* (7 decembris 1965), n. 16 in *AAS* 58 (1966), p. 1037. Henceforth, as *Gaudium et spes*. See also PIUS XII, *Radio Address on the Correct Formation of a Christian Conscience in the Young* (March 23, 1952) in *AAS* (1952), p. 271.

¹⁰ SACROSANCTUM CONCILIUM OECUMENICUM VATICANUM II, *Declaratio Dignitatis Humanae* (7 decembris 1965), n.13, in *AAS* 58 (1966), p. 939. Henceforth, as *Dignitatis Humanae*.

kind.”¹¹ Again, in her Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, the Church reaffirms the priest’s specific role in serving this internal realm. By remaining ever-ready to administer the Sacrament of Penance, priests act as ministers of divine consolation, providing a “sure hope for the faithful”¹² and comforting the afflicted with the very mercy they have received from God.

The post-conciliar era brought a significant clarification of this understanding during the revision of the Code. The discussions recorded in the *Communicationes*¹³ document the early efforts of the *Coetus* of consultants to resolve the often-confused relationship between the two *fora*. During these sessions, the consultants contended with the definition of *potestas regiminis* (power of governance), specifically whether the internal forum should be considered an exercise of that power or something entirely distinct. Their primary concern was to prevent the legalism of the external forum from suffocating the sacredness of the internal forum. At the end, the committee noted that the distinction between the *fora* was not based on two different powers, but on a different manner of exercising the same power: *Distinctio inter forum externum et forum internum non est in duplici potestate, sed in duplici modo exercendi*

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Presbyterorum ordinis*, n. 13.

¹³ Cf. *Communicationes* 1 (1969), p. 79.

*unam eandemque potestatem.*¹⁴ (The distinction between the external forum and the internal forum is not in a dual power, but in a dual way of exercising one and the same power).

During the revision process, a strong consensus emerged that ecclesiastical law primarily addresses the external forum for the sake of the public good (*Ius respicit forum externum ad bonum publicum communitatis*), whereas the internal forum serves the private good of the individual (*Forum internum respicit bonum privatum personae*).¹⁵ Addressing the potential conflict between an act in the internal forum and external legal reality, the committee emphasised an important boundary, namely: that an act of the internal forum is not recognised in the external forum unless specifically provided for by law (*Actus fori interni, in foro externo non agnoscuntur, nisi id specialiter caveatur*).¹⁶ This principle became the foundation for

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ Cf. *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Cf. *Ibid.* Note that many canonists, like A. D'Auria and Velasio De Paolis, have highlighted how the 1983 Code transformed the internal forum from a mere private space into a specialised exercise of the Church's power of governance, regulated by Canon 130. This modern synthesis views the internal forum as a vital "firewall" that protects the individual's relationship with God from public prejudice. Unless the law explicitly provides otherwise, acts of governance in the internal forum have no standing in the external forum, ensuring that the visible legal effects of the Church do not infringe upon the sacred space of conscience. Cf. V. DE PAOLIS – A. D'AURIA, *Le Norme Generali. Commento al*

Canon 130 of the 1983 Code. In doing so, the committee moved away from the 1917 Code's tendency to conflate the two *fora*. Instead, they established a definitive legal standard: that the internal forum is a sanctuary of mercy and conscience where the Church's authority is exercised in order to heal, yet its effects must remain occult (hidden) to safeguard the dignity and reputation of the faithful within the public life of the Church.

From the above, we can agree that there have been different definitions and considerations of the internal forum. For the purpose of this work, we have adopted the definition below:

The internal forum is the sum total of the relations between the believer and God, in which there enters the mediation of the Church, not in order to regulate directly the social consequences of these relations, but in order to provide for the supernatural welfare of the believer in relation to his friendship with God, that is, in relation to his state of grace, and therefore in relation to his final destiny, the eternal life.¹⁷

Codice di Diritto Canonico, seconda edizione, Urbaniana University Press, Roma 2014, pp. 455-458.

¹⁷ F. G. MORRISEY, "The Role of the Internal Forum," in *The Jurist* 38 (1978), p. 215. Morrisey wrote this piece during the crucial years when the 1983 Code was being drafted, providing the theological and canonical justification for the distinction of the two fora. It is one of the most precise descriptions of the internal forum's purpose in the post-Vatican II era. See also W. H. WOESTMAN, *Ecclesiastical Sanction and the Penal Process: A Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore 2009, p. 267.

The internal forum is further categorised into *sacramental and non-sacramental* (extra-sacramental) spheres. Sacramental Internal Forum is strictly limited to the Sacrament of Penance. The information shared is protected by the absolute Sacramental Seal (Can. 983 §1), which admits no exception. Non-Sacramental Internal Forum, on the other hand, occurs in Spiritual Direction or the formation of conscience outside of confession. While this forum demands a high level of professional secrecy and “natural” confidentiality, it does not carry the same ontological “seal” as confession.

The *Notes of the Apostolic Penitentiary* (2019) and scholars such as Carlos Commentz emphasise that this distinction between the sacramental and non-sacramental internal forum is necessary to protect the freedom of the faithful.¹⁸ Just as one must be honest with a legal advocate to ensure a proper defence, the soul requires a protected environment to maintain total sincerity with her Divine Advocate, the Holy Spirit (Παράκλητος) whom the Father has sent us (Jn. 14:16, 1 Jn. 2:1). Today, the Magisterium as well as canonists, like William H. Woestman, strongly defend this sacred space against modern external pressures.¹⁹ Similarly, *Pastores Dabo Vobis* moves

¹⁸ Cf. *Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary*. See also C. E. COMMENTZ, *When and How to have Recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary*, Second Edition Revised and Expanded, Midwest Theological Forum, Illinois 2025.

¹⁹ Cf. W. H. WOESTMAN, *Ecclesiastical Sanction and the Penal Process*, pp. 260-276. see also G.P. MONTINI, “La Chiesa tra l’impegno per la trasparenza e

away from seeing the internal forum as a mere legalistic court and towards seeing it as a vital pedagogical space.²⁰ Within this sphere, the Church's grace meets the most private aspects of human life, such as sins, occult impediments, and spiritual growth, etc., while always ensuring that the public good of the Church never compromises her supreme mission: *salus animarum* (can. 1752).

Part II: Sacramental Internal Forum

This section discusses the exercise of the *munus sanctificandi* through the Sacrament of Reconciliation. It focuses on the role of the confessor as both judge and physician. It concerns the faculty to hear confessions, the inviolability of the seal, and the minister's duty to adhere to the Magisterium while showing pastoral mercy to the penitent.

On the Minister and the Faculty to Hear Confessions, can. 965 states that the minister of the Sacrament of Penance must be a validly ordained priest. But Ordination alone does not grant the legal power to absolve; the priest must also possess the faculty to exercise this power over the faithful (can. 966); he must be capable to act (can.

la tutela del segreto. Alcune conclusioni al termine della giornata di studio,” in *Periodica* 107 (2018), p. 539.

²⁰ Cf. *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, n. 66. See also IOANNES PAULUS PP II, Adhortatio apostolica *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia* (2 decembris 1984), in *AAS* 77 (1984), p. 185-275. Henceforth, as *Reconciliatio et Paenitentia*.

124). This is, in fact, the reason behind the issuing of the document commonly called *Celebret* (may he celebrate). The faculties are granted either by the law itself (e.g., to the Pope, Cardinals, and Bishops) or by a competent ecclesiastical authority, such as the Local Ordinary (can. 967-969). Nevertheless, in the danger of Death (*in periculo mortis*)²¹ the Church's concern for the *salus animarum* overrides formal jurisdiction.²² And so, any priest, even one lacking the usual faculty or who has lost the clerical state, can validly and licitly absolve any penitent in this extremity (can. 976).

The confessor acts both as a judge and physician, balancing the application of divine justice with the healing of the soul (can. 978 §1). He is to make himself available for the celebration of this Sacrament. Priests with the care of souls (such as pastors) have a grave obligation to hear the confessions of the faithful who reasonably request them (can. 986). In urgent cases, *any confessor* (a priest with faculties) is obliged to hear the confession of the faithful, while *any priest* (even without faculties) can hear the confession in *periculo mortis* (can. 986 §2).

²¹ When one is in the danger of death (*in periculo mortis*), it means the person is in a state where there is a probable or serious risk that he or she will die, even if death is not necessarily immediate. Related to this notion is the state of being *in articulo mortis*, that is, at the point of death. This latter (*in articulo mortis*) refers to the final agony or the immediate threshold of passing away.

²² See also the conditions for *Ecclesia Supplet* in can. 144.

Morally speaking, the confessor is expected to be a man of prudence and discretion. He must adhere to the doctrine of the Magisterium and avoid asking imprudent or unnecessary questions, particularly regarding the identity of accomplices (can. 979). He must be a “Good Confessor.”²³ In imposing penance, he must make it “salutary and appropriate” (can. 981) considering the nature and number of the sins, and ensuring that they serve as a remedy for the penitent’s spiritual life.

There are, however, some prohibitions. A priest is not to absolve an accomplice in a sin *contra sextum Decalogi praeceptum*, except in danger of death (can. 977). Attempting to do so results in automatic excommunication (*latae sententiae*) reserved to the Holy See (can. 1378). He is not to reveal anything learned in the context of the Sacrament. The Sacramental Seal is absolute and ontological, and it admits no exceptions, regardless of the gravity of the crime or the demands of civil authorities.²⁴ It is “absolutely forbidden for a

²³ C. E. COMMENTZ, *A Good Confessor: Handbook for the Ministry of Confession*, Midwest Theological Forum, Illinois 2025. The author describes a “Good Confessor” in his relation to his ministry, duties, spirituality, ethics and morality, knowledge and awareness, etc. See also PONTIFICAL COUNCIL FOR THE FAMILY, *Vademecum for Confessors Concerning Some Aspects of the Morality of Conjugal Life* (February 12, 1997).

²⁴ Cf. G. INCITTI, “Il sigillo sacramentale e il segreto ministeriale: Tutele e violazioni tra normativa canonica e ordinamenti civili,” in *Ephemerides Iuris Canonici* 61 (2021), pp. 417-422; M. PIACENZA, “Il sigillum confessionis: un

confessor to betray in any way a penitent in words or in any manner and for any reason” (can. 983 §1).

*Quod auditur in foro Dei semper manere debet in foro Dei. Numquam dari potest ratio quamvis gravissima quae permitat manifestationem in foro humano peccatorum quae paenitens confessus fuerit Deo in foro sacramentali. Agitur ergo de “sigillo inviolabili”. Non agitur de lege humana ecclesiastica, sed divina. Non potest ergo dispensari.*²⁵

tesoro affidato alla cura della Chiesa,” in *Ephemerides Iuris Canonici* 61 (2021), pp. 391- 394; C. PAPALE, “Registrazione e divulgazione della confessione sacramentale,” in C. PAPALE (ed.), *I delitti contro il sacramento della penitenza riservati alla Congregazione per la Dottrina della Fede* (Quaderni di Ius missionale 5), Urbaniana University Press, Città del Vaticano 2016, pp. 85-102; M. RIVELLA, “Il confessore educatore: l’uso delle conoscenze acquisite dalla confessione,” in CONGREGAZIONE PER IL CLERO, *Il sacramento della penitenza. Il ministero del confessore: indicazioni canoniche e pastorali*, Libreria Editrice Vaticana, Città del Vaticano 2011, pp. 171-85. Recently, at the Annual Course on the Internal forum offered by the Apostolic Penitentiary, it was also reaffirmed that: “*Il sigillo sacramentale costituisce un particolare tipo di segreto che obbliga il confessore a non rivelare mai, per nessun motivo e senza possibilità di eccezione, il penitente e i peccati che il penitente stesso gli abbia manifestato nel sacramento della confessione.*” D. CITO, “*Il sigillo sacramentale e il segreto: Il rapporto tra foro interno e foro esterno*” (XXXVI Corso sul Foro interno 9-13 marzo 2026), p. 3.

²⁵ V. DE PAOLIS, “De delictis contra sanctitatem sacramenti Poenitentiae,” in *Periodica* 79 (1990), p. 191. (What is heard in the forum of God must always remain in the forum of God. No reason, however grave, can ever be given that would permit the manifestation of sins in the human forum which a penitent has

The Church distinguishes between a direct violation and an indirect violation of this seal. The difference lies in how the identity of the penitent and the sin are linked. A direct violation occurs when the confessor reveals both the specific sin and the specific person who committed it. A confessor who breaks this seal incurs a *latae sententiae* excommunication reserved to the Holy See (cann. 983 §1; 1386§1). After the reformation of Book VI of the Code in 2021, a third paragraph was added to can. 1386:

Without prejudice to the provisions of §§ 1 and 2, ***any person*** who by means of any ***technical device*** makes ***a recording*** of what is said ***by the priest or by the penitent in a sacramental confession, either real or simulated, or who divulges it through the means of social communication***, is to be punished according to *the gravity of the offence*, not excluding, in the case of a cleric, by ***dismissal from the clerical state*** (can. 1386§3).²⁶

confessed to God in the sacramental forum. We are dealing, therefore, with an ‘inviolable seal.’ It is not a matter of human ecclesiastical law, but of divine law. Therefore, no dispensation can be granted). The English translation is ours.

²⁶ This provision already existed, but as a decree and was later incorporated into the Code in 2021. Cf. CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Decretum de sacramenti Paenitentiae dignitate tuenda* (September 23, 1988), in *AAS* 80 (1988), p. 1367. The emphasis is ours. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* also states: “Given the delicacy and greatness of this ministry and the respect due to persons, the Church declares that every priest who hears confessions is bound under very severe penalties to keep absolute secrecy regarding the sins that his penitents have confessed to him. He can make no use

An indirect violation occurs when a priest does not name the penitent, but provides enough specific details that the penitent's identity can be deduced or the sacrament is brought into contempt. A confessor who violates this norm is to be punished (*Ferendae Sententiae*) according to the gravity of the offence (can.1386 §1). The obligation also extends to interpreters and anyone else who happens to overhear a confession (cann. 983 §2; can. 1386 §2).

In addition, a confessor is strictly prohibited from using knowledge acquired from confession to the detriment of the penitent, even if there is no danger of revelation (Can. 984). Superiors are likewise forbidden from using such information for external governance. For those in seminary formation, a superior should never use information gained in this forum to the detriment of the candidate in the external forum (cf. Can. 240 §2). Not even in the cause of sainthood are testimonies from their confessors admitted.²⁷ In Ecclesiastical trials also, a confessor is legally incapable of acting as a witness regarding

of knowledge that confession gives him about penitents' lives. This secret, which admits of no exceptions, is called the 'sacramental seal,' because what the penitent has made known to the priest remains 'sealed' by the sacrament." *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 1467.

²⁷ "Regular confessors or spiritual directors of the Servant of God must not be admitted to testify concerning anything they have come to know about the Servant of God in the forum of conscience outside sacramental confession." CONGREGATION OF THE CAUSES OF SAINTS, *Sanctorum Mater* (17 May 2007), art. 101, § 2.

information obtained through the confessional, even if the penitent requests it (Can. 1550 §2).

Part III: Non-Sacramental Internal Forum

In this part, the focus shifts to the spiritual accompaniment and the “forum of conscience” outside the confessional. It involves the guidance of souls in discerning the will of God, the pedagogical process of moral formation, and the boundaries between the spiritual director and the vocational formator. It addresses the contemporary need for privacy and the protection of the candidate’s “right to a good reputation” (Can. 220). Jorge Medina Estévez²⁸ provides a rich foundation for this, particularly regarding the delicate nature of the non-sacramental internal forum.

The expression *spiritual direction* has been and is still the most widely used and common, even if recently it has begun to be used another equivalent definition, ‘spiritual accompaniment.’ Such expressions are meant to describe the relationship between a Christian desirous of growing in fidelity to the vocation to holiness and another Christian who helps him on his journey toward the Lord. The first is the ‘directee’ or ‘spiritual son/daughter,’ while the second is the ‘director’ or ‘spiritual father/mother.’

Spiritual direction moves on the ground of conscience or the *internal forum* and should not be confused with the exercise of authority in the

²⁸ Cf. J. M. ESTÉVEZ, *La Direzione spirituale per accogliere Cristo nella propria vita*, LEV 2018.

external forum. It is inadvisable that the one who exercises authority in the external forum be simultaneously the one who assumes the responsibility for spiritual direction, since the one who directs spiritually usually possesses information belonging to the realm of the conscience of the person being directed, knowledge that must not be used to make decisions in the external forum. The mere suspicion that something belonging to the realm of intimacy may have influenced acts of governance creates a very awkward situation, and it damages the directee's trust in the spiritual director.²⁹

The internal forum is a space that facilitates a personal encounter with Christ, and the spiritual director acts as a bridge, not a barrier. Spiritual direction, thus, is an itinerary of faith³⁰ where the director must respect the mystery of God's work in the soul. The role of the director is to help the directee listen to the Master, and this requires a space of absolute trust. He is a "servant of the Bridegroom"³¹ whose task is to fade away so that the soul can speak directly to Christ.

²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 17-18. The English translation is ours.

³⁰ Cf. FRANCISCUS PP, Adhortatio apostolica *Evangelii Gaudium*, (24 novembris 2013), nn. 170-172, in *AAS* 105 (2013), pp. 1091-1092. Henceforth, as *Evangelii Gaudium*. See also ID., *Address to the Apostolic Penitentiary*, (March 28, 2014).

³¹ St. JOHN OF THE CROSS, *The Living Flame of Love*, Stanza 3, in K. KAVANAUGH – O. RODRIGUEZ (trans/eds.), *The Collected Works of St. John of the Cross*, ICS Publications, DC 1991.

Spiritual accompaniment does not substitute the conscience of faithful; it applies the “pedagogy of grace.”³² It is not about giving orders, but about educating the conscience so that the individual becomes capable of making free and responsible choices in the sight of God. The directee, however, must feel a total freedom of spirit. If, for instance, a candidate fears that their spiritual struggles will be used to deny them ordination or profession, the sincerity required for true direction vanishes. This is precisely one of the reasons for which can. 240 §2 forbids rectors from hearing the confessions of students or interfering in their spiritual direction.

While the non-sacramental internal forum lacks the sacramental seal, the “natural secret” of spiritual direction is so grave that its violation has been considered to be a “sacrilege against the dignity of the human person.”³³ If then a Spiritual director were to allow information from the non-sacramental internal forum to leak into the external forum, it would be a direct violation of can. 220, which states that: “no one is permitted to harm illegitimately the good reputation which a person possesses nor to injure the right of any person to protect his or her own privacy.” The “good name” of a

³² CONGREGATION FOR THE CLERGY, *The Gift of Priestly Vocation, Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* (8 December 2016), LEV, Vatican City 2016, n. 107; J. M. ESTÉVEZ, *La Direzione spirituale*, pp. 19-20.

³³ *Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary.*

candidate would be destroyed based on private struggles that the candidate had a right to keep private while seeking healing.

Part IV: The Apostolic Penitentiary

The Apostolic Penitentiary is often called the “Tribunal of Mercy.”³⁴ Under the Apostolic Constitution, *Praedicate Evangelium*, it is defined as a Tribunal rather than a standard administrative Dicastery.³⁵ It grants absolutions, dispensations, commutations, and validations reserved to the Holy See for the internal forum. The Apostolic Penitentiary handles matters concerning the “occult” (hidden) life of the faithful, such as the absolution of censures reserved to the Pope (e.g., profanation of the Eucharist). It has its own internal administrative structure.³⁶ The Apostolic Penitentiary

³⁴FRANCIS, *Address to Participants at the Course Organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary* (29 March 2019).

³⁵ Cf. ID., *Constitutio apostolica Praedicate Evangelium* (19 martii 2022), art. 190 -193, in *AAS* 114 (2022), pp. 438-439.

³⁶ On the Structure of the Apostolic Penitentiary, it would be sufficient to refer to what has already been said by C. E. Commentz: “The head of the Apostolic Penitentiary is the Cardinal Major Penitentiary. A Council of Prelates assists him in decisions concerning the more complex cases. Among the prelates is the Regent, who is responsible for the organization and the smooth running of the Penitentiary and who substitutes for the Major Penitentiary in his absence. A theologian and a canonist also are members of the Council of Prelates. The Officials of this Tribunal are priests who take part in the daily meetings dedicated to the study of cases. They propose solutions, which are submitted to

functions to ensure that even in the most complex or secret spiritual crises, the “door of mercy” remains open.

The Apostolic Penitentiary is one of the Apostolic Tribunals whose competency is limited to the internal forum, that is, the intimate relationship between God and the individual faithful. It grants ‘absolutions,’ ‘dispensations,’ ‘favours,’ ‘sanations,’ and ‘commutations’ (cf. *Praedicate Evangelium*, 191). The granting of indulgences also has been entrusted to the Apostolic Penitentiary (cf. *Praedicate Evangelium*, 193).³⁷

Regarding the competence of the Apostolic Penitentiary above (‘absolutions,’ ‘dispensations,’ ‘favours,’ ‘sanations,’ and ‘commutations’), it is important to note that the Apostolic Penitentiary is competent if “it is a question of occult cases and that the excommunication has not been declared in the external forum.”³⁸ For those of the external forum, then the substantive norms of the Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith have to take their course.

§1 The Congregation [Dicastery] for the Doctrine of the Faith, according to art. 52 of the Apostolic Constitution *Pastor bonus*, judges *delicts against the faith*, in accordance with art. 2 §2, and also the more *grave delicts committed against morals* and in the celebration of the

the Cardinal Major Penitentiary for his decision and signature. The Cardinal Major Penitentiary or the Regent presides over the Officials.” C. E. COMMENTZ, *When and How to have Recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary*, pp. 1-2.

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 1. See also *Id.*, *Quando e come ricorrere alla Penitenzieria Apostolica*, terza edizione riveduta e ampliata, LEV, Città del Vaticano 2026.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

sacraments and, whenever necessary, proceeds to declare or impose canonical sanctions according to the norm of both common and proper law, *with due regard for the competence of the Apostolic Penitentiary* and in keeping with the *Agendi ratio in doctrinarum examine*.³⁹

Hence, “when an excommunication is declared in the external forum, the Apostolic Penitentiary cannot intervene because it is a Tribunal of the internal forum. To obtain absolution, one must have recourse to the competent authority.”⁴⁰ It should be recalled that “if

³⁹ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF FAITH, *Norms Regarding Delicts Reserved to the Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith* (December 7, 2021), art. 1. Note also that these Norms, which were emended through the *Rescriptum ex Audientia* of October 11, 2021 and published on 7 December 2021, came into effect on December 8, 2021. Cf. DICASTERY FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, *Vademecum on Certain Points of Procedure in Treating Cases of Sexual Abuse of Minors Committed by Clerics* (June 5, 2022). See also IOANNES PAULUS PP II, *Motu proprio Sacramentorum Sanctitatis Tutela* (April 30, 2001); D. CITO, “Il sigillo sacramentale e il segreto: Il rapporto tra foro interno e foro esterno” (XXXVI Corso sul Foro interno 9-13 marzo 2026), p. 9.

⁴⁰ C. E. COMMENTZ, *When and How to have Recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary*, p. 13. However, one might ask: “If a member of the faithful has been absolved of a *latee sententiae* censure in the internal forum, what can he or she do if the delict that gave rise to that canonical penalty subsequently comes to public light and, consequently, becomes of the external forum?” The following answer has been offered: “This is rare in practice but could well occur. In such a case, the burden of proof remains *solely in the hands of the faithful absolved in the internal forum*. Only he or she has the protocol number of the Penitentiary’s rescript, with which that person could prove he or she was validly and legitimately absolved in the internal forum by the competent authority.

the Apostolic See has reserved the remission of a penalty to itself or to others, the reservation is to be strictly interpreted.”⁴¹ It is equally necessary to make the following clarifications regarding the abovementioned competence of the Apostolic Penitentiary.

Absolutions by the Apostolic Penitentiary here are to be considered as the lifting of censures (ecclesiastical penalties) like excommunication or interdict. Note that while a priest can absolve sins, certain “reserved” sins require the Penitentiary’s intervention. While many penalties can be handled by a local Bishop, five specific “sins”, which are also “delicts”, result in an automatic excommunication that only the Holy See (via the Penitentiary) can lift.

Examples: A person who has committed the reserved delict of profanation of the Eucharistic species seeks to be reconciled. The

Therefore, it would not be coherent to impose a censure on him or her again to punish such a crime since at the time the censure fulfilled its function of breaking the contumacy of this member of the faithful and led to his or her repentance. Censures, as mentioned above, are medicinal penalties, and when a member of the faithful has already repented of his or her crime, it makes no sense to impose them. The recent reform of Book VI establishes that in these cases the authority can instead impose an expiatory penalty (cf. can. 1361 §4)”. *Ibid.*, pp. 14-15.

⁴¹ Can. 1354 §3.

Penitentiary grants the absolution of the automatic excommunication (latae sententiae).

If a priest directly violates the seal of confession by revealing the identity of a penitent and their sin, he incurs a latae sententiae excommunication. To be restored to the clerical state and the sacraments, he must petition the Penitentiary for absolution.

A dispensation by the Apostolic Penitentiary can be said to be the relaxation of a purely ecclesiastical law in a particular case. It allows an individual to be exempt from a canonical obligation while the law itself remains in force for everyone else. Canonical law lists several impediments and irregularities.⁴² While Bishops handle many, some are reserved for the Pope.

⁴² An irregularity regarding the Sacred Orders (1040) is said to be “a perpetual canonical impediment that prevents a candidate from receiving Sacred Orders or a priest from licitly exercising Orders already received, unless he has been dispensed from the irregularity by the competent authority. Irregularities can arise from delicts, but they are not themselves canonical penalties. As such, a person can be absolved from a delict and/or of all of his sins and yet still remain in his irregular condition until he obtains a dispensation.” C. E. COMMENTZ, *When and How to have Recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary*, pp. 25. In addition, it should be noted that “with the Apostolic Letter *Misericordia et Misera*, the Holy Father extended to all confessors the faculty to absolve from cases of abortion, whilst the dispensation from irregularities arising from cooperation in procuring abortion – both with regard to ordination and with regard to the exercise of the ministry – remains reserved to the Apostolic

Example: *A candidate for Holy Orders who has a canonical irregularity (eg., previously attempted marriage). The Penitentiary grants a dispensation so they may validly receive Ordination.*

The Impediment of Holy Orders: A man who has been ordained a priest or deacon is bound by the impediment of sacred orders (can.1087). If he leaves the ministry and wishes to marry validly in the Church, the Penitentiary grants the dispensation from this legal bond.

Favours (*Gratiae*) are graces or special permissions granted by the Holy See that fall outside the strict right of the petitioner. In the Penitentiary, this often pertains to indulgences. Nevertheless,

Penitentiary. Furthermore, the cases reserved to the Holy See (which are the *delicta graviora*) continue to be so, for which confessors must always necessarily resort to the Apostolic Penitentiary, aware that the response is ordinarily assured within 24 hours.” ORDO FRATRUM MINORUM, “Apostolic Penitentiary: Extension of the five-year faculties” (March 10, 2025). <https://ofm.org/en/apostolic-penitentiary-extension-of-the-five-year-faculties.html>. Accessed on May 15, 2026. See also G. TONELLO, “*Censure canoniche, irregolarità e impedimenti all’attenzione del confessore*” (XXXVI Corso sul Foro interno 9-13 marzo 2026), p. 9; PONTIFICIUM CONSILIUM DE LEGUM TEXTIBUS, *Dubium circa la concessione della facoltà di assolvere dall’aborto contenuta nel n. 12 della recente lettera del Santo Padre Misericordia et misera* (29 novembre 2016), Città del Vaticano, Prot. N. 15675/2016.

beyond indulgences, favours can include the validation of spiritual exercises or the resolution of “dubious” vows.

Examples: The granting of a Plenary Indulgence to the faithful who participate in a specific Jubilee event or a special day of prayer decreed by the Pope.

Vows: A person makes a private, impulsive vow to remain celibate but later realises they have a deep vocation to marriage. The Penitentiary can grant the favour of releasing them from the obligation of that private vow to allow for a holy marriage.

Sanation (*Sanatio in Radice*) involves the “healing at the root.” It is a legal act that validates an invalid marriage without the parties having to renew their consent. It involves a dispensation from a canonical impediment and the effects flow retroactively. It is often used when a marriage is invalid, but one of the parties is unaware of the defect, or when asking them to renew consent would cause a divorce or grave scandal.

Example (Disparity of Cult): A Catholic marries a non-baptised person without the required dispensation. Years later, it is discovered the marriage was technically null. If the non-Catholic spouse refuses to participate in a new Church wedding, the Penitentiary can grant a Sanatio in Radice, making the union valid from the beginning without a new ceremony.

Commutation is the substitution of one pious work or obligation for another that is more feasible for the individual. It recognises that while an obligation exists, the person’s circumstances make the

original requirement impossible or overly burdensome. It is frequently used for people who are physically or legally unable to fulfil a specific spiritual obligation.

Example: A person has made a private vow to go on a rigorous pilgrimage but becomes physically disabled. The Penitentiary commutes the vow to a different act of charity or a specific series of prayers.

A deceased person leaves money in their will for 500 Masses to be said for their soul. However, due to inflation or the closing of the parish, the funds only cover 100 Masses. The Penitentiary can commute the original obligation, decreeing that the 100 Masses satisfy the spiritual intent of the deceased's will.

The recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary for absolutions, dispensations, favours, sanations, or/and commutations can actually be made by any member of the faithful, but a priest-confessor is always recommended. This is because, although “the obligation to recourse falls on the penitent who has been absolved in confession; however, it is more convenient for the confessor to address the Tribunal of the Apostolic Penitentiary because he will know better how to do so. Also, in this way the penitent's anonymity can be

protected.”⁴³ Cann. 1354 -1363 give indications on how to proceed in such situations.

Regarding the contents of the recourse, there are some basic information that should be included in the letter to the Apostolic Penitentiary, which should not be sent via email or any other electronic post system to avoid the risk of breaking the seal. Below are some essential notes that have already been made available.

The recourse concerning the profanation of the Consecrated Species should include: “the approximate age of the penitent and his or her psychological state, when the delict was committed, how many times it was committed, how it was committed, the motives behind the profanation, whether the delict was committed by one person or more than one, whether the penitent committed the delict at the instigation of a sect and, if so, whether he or she has broken all ties with it.”⁴⁴

Similarly, a recourse about the direct violation of the *Sigillum Confessionis* should include: “the approximate age of the penitent, when the delict was committed, how many times it was committed, the circumstances involved, whether the delict was committed deliberately or was more an act of inadvertence, whether the person

⁴³ C. E. COMMENTZ, *When and How to have Recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary*, p. 16.

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 18.

affected by the violation suffered damages, and whether the penitent is a confessor who is normally prudent in this matter.”⁴⁵

For a recourse pertaining to the absolution of one’s accomplice, in a sin *contra sextum*, the petitioner should include: “the approximate age of the penitent, the approximate age of the accomplice, the state in life of the accomplice: single, married, religious, priest, how many times the accomplice was absolved, the last time the accomplice was absolved, whether the penitent has ended the sinful relationship with the accomplice, whether the penitent is living a life worthy of his priestly calling: daily celebration of Holy Mass, fidelity to the Liturgy of the Hours, etc.”⁴⁶

There are also formulas provided for the Absolution from Censures and Dispensation from Irregularities. They are found in Appendix 1 of the *Ordo Poenitentiae*. C. E. Commentz makes them even more accessible for ministers in his manual:

For Absolution from Censures

By the power granted to me, I absolve you from the bond of excommunication (or suspension or interdict). In the name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit.

The penitent answers: Amen.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, pp. 18-19.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 19-20. See also W. H. WOESTMAN, *Ecclesiastical Sanction and the Penal Process*, p. 274.

For Dispensation from Irregularity

By the power granted to me, I dispense you from the irregularity which you have incurred. In the name of the Father and of the Son ✠ and of the Holy Spirit.

The penitent answers: Amen.⁴⁷

The Office of the Diocesan Penitentiary

The governance of the internal forum in a diocese is principally organised through the established office of the Diocesan Penitentiary (can. 508) and the Extraordinary Missionaries of Mercy commissioned by Pope Francis for the Jubilee year of Mercy and subsequently extended indefinitely.⁴⁸ These two offices may seem conflicting at first glance, especially if the individuals exercising them are distinct. The office of the Extraordinary Missionary of Mercy, given its apostolic mandate, may also seem conflicting with

⁴⁷ C. E. COMMENTZ, *When and How to have Recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary*, p. 16. The author further affirms that it is also possible for the confessor to use the usual formula of absolution with the intention of absolving from the censures or irregularity. For the samples of how to make the recourse, see *Ibid.*, pp. 51-71.

⁴⁸ Cf. FRANCISCUS, PP., *Litterae Apostolicae Misericordia et Misera* (20 Novembris 2016), n. 9, in *AAS* 108 (2016), pp. 1311-132. Henceforth, as *Misericordia et Misera*. See also DICASTERIUM DE LEGUM TEXTIBUS, *Circa la concessione della facoltà di assolvere dall'aborto nel n. 12 della lettera Misericordia et misera* (29 novembre 2016), Prot. N. 15675/2016.

the office of the Apostolic Penitentiary, but each of them is distinct and with their respective responsibilities.

By virtue of office, the canon penitentiary of a cathedral church and of a collegial church has the ordinary faculty, which he cannot delegate to others, of *absolving in the sacramental forum* outsiders within the diocese and members of the diocese even outside the territory of the diocese from *undeclared latae sententiae* censures *not reserved to the Apostolic See*.

§2. Where there is no chapter, the diocesan bishop is to appoint a priest to fulfil the same function.⁴⁹

The Canon Penitentiary (*Paenitentiaris Canonici*) is a priest appointed to a cathedral or collegial church who possesses, by virtue of his office, the ordinary faculty to absolve in the sacramental forum undeclared *latae sententiae* censures that are not reserved to the Apostolic See (can.508 §1). His competency extends to all members of the diocese, even when they are outside its territory, as well as to outsiders (*peregrini*) currently present within the diocese. Equiparated to this office are the Chaplains of hospitals, prisons, and on sea journeys (can. 566 §2).⁵⁰ This power is non-delegable and serves as a local Tribunal of mercy for standard canonical penalties, such as those related to procured abortion (can.1397 §2).

⁴⁹ Can. 508. The emphasis is ours.

⁵⁰ Cf. G. TONELLO, “*Censure canoniche, irregolarità e impedimenti all’attenzione del confessore*,” p. 9.

It is important that the priest that is appointed to such an important office may be an expert of Theology and Canon Law with an exemplary lifestyle. He has to be prudent, accessible and available. Because of the nature of this office and the need to protect the Seal of confession, it is not recommended to assign the judicial vicar, or vicar general or other episcopal vicars to this office since they are constantly involved in the exercise of the *potestas regiminis* in the external forum. In fact, when a confessor confronts a penitent in the internal forum who has incurred a censure reserved to the Apostolic See or to the Local Ordinary, he is faced with three options⁵¹ none of which involves any of the episcopal vicars.

⁵¹ “When a censure is not public knowledge, the confessor can do three things, choosing the one he deems most beneficial for the spiritual well-being of the penitent:

a. When the censure is reserved to the local Ordinary, the confessor can tell the penitent that if he or she so desires, the penitent can go to Confession to the ***Diocesan Penitentiary, or its equivalent***, who has the necessary faculties to remit the censure. If the penitent does not want to go to the Diocesan Penitentiary, the confessor can resolve the problem by choosing one of these options.

b. The confessor informs the penitent that, as the confessor, he – in a discreet manner and without revealing names – will ***ask authorization permitting him to remit the censure***. The penitent must return to receive remission of the censure and absolution of his or her sins and to receive his or her penance, which would be imposed by the same authority that granted the authorization to the confessor. In this case, the confessor should contact the competent authority to

It would be praiseworthy if, occasionally, the Diocesan Penitentiary could enlighten the clergy of these delicate matters. Similarly, a brief workshop or seminar organised by this very important office for the candidates for ordination or newly ordained prior to the reception of their faculties could prove essential in this regard. This could be done in collaboration with the missionaries of mercy where different persons occupy these offices.

which the censure is reserved as soon as possible and ask authorization to remit the censure and also receive the penance that should be imposed. ***For the six cases mentioned above that are reserved to the Apostolic See, the confessor should contact the Apostolic Penitentiary.***

c. When it is difficult for a penitent to remain in a state of grave sin and not receive the Sacraments for an extended time while his or her confessor awaits permission to absolve him or her, and if the penitent is truly sorry for the delict committed, ***the confessor can, by virtue of can. 1357 of the Code of Canon Law, remit the censure from the penitent and absolve the penitent his or her sins.*** The confessor should instruct the penitent to return after several weeks at a mutually convenient time to receive the penance. ***In this case, within thirty days the confessor must refer the case to and receive the penance from the competent authority to which the censure is reserved.*** The second paragraph of the same canon establishes that the obligation to recourse falls on the penitent who has been absolved in confession; however, it is more convenient for the confessor to address the Tribunal of the Apostolic Penitentiary because he will know better how to do so. Also, in this way the penitent's anonymity can be protected. If the obligation to recourse is culpably breached within one month, the penalty is incurred again (cf. can. 1357 § 2).” C. E. COMMENTZ, *When and How to have Recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary*, p. 15-16.

The Missionaries of Mercy

During the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy, some priests were commissioned directly by Pope Francis as Missionaries of Mercy. This commission later assumed a permanent nature in the Church.⁵² The primary competency of the Missionaries of Mercy consists in the authority to absolve sins reserved to the Apostolic See, which normally require recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary. This faculty must be understood as an “Extra-ordinary faculty.”⁵³

⁵² “La figura de los misioneros de la misericordia, concebida inicialmente como una medida extraordinaria y temporal para el Jubileo, se ha visto consolidada con un mandato prorrogado de manera indefinida. Esta decisión, formalizada en la carta apostólica *Misericordia et misera*, supone una alteración significativa en el ejercicio de la potestad de régimen, al permitir que la facultad de absolver pecados reservados a la Sede Apostólica permanezca accesible de forma estable y capilar en las iglesias locales.” F. PÉREZ-MADRID, *Religión y derechos fundamentales: nuevos desafíos jurídicos*, Dykinson, Madrid 2026.

⁵³ Cf. G. TONELLO, “Censure canoniche, irregolarità e impedimenti all’attenzione del confessore,” p. 9: “Accanto ai Penitenzieri delle quattro Basiliche Papali e ai sacerdoti della Penitenzieria Apostolica, si aggiungono tutti i Missionari della Misericordia - designati in occasione dell’Anno Giubilare della Misericordia (2015-2016) e mantenuti in attività per disposizione pontificia -, ai quali il Santo Padre ha conferito facoltà straordinarie che includono l’assoluzione da censure riservate previste per alcuni delitti. Sono tutti presbiteri inviati con mandato pontificio e stabilizzati come servizio permanente da *Misericordia et misera* (n. 9), in sostanza confessori con facoltà peculiari nel foro interno, utili quando entrano in gioco censure riservate alla Sede Apostolica.”

This office helps in the decentralisation of the exercise of the power of governance. There have been various modifications of the administrative interventions of the Roman curia on the documents of the particular church and this reflects the “sound decentralisation” for which Pope Francis advocated.⁵⁴ It cuts across the question of translation of liturgical texts, *confirmatio* of the *Ratio Nationalis*, erection of seminaries, etc.⁵⁵ The Office of the Missionary of Mercy might be of great assistance to the Clergy and faithful living and working in developing countries who may need to spend almost double of their monthly income in order to be able to mail the recourse (*sub secreto*) to the Apostolic Penitentiary in the Vatican.

However, the indefinite nature of the office of the Missionary of Mercy poses certain questions. First, what is the guarantee for its continuity? In other words, when the current group of the missionaries pass away, when shall there be another commissioning of the Missionaries of Mercy? Second, if the missionaries of mercy

⁵⁴ Cf. *Evangelii Gaudium*, nn. 16, 32.

⁵⁵ Cf. FRANCISCUS PP., *Litterae apostolicae motu proprio datae Competentias quasdam decernere* (11 februarii 2022), art. 2, in *AAS* 114 (2022), p. 291; ID., *Litterae Apostolicae Magnum Principium* (September 3, 2017), in *AAS* 109 (2017), pp. 967-970; G. INCITTI, “*Magnum Principium*: For a Better Mutual Collaboration between the Roman Curia and Bishops’ Conferences,” in *Notitiae* 53 (2017) 2, pp. 128-130; A. ROCHE, “A Key to reading the motu proprio *Magnum Principium*,” in *Notitiae* 53 (2017)², p. 48; *Communicationes*, 38 (2006), pp. 10-17.

are already there in the dioceses, is there still a need for the recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary given that both offices have an apostolic mandate? While the first is not within our powers to answer, the answer to the second question lies in the distinction between sacramental ministry (what a priest does in a confessional) and legal/administrative governance (what a tribunal does for the whole Church). In other words, a Missionary of Mercy is a pastor; the Apostolic Penitentiary is a body of expert canonists and theologians. Missionaries of Mercy are primarily commissioned for the sacramental forum (the Confessional). The Apostolic Penitentiary, however, handles also the non-sacramental internal forum. For instance, *a member of the faithful needs a dispensation from a private vow or a secret impediment to marriage that they do not want to bring up in confession, or that requires a written legal document (a rescript) to prove its validity later*. The Apostolic Penitentiary issues these official, albeit secret, documents.

The Missionary of Mercy is essentially an extension of the Apostolic Penitentiary's power. Their faculties are delegated and can be specific or temporary.⁵⁶ While the Missionaries of Mercy have the power to absolve the sin and the censure in the moment of

⁵⁶ One may imagine the Missionaries of Mercy as "Emergency Medics" stationed throughout the world; they can perform life-saving spiritual "surgery" (absolution of reserved sins) immediately. The Apostolic Penitentiary, on the other hand, is the "Specialist Research Hospital" which manages the medics, handles the most rare and complex diseases (legal cases), issues the official medical records (rescripts), and sets the protocols for everyone else to follow.

confession, the competence of the Apostolic Penitentiary is much broader including also the granting of indulgences of which the Missionaries of Mercy are not competent.

Part V: *Animadversiones in Casibus Practicis* *(Observations on Practical Cases)*

This section presents a few cases that demonstrate not just the importance, but the urgency of the formation in the internal forum in our Major Seminaries. It must be understood that our intent here is not to declare any judgment on the authors of the social media posts used for this study; rather, we seek to reaffirm the sanctity of the internal forum. Before presenting these cases, it would be important to call to mind the exhortation of the Apostolic Penitentiary:

In a time of mass communication, in which all information comes ‘burned’ and with it, unfortunately, also a part of people’s lives, it is necessary to re-learn the power of the word, its constructive power, but also its own destructive potential; we must be vigilant so that the sacramental seal never becomes violated by anyone and the necessary confidentiality connected to the exercise of the ecclesial ministry is always jealously guarded, having truth and only the integral good of people as its horizon [ultimate goal].⁵⁷

⁵⁷ *Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary*. See also H. O. ODENORE, “Seminary Formation and Modern Means of Communication: Issues and Possibilities,” in G. OGBENIKA – F. IKHIANOSIME (eds.), *Formation of the Human Person in the 21st Century: Proceedings of the 2nd International Conference*,

Some Priests from African countries made the following post on social media (Facebook).

POST 1

The next penitent on the queue: Sorry Father, I have not come to confess any sin. I have not eaten since yesterday and I'm running short of blood. If you can give me any amount of money for food and blood tonic.

Me: *Were you not the one I met two months ago at another parish with the same request? I still recognise your face. What are you doing here? You were offered a job few months ago but you abandoned it and returned to begging from one parish to another. Be careful!* 😞

POST 2

Today was my free day. I had planned to rest, to simply breathe and relax. But as I lay in my room, a flood of unnecessary, distracting thoughts crept in. Temptation often strikes when we're idle — and instead of entertaining it, I chose a different path. I stood up, put on my alb and

Seminary of All Saints, Uhiele-Ekpoma, Ekpoma Review, Edo State 2021, pp. 487- 503; L. N. NWANKWO, "The Pursuit of Silence the Challenge of Seminary Formation," in *Ministerium* 11 (2025), pp. 66-75; R. SARAH, *The Power of Silence: Against the Dictatorship of Noise*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco 2017.

draped my purple stole — garments of mercy and service
— and made my way to the confessional.

It was late afternoon. The chapel was quiet. I entered, sat down, and began to meditate. The red light turned on. I was there, simply waiting, like the father of the prodigal son — watching, praying, hoping. After some time in prayer, I pulled out my rosary and began to recite each bead slowly, offering it for whoever might need grace that day.

Then suddenly — a soft, trembling voice broke the silence: *‘Forgive me, Father... this is my first confession in seven years.’ My heart skipped. Seven years. Seven years of silence, of distance, of wounds. And now... healing. Forgiveness. Grace.* At that moment, I knew my waiting was not in vain. All the hours of silence, all the quiet prayers — it was for this soul. Heaven must be rejoicing. I could almost hear the angels throw a banquet. This... this was one of the most beautiful moments I’ve experienced as a priest — to be a witness, a bridge, a channel of God’s mercy to a soul who found the courage to return home.

POST 3

You will come to confession and tell me: Father, my son Chidiebere is not really from my husband, and you expect me to tell you to pray one Our Father and two Hail Mary and I will absolve you? Stop Using Confession to Cover

Infidelity. Before You Kneel Before a Priest, Kneel Before the Person You Cheated On. One of the main reasons many people never experience true repentance is because they frequently receive easy penance for their sins.

Penance sometimes is meant to teach the soul a lovely lesson, a lesson that changes behaviour. For example: if you confess that you stole 10,000 naira and your penance is to return it, next time you see 10,000 naira, you won't steal it. But if your penance is only to say one Our Father and two Hail Marys, you may leave the confessional and steal again. It works the same way with infidelity. If a woman cheats on her husband, and her penance is to confess to him, she will never cheat again. If a man cheats on his wife, and his penance is to confess to her, he will never cheat again. I know some people will say, "Father, you want to break homes." The truth is, a home that is not built on trust and faithfulness is already spiritually broken.

So, listen carefully: If your child does not belong to your husband, do not come to the confessional first. Go to your husband. Go and tell him the truth. Confess your unfaithfulness to the person you actually wounded. The first person your sin touched is not the priest (God). It is your husband or wife.

Many people want spiritual forgiveness without taking human responsibility. But real repentance never just tears

in front of a priest. Real repentance is courage in front of the person you hurt. A true confession must include a real desire to repair what you destroyed. If you hide the truth from your spouse and only kneel before a priest, you are not being healed, you are only relieved of guilt. Confessional Grace does not cancel responsibility. *When you come to me and say: Father, my child belongs to another man, not my husband. My question will be: Have you gone back to your husband to ask for his forgiveness?* True conversion moves in two directions: toward God and toward the person you wounded.

Sometimes, your penance must be practical. *Not just: say three Hail Marys. But, go home and tell the truth. Ask for forgiveness.* Practical sins require practical steps of healing. *The confessional is not a hiding place of Sins. It is a place of truth.* God forgives you in confession, but His grace will always push you toward restitution, reconciliation, and responsibility. If your repentance does not lead you back to the person you hurt, then you have not yet understood what repentance really means. Confession without responsibility is incomplete. A marriage cannot heal on hidden lies. Truth may hurt, but deceit destroys completely. A home built on honesty has a chance to survive. A home built on secrets is already dying. A home built on hidden children and lies is spiritually broken before it even begins. If you want true

freedom from sin, be courageous enough to face the people you've hurt. *So, if you see me in the confessional and you don't want a practical penance, just avoid me. Go to a priest who will give you one Our Father and one Hail Mary.*

These are just a few cases that are in the various social media channels. Most times, it is not about a direct violation of the Sacramental Seal; it is simply a question of prudence and, maybe ignorance. A newly ordained priest could be so zealous about how the Lord heals many souls through him in the Sacramental internal forum that he forgets that it is actually Jesus who heals and not the minister. He could easily forget that “the defence of the sacramental seal by the confessor, and if necessary to the shedding of blood (*usque ad sanguinis effusionem*) represents not only an act of dutiful ‘loyalty’ towards the penitent, but much more: a necessary testimony – a ‘martyrdom’ – made directly to the uniqueness and salvific universality of Christ and of the Church.”⁵⁸ *The greatest damage can arise even from the best intention*; the pastoral intention of the priest does not justify the violation of the Seal of Confession.

Furthermore, that name of the penitent is not mentioned or substituted is not an excuse for a priest to carelessly throw into the public domain personal information that was confidentially told to him. Indeed, “spiritual direction belongs to the internal extra-

⁵⁸ *Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary*. See also CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Declaration *Dominus Iesus* (6 August 2000).

sacramental forum, in which the faithful individual entrusts his own path of conversion and sanctification to a specific priest, consecrated, or lay person. ... Also, this particular area, therefore, asks for some certain secrecy “outside”, inherent to the content of spiritual discussions and deriving from the right of each person to respect his own privacy (cf. Can. 220 CIC).”⁵⁹ The Apostolic Penitentiary warns against any imprudent attitude in this regard, especially in our present-day society.

In the face of all this, the Apostolic Penitentiary has considered it appropriate to intervene, with this ‘Note’ to reaffirm the importance and promote a better understanding of those concepts, typical of ecclesial and social communications, that today seem more alien to public opinion and sometimes to civil juridical systems: the sacramental seal, the confidentiality in the extra-sacramental internal forum, the professional secrecy, the criteria and real limits of all other communications.⁶⁰

It is therefore important to reflect on the possible ways of integrating this reality into the initial formation of candidates for the priesthood and also in the curriculum of the ongoing formation of the clergy. This would remind the ministers of this very important Sacrament that during the sacramental celebration of reconciliation “the priest, in fact, becomes aware of the sins of the penitent “*non ut homo, sed ut Deus*” – not as man, but as God knows it, so much so that he

⁵⁹ *Note of the Apostolic Penitentiary.*

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

simply “does not know” what he was told in confession, because he did not listen as a man, but, precisely, in the Name of God. The confessor could, therefore, also, “swear”, without any prejudice to one’s conscience, to “not know” what he knows only as a minister of God.”⁶¹ The next section proposes the establishment of a separate semestral course on the internal forum in the *Ratio studiorum* of our seminaries.

Part VI: The Place of the Internal Forum Formation in the *Ratio Nationalis*

The competent authority for the preparation, approval and publication of the National Programme of Seminary Formation is the Episcopal Conference (can. 242 §1).⁶² Although some Episcopal Conferences, after the publication of the 2016 *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, are yet to publish the *Ratio Nationalis*, this work proposes the integration of a course on the Internal forum in the *iter* of seminary formation.

The absence of a valid *Ratio Nationalis* can be detrimental to seminary formation. Some of the challenges that such an absence may produce have already been presented in a different study⁶³

⁶¹ *Ibid.* See also THOMAS AQUINAS, *Summa Theologiae*, Suppl., 11, 1, ad 2.

⁶² Cf. *Optatam totius*, n. 1. *The Gift of Priestly Vocation*, n. 4.

⁶³ E. I. UMANAH, *The Seminary, Time and Place of Formation: Challenges of the Church in Nigeria*, Thesis ad Doctoratum in Iure Canonico, Pontificia Universitas Urbaniana, Roma 2025. See also B. EZULIKE, “Disconnect

wherein the *iter* for the preparation, approval, *confirmatio*, and promulgation was adequately exposed. Worthy of note is the fact that the *Ratio Nationalis* no longer requires the *approbatio* (approval) of the Apostolic See, but rather its *confirmatio*.⁶⁴ In sum:

Between Seminary Formation and the Priestly Life and Ministry: The Missing Link”, in *Bigard Theological Studies* 43 (2023), pp. 58-59; I. AMADASU, “Promoting a Seminary Formation that is Continuous with the Priestly Ministry,” in G. OGBENIKA – F. IKHIANOSIME (eds.), *Formation of the Human Person in the 21st Century*, pp. 207- 218; E. N. OMOROGBE, “Formation to the Priesthood: Forming the Formators,” in G. OGBENIKA – F. IKHIANOSIME (eds.), *Formation of the Human Person in the 21st Century*, pp. 194-206.

⁶⁴ Cf. FRANCISCUS, PP., *Litterae Apostolicae Competentias quasdam decernere* (11 Februarii 2022), art. 2, in *AAS* 114 (2022), p. 291. It has been observed that “the word “*recognitio*” comes from the verb “*recognoscĕre*” which means “to revise.” *Recognitio*, thus, can be translated as “revision.” It is a *sui generis* act of the Apostolic See which seeks to safeguard the formal and substantial juridical correctness of those acts that require the said *recognitio* and the common action of the Church in them. It is an attentive examination and detailed revision of the proposed texts of the Episcopal Conference in order to judge their legitimacy and congruence with universal canonical or liturgical norms that the Bishops’ Conferences wish to promulgate or publish. ... *Confirmatio* comes from the verb “confirmare” which means “to confirm.” Hence, *confirmatio* can be translated as “confirmation.” It is an authoritative act through which the competent Dicastery ratifies the approval of the episcopal conference. ... Evidently, while the *approbatio* rests within the powers of the Episcopal Conferences, *Recognitio* and *confirmatio*, albeit different concepts,

In preparing the new *Ratio Nationalis*, the present research recommends some preliminary stages of consultation, which reflect the synodal path of the Church. Thus, through the Episcopal Commission for Seminaries, the CBCN, at the general consultation stage, may be assisted by Seminary formators, who, having consulted with the lay faithful and the seminarians themselves, shall prepare the first draft to the Episcopal Commission for Seminaries, followed by the ultimate revision by the Seminary formators. Here, the present work recommends consultation with experts in fields like canon law, theology, safeguarding, psychology, etc. to ensure its congruency before the eventual submission to the Administrative Board of the CBCN for eventual observations and revision, followed by the voting at the Plenary. Being a General Legislative Decree (cf. cann. 29; 455), a two-third majority of members with deliberative vote at the plenary would need to be obtained prior to the request for the *confirmatio* of the Dicastery for Evangelisation and (cf. cann. 242§1), the eventual *vacatio legis* (cf. cann. 8; 455§3) and Promulgation of the *Ratio Nationalis ad normam iuris* (cann. 7; 8§2; 455§§2,3).⁶⁵

both characterise the two particular modes of intervention of the Apostolic See in the preparation of liturgical books.” E. I. UMANAH, *The Seminary, Time and Place of Formation*, pp. 174-177. See also PONTIFICIUM CONSILIIUM DE LEGUM TEXTIBUS INTERPRETANDIS, Nota *La natura giuridica e l'estensione della 'recognitio' della Santa Sede* (28 aprile 2006), in *Communicationes*, 38 (2006), pp. 10-17; CONGREGATIO PRO EPISCOPIS, *Lettera circolare ai Presidenti delle Conferenze Episcopali circa la revisione dei loro Statuti* (13 maggio 1999-21 giugno 1999), in *AAS* 91 (1999), pp. 996-999; A. ROCHE, “A Key to reading the motu proprio *Magnum Principium*”, in *Notitiae* 53 (2017)², p. 48; G. INCITTI, “*Magnum Principium*: For a Better Mutual Collaboration between the Roman Curia and Bishops’ Conferences”, p. 119.

⁶⁵ E. I. UMANAH, *The Seminary, Time and Place of Formation*, pp. 211. See also *The Gift of Priestly Vocation*, n. 8; P. BANDUŁA, “The Concept and

The confirmatory act of the Apostolic See, although a *condicio iuris*, does not transform the *Ratio Nationalis* into a pontifical document.⁶⁶ Instead, the *Ratio Nationalis*, without prejudice to its validity and binding force, remains a general legislative decree of the Episcopal Conference even after the *confirmatio* of the Apostolic See.

Having established the juridic nature of the *Ratio Nationalis* which is to include the *Ratio Studiorum* (can. 247), we shall now draw out a *proposed outline* for a semestral course on the Internal Forum in the final year of the initial formation. This outline could also fit into the Priestly Ongoing Formation Outline⁶⁷ of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria.

Competences of the Conference of Bishops”, in *Biuletyn Stowarzyszenia Absolwentów i Przyjaciół Wydziału Prawa Katolickiego Uniwersytetu Lubelskiego*, 17 (2020) 2, p. 17; G. GHIRLANDA, *Chiesa Universale e Chiesa Particolare (Cann. 330-572)*, p. 735. See also D. MOGAVERO, “Conferenze Episcopali: loro statuto”, in GRUPPO ITALIANO DOCENTI DI DIRITTO (ed.), *Chiese particolari e Chiesa universale*, Glossa, Milano 2003, pp. 83-102; C. C. ANYANWU, *The Relationship between Universal Law and Particular Law: An Analysis of the Particular Complementary Norms of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN)*, St. Paul University, Ottawa 2008, pp. 89-90.

⁶⁶ Cf. E. I. UMANAH, *The Seminary, Time and Place of Formation*, pp. 178. See also J. BEAL – J. CORIDEN – T. GREEN (eds.), (eds.), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, p. 599. See also J. MARTÍN DE AGAR – L. NAVARRO, *Legislazione delle Conferenze episcopali complementare al CIC*, p. 23.

⁶⁷ Cf. CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, *Priestly Ongoing Formation Outline*, CSN, Abuja 2012. See also ID., *I Chose You: The Nigerian*

6.1 Proposed Course Content on the Internal Forum in Nigerian Seminaries

Course Title: Formation for the Internal Forum

The Instructor: The instructor is expected to be properly formed in the Internal forum, preferably one who has participated at the annual course of the Apostolic Penitentiary. He or she should be an expert in Canon Law and Theology.

Course Description: This course equips candidates for the Sacred Orders to understand and rightly exercise the internal forum, both sacramental and non-sacramental, in future priestly ministry. It integrates Canon Law, Moral Theology, Sacramental Theology, Spiritual Direction, and Pastoral prudence, with special attention to formation of conscience, confidentiality, and the salvation of souls. It also prepares the future minister of the Sacrament of Reconciliation on when and how to have recourse to the Apostolic Penitentiary and the Diocesan Penitentiary.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, the candidates for the Sacred Orders are expected to:

1. Distinguish the external and internal forum, and sacramental vs. non-sacramental internal forum.

Priest in the Third Millennium, CSN, Abuja 2004; ID., *Guidelines on Priestly Life and Ministry in Nigeria*, CSN, Abuja; ID., *Called to Love: Ethical Standards for Clergy and Seminarians in Nigeria*, CSN, Abuja 2006. This document (*Called to Love*) was revised in 2012.

2. Apply relevant canons (c. 960–964, 983–984, 1388, 1398, etc.) to pastoral cases.
3. Recognise the inviolability of the sacramental seal and its pastoral implications.
4. Recognise the natural secrecy expected of the extra-sacramental internal forum and its importance.
5. Know the reserved sins, as well as the irregularities and how to act when confronted with such situations.
6. Learn the Ethics of a Good Confessor and Spiritual Director.

Course Structure: 14 Weeks

I Canonical and Theological Foundations (Weeks 1-3)

1. The Two Fora: Distinguishing the external forum from the internal forum (can. 130); Sacramental vs. Non-Sacramental (spiritual direction) settings.
2. The Minister of the Sacrament of Penance and the Faculty: Requirements for the valid and licit exercise of the faculty to hear confessions (cann. 966–976).
3. The Identity of the Confessor as Judge and Physician (can. 978): Balancing Truth (Conscience) with Pastoral Charity (Mercy).

II The Sacramental Seal and Absolute Confidentiality (Weeks 4-7)

1. *Sigillum Confessionis*: Total protection of the penitent (can. 983 §1); obligations of confessors and interpreters; avoiding the use of confessional knowledge to the detriment of the penitent (can. 984). *Quod auditur in foro Dei semper manere debet in foro Dei*.

2. Canonical Delicts connected to the Sacrament of Penance: Solicitation (can. 1385), Direct and Indirect Violations of the Seal (can. 1386 § 1), as well as violation of Secrecy on the part of Interpreters, and the others mentioned in can. 983 § 2 (can. 1386 § 2), Recording and Divulgence via Social communication (can. 1386 § 3), Absolution of Accomplice (cann. 977; 1384), Absolution without Faculties (can. 1379 § 1), Making use of knowledge acquired from confession to the detriment of the penitent (can. 984 §1), False Malicious Accusation of Solicitation (cann. 982; 1390 §1), etc.
3. Extra-Sacramental Secrecy: Natural and Professional Secrecy in Spiritual Direction, *Secretum Pontificium* (can. 1336 §§ 2-4; can. 1371 § 4), Right to Good Name (can. 220), Maintaining the boundary between Internal Forum and seminary Governance (can. 240; can. 984 §2; can. 985), etc.

III: *Delicta Reservata*, *Delicta Graviora*, and the Competent Authorities (Weeks 8-11)

1. Delicts: *Delicta Graviora* and *Delicta Reservata*; Dicastery for the Doctrine of the Faith (DDF) in the External Forum and the Apostolic Penitentiary in the Internal Forum; Special faculties of the Apostolic Penitentiary; Office of the Diocesan Penitentiary (can. 508).
2. Irregularities and Impediments: Identifying impediments to Sacred Orders (cann. 1040-1049).
3. Recourse to the Holy See: The mechanics of lifting *latae sententiae* censures in the Internal Forum; Samples of Confidential Recourse (*sub secreto*) to the Apostolic Penitentiary (can. 1357).

IV: Ethics, Safeguarding and Practice (Weeks 12-14)

1. Ethics of the Internal forum
2. Safeguarding Policies of the Bishops' Conference.
3. Practicum and Workshop

V. Assessment

References: The website of the Apostolic Penitentiary and some selected Authors as well the related Pontifical documents.

Conclusion

The formation of future priests for the internal forum is not merely an academic exercise; it is a vital pastoral necessity that directly impacts the *salus animarum* which is the *suprema lex* in the Church (can. 1752). As demonstrated by recent trends, especially the imprudent “impulse to share” confidential spiritual experiences on social media, there is an urgent need to re-educate ministers on the constructive power and destructive potential of their words. Since the priest acts *in persona Christi Capitis*, he must safeguard the sanctuary of the conscience and recognise that the pastoral care of souls requires absolute discretion. If a pastor is unable to maintain this privacy, it would be difficult, if not impossible, to trust him further with the deep secrets of the souls they are called to serve.

To address these contemporary challenges effectively, the present work advocates for the structural integration of a dedicated, separate course within the *Ratio Studiorum* of the *Ratio Nationalis* titled, *Formation for the Internal Forum*. Without prejudice to related courses such as Canon Law, Moral Theology, Sacramental Theology, etc, this course promises to be practical and engaging. A

specialised, semestral curriculum will equip future pastors with the tools and character to distinguish between the external and internal fora, as well as the unique boundaries separating sacramental and non-sacramental internal forum. Furthermore, such formation will clarify the proper, practical channels for resolving complex or secret spiritual crises, helping future confessors appreciate more the respective presence, as well as, the canonical and pastoral competencies of the offices of the Diocesan Penitentiary, the Missionaries of Mercy, and the Apostolic Penitentiary. It would also be important to have newly appointed Diocesan Penitentiary attend the annual course of the Apostolic Penitentiary on the internal forum. Better still, it would a noble idea to have an annual course on the internal forum organised by the Catholic Secretariat for the same purpose.

The distinction of the two fora within the seminary is itself educative and formative. Mercy is contagious! The real internal forum should be experienced first in the seminary, with a guaranteed confidentiality and a clear separation of the two fora. This Climate of trust and secrecy⁶⁸ of the internal formation during seminary

⁶⁸ Cf. *The Gift of Priestly Vocation*, nn. 41-43. Worthy of affirmation too is what has been noted by other scholars: “*A confessare s’impara da chi sa e ama confessare. Ogni altra tecnica senza questo esempio è destinata a fallire. I sacerdoti confessori ben formati costituiscono una delle condizioni fondamentali per la piena rinascita spirituale di tutti i Cristiani.*” R. SELEJDAK, “La formazione dei confessori nei Seminari e negli Istituti di formazione sacerdotale,” in M. SODI – J. ICKX (eds.), *La Penitenzieria apostolica e il Sacramento della Penitenza*, p. 294.

formation is necessary for the formation of future ministers capable of upholding the decorum of the internal forum.

Finally, we all have a duty to protect the internal forum from the publicity of the external world. This is truly a direct defence of the dignity of the human person. As Pope Francis warned, conflating or violating these spheres is a grave sin against the faithful who vulnerably open their souls to the Church. In his words:

The internal forum is an internal forum, and it cannot go ‘outside.’ And I say this because I have noticed that some groups in the Church, representatives, superiors – let us put it this way – blend the two things and take from the internal forum to make decisions in the external one, and vice versa. Please, this is a sin! It is a sin against the dignity of the person who trusts the priest, and who expresses his or her own situation to ask for forgiveness, and then this is used to organise matters for a group or a movement ... But the internal forum is an internal forum. And it is a sacred thing. I wanted to say this because I am concerned about this.⁶⁹

Quod auditur in foro Dei semper manere debet in foro Dei. May the confessional never be a place of exposure and vainglory, but a true Sanctuary or House of Divine Mercy,⁷⁰ reconciliation, and profound spiritual healing. Amen.

⁶⁹ FRANCIS, *Address to Participants at the Course Organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary* (29 March 2019).

⁷⁰ Cf. LEO XIV, *Address to Participants at the XXXVI Course Organised by the Apostolic Penitentiary* (13 March 2019).

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Studies & Perspectives

Theological Meaning of the "Sealing of the Holy Spirit" in the Sacrament of Confirmation and the Consecrated Life

Julius IJEKEYE, PhD¹

dr.fjrjulus@yahoo.com

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Abstract

This study explores the theological meaning of the sealing of the Holy Spirit in the Sacrament of Confirmation and its implications for the consecrated life. While Confirmation is often understood primarily as a sacrament of Christian maturity and spiritual strengthening, findings reveal that many theological treatments insufficiently examine its deeper pneumatological, Trinitarian, and vocational dimensions. This study addresses that gap by investigating the seal of the Holy Spirit as a mark of divine ownership, consecration, identity, and mission, rooted in the Spirit's

¹ Julius Ijekeye, PhD is a priest of the Catholic Diocese of Issele-Uku (Nigeria) and a Lecturer and Formator in the *Seminary of All Saints*, Uhiele-Ekpoma, Edo State. He lectures Systematic Theology in the Theology department, majoring on the Holy Trinity and Sacraments; and also lectures in the Philosophy department, majoring on Social and Political Philosophy. He is currently the Registrar of the Seminary.

role within the economy of salvation. Drawing on Scripture (especially Eph. 1:13–14; Eph. 4:30; 2 Cor. 1:21–22), patristic theology, particularly St. Cyril of Jerusalem and St. Augustine, and contemporary Trinitarian reflection, the study argues that the Spirit’s seal configures the confirmed more deeply to Christ and finds a privileged expression in the consecrated life, where the believer’s total dedication to God manifests the enduring fruits of Confirmation. The method employed for the study is critical analysis.

Keywords: Seal of the Holy Spirit; Sacrament of Confirmation; Consecrated Life; Trinitarian Theology; Christian Consecration

Introduction

The image of the “seal” occupies a significant place in Sacred Scripture and Christian theology as a symbol of divine ownership, protection, authenticity, and covenantal belonging. St. Paul teaches that believers, having received the Gospel in faith, “were sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13), who is given as the guarantee of their inheritance until the fullness of redemption. This biblical imagery points to the transformative work of the Holy Spirit in the life of the Christian, marking the believer as belonging to Christ and incorporating him or her more deeply into the communion of the Church and the life of the Holy Trinity.

Within the sacramental life of the Church, the theology of the seal finds a particularly profound expression in the sacrament of Confirmation. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, Confirmation

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perfects baptismal grace and imprints an indelible spiritual character on the soul, configuring the faithful more closely to Christ and strengthening them for witness and mission. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explicitly teaches that the seal of the Holy Spirit signifies total belonging to Christ, enlistment in his service, and the promise of divine protection until the day of salvation. Consequently, Confirmation is not merely a rite of Christian maturity but a sacramental participation in the mission of Christ through the power of the Spirit.

The theme of the seal also possesses a special significance for consecrated life in the Church. Men and women who embrace the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience respond in a radical manner to the grace already received through Baptism and Confirmation. Their consecration manifests the fullness of belonging to God and serves as a visible sign of the Spirit's sanctifying presence in the Church. As the Second Vatican Council teaches that consecrated persons are called to be a living witness to the Kingdom of God and a sign of the eschatological union to which all the faithful are called. The apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* further presents consecrated life as a unique manifestation of the Spirit's action, through which the Church reflects the holiness and self-giving love of Christ.

The Fathers of the Church frequently interpreted the seal of the Spirit as both a mark of divine ownership and a participation in the life of God. St. Cyril of Jerusalem described the Spirit's seal as a sacred

mark impressed upon the soul, while St. Augustine viewed it as the sign of belonging to Christ and incorporation into his Mystical Body. Their reflections provide an important theological foundation for understanding how the seal of the Spirit shapes both sacramental identity and vocational commitment within the Church.

Despite the rich biblical, patristic, and magisterial treatment of the theme, the relationship between the sealing of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation and its fuller expression in consecrated life has not always received adequate theological attention. This study therefore seeks to examine the theological meaning of the seal of the Holy Spirit, particularly in relation to the sacrament of Confirmation and the vocation to consecrated life. Through a critical analysis of Scripture, the teachings of the Church Fathers, and the Magisterium, it argues that the seal of the Spirit signifies not only divine ownership and assurance of salvation but also a call to holiness, mission, and deeper participation in the life and communion of the Triune God.

Ephesians 1:13 and the Seal of Promise

Ephesians 1:13 states: "In him you also, when you had heard the word of truth, the gospel of your salvation, and had believed in him, were marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit." This verse, rich in theological meaning, describes a pivotal moment in the life of a believer, the reception of the Holy Spirit as a divine "seal." Addressing Gentile Christians, St. Paul outlines a sequence of salvation which includes hearing the gospel, believing in Christ, and being sealed by the Holy Spirit. This progression affirms that faith

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in Christ initiates a profound spiritual reality and union with God through His Spirit.

The metaphor of a seal draws from ancient cultural practices where seals were used to signify ownership, authenticity, and security. Kings and landowners sealed documents or property as a mark of identity and protection. Bruce puts it that the Spirit is “the guarantee of our inheritance, until the redemption of God’s possession,” also that it is by “the Holy Spirit of God” that believers “were sealed against the day of redemption.” This sealing assures believers that they belong to God, are protected by Him, and are set apart for His purpose.

Theologically, the seal of the Holy Spirit has soteriological significance. It serves as both a guarantee of salvation and a pledge of future inheritance, as reinforced in the following verse, Ephesians 1:14: “who is the guarantee of our inheritance until we acquire possession of it.”

In practical terms, this verse offers believers assurance of their identity in Christ, confidence in God’s ongoing work within them, and hope for their eternal destiny. It challenges Christians to live out their faith with the awareness that they are sealed, secured, and sanctified by the Spirit of God.

Ephesians 4:30 and Eschatological Identity

Ephesians 4:30 says “And do not grieve the Holy Spirit of God, with whom you were sealed for the day of redemption.” This verse highlights the spiritual and eschatological dimensions of the believer’s identity in Christ. St. Paul exhorts the Christian community to avoid sin and disunity, warning that such behaviour grieves the Holy Spirit. The reference to being "sealed" by the Spirit connects this verse with earlier statements of Paul affirming that believers belong to God and are marked by Him for a future fulfilment.

This is an additional indication that the new identity in Christ involves a seal of ownership and belonging that cannot be broken until Christ comes and claims his people as his own at the end of time. Similarly, God’s seal on the believer signifies that they are His possession, set apart for a divine purpose and preserved until the final day. This theological point affirms a deep eschatological identity; Christians live now in light of their future redemption. St. Paul frames the believer's moral life within this end time perspective, making holiness not merely a personal ethic but an eschatological preparation.

The references to believer’s sins and to divine redemption and forgiveness are framed by important statements about the grace which God has lavished on them. Furthermore, the exhortation not to grieve the Holy Spirit implies a relationship with a personal and divine agent, not a mere force. The Spirit is involved in the sanctifying and unifying work of the Church. When believers act

contrary to the Spirit's purposes especially through bitterness, malice, or disunity (Eph. 4:31) they oppose their eschatological calling.

The Seal as Divine Mark and Mission

The concept of the seal in Scripture, particularly as found in passages such as Ephesians 1:13 and 4:30, represents a powerful theological image that conveys both divine ownership and mission. In the Holy Spirit, believers are sealed for the day of redemption, through Christ, but in the Spirit, people have access to God the Father. It is in the Spirit that believers are built together so as to form a dwelling place for God.

In Ephesians 1:13, believers are said to be “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit,” indicating that God places His divine mark upon those who believe in Christ. This seal confirms their identity as God’s own people and guarantees their inheritance of eternal life. As Peter T. O'Brien in his work affirms that “In Christ you were sealed, indicating that it was in him that the seal of the same Holy Spirit, promised to Israel, was received by the Gentiles when they believed.” Thus, the seal functions first and foremost as a divine mark, indicating belonging and security.

However, the biblical understanding of sealing extends beyond passive identification; it also implies consecration and commission. Just as ancient seals were used to assign purpose and authority, the seal of the Holy Spirit equips believers for mission. This is evident,

as St Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 1:21–22, noting that “it is God who establishes us with you in Christ, and has commissioned us; he has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee.” This links the seal to both identity and empowerment, implying that believers are marked not only to belong to God but also to serve Him; and service here is linked to the mission believers have for Christ.

The “seal” as a divine mark and mission affirms both the identity and purpose of the Christian. Sealed by the Holy Spirit, believers are secured in God’s covenantal love and commissioned to participate in His redemptive work. This theological truth reminds the faithful that their lives are not only saved for eternity but also set apart for service in the world.

The Seal as Illumination and Power according to Cyril of Jerusalem

Illumination through Baptism and Chrismation: Cyril of Jerusalem emphasizes that baptism and chrismation or anointing are transformative rites that impart spiritual enlightenment. In his *Catechetical Lectures*, he explains that baptism symbolizes the washing away of sins, while chrismation signifies the reception of the Holy Spirit. He states, while symbolically, on your foreheads and organs of sense, believers’ bodies are anointed with this oil that is seen; their souls are sanctified by the holy and life giving Spirit. Believers may not receive Baptism twice or thrice; else it might be said, though I have failed once, I shall set it right a second

time: whereas if thou fail once, the thing cannot be set right; for there is one Lord, and one faith, and one baptism for only the heretics are re-baptized because the former was no baptism.

The Seal as a Divine Mark: For God seeks nothing else from us, save a good purpose. Say not, how are my sins blotted out? The anointing with chrism is also understood as a seal, marking the believer as belonging to Christ. St. Cyril notes that believers became Christ, when they received the sign of the Holy Spirit. This seal signifies divine ownership and protection.

The Spirit as Love and Indwelling Presence according to St. Augustine

St. Augustine understands love as the very inner reality of the Holy Trinity. In his Trinitarian reflection, the Father is the Lover, the Son the Beloved, and the Holy Spirit the Love who eternally unites both. The Holy Spirit is thus not merely an intermediary force, but the consubstantial and co-eternal communion of love between the Father and the Son. This theology also highlights the Spirit as the divine indwelling presence who sanctifies and abides within believers.

In a parallel way, just as the Son comes forth from the Father and is sent into the world, so the Holy Spirit proceeds eternally from the Father, manifesting the inner life of divine communion and extending it into creation through sanctification and grace.

Beyond the inner life of the Trinity, Augustine also highlights the Holy Spirit's intimate presence in the life of the believer as God's

indwelling gift. The Spirit's presence is made manifest in the believer's capacity to love, which participates in and reflects the very love of God. This indwelling is not merely figurative or symbolic, but a real and transformative presence whereby God dwells within the soul. Through this abiding presence, the believer is sanctified and becomes a living temple of the Holy Spirit, reordered toward communion with God and conformed to divine charity.

Theological Implications of Augustine's Thought

St. Augustine's pneumatology reveals a profound relationship between the immanent and economic dimensions of the Holy Spirit. Within the inner life of the Trinity (*ad intra*), the Holy Spirit is the eternal communion of love proceeding from the Father and the Son, the divine bond that manifests and expresses their perfect unity. As such, the Spirit belongs fully to the eternal mystery of God and participates equally in the one divine essence.

Within the economy of salvation (*ad extra*), the same Holy Spirit communicates this divine love to humanity. Through the Spirit, the love of God is poured into the hearts of believers (cf. Rom. 5:5), enabling them to share in the life of the Trinity and to grow in holiness, charity, and communion. The Spirit thus serves as the divine agent of sanctification, drawing the faithful into participation in the very love that eternally unites the Father and the Son.

Augustine's theology therefore presents the Holy Spirit as both the eternal Love within God and the transformative Presence of God in the Church and in the believer. The Spirit who constitutes the

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communion of the Trinity is the same Spirit who dwells within the faithful, making them temples of God (cf. 1 Cor. 3:16) and members of Christ's Body. Consequently, the Christian life is not merely an imitation of divine love but a real participation in it through the indwelling Spirit.

This Augustinian vision provides a rich framework for understanding both the nature of God and the mystery of salvation. The Holy Spirit, as the bond of Trinitarian love and the source of sanctifying grace, unites believers to Christ, incorporates them into the communion of the Church, and leads them toward their ultimate destiny: full participation in the life and love of the Triune God.

The Holy Spirit as the Gift of the Father through the Son

One of the central themes of the Acts of the Apostles is the fulfilment of the Father's promise through the outpouring of the Holy Spirit upon the Church (Acts 1:4–5; 2:1–4). The Apostles gathered in prayer, awaiting not merely a divine blessing but the coming of the Holy Spirit himself, the supreme Gift of God. In Christian theology, the Holy Spirit is not simply a means by which God accomplishes his purposes; rather, he is the personal Gift of the Father and the Son, bestowed upon believers so that they may participate in the very life of God.

Sacred Scripture presents the Holy Spirit as the fulfilment of Christ's promise: "I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Advocate, to be with you forever" (Jn. 14:16). St. Paul likewise

teaches that “God’s love has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit who has been given to us” (Rom. 5:5). The Spirit is therefore both Gift and Giver, communicating divine love and enabling believers to enter into communion with the Father through the Son.

The Fathers of the Church frequently emphasized this understanding. St. Augustine describes the Holy Spirit as the mutual Love and Gift (*Donum*) of the Father and the Son, eternally proceeding from them and given to the Church for her sanctification. Likewise, St. Basil the Great teaches that through the Spirit believers are restored to friendship with God, adopted as children of the Father, and made participants in the divine life. The Holy Spirit is thus the living presence of God dwelling within the faithful, transforming them from within and conforming them to Christ.

The Magisterium of the Church affirms this same doctrine. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that the Holy Spirit is “God’s gift par excellence” and the one through whom believers receive sanctifying grace and become “partakers of the divine nature” (cf. 2 Pet. 1:4). Sent by the Father in the name of the Son and by the Son from the Father, the Spirit continues Christ’s saving mission in the Church and in the hearts of believers.

The theological implication arising from the above is that the gift of the Holy Spirit reveals both the inner life of the Trinity and its saving manifestation in history. Eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son, the Spirit is sent into the world to dwell within believers, drawing them into communion with the Triune God. The Father

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gives the Spirit through the Son, manifesting the unity, love, and cooperation of the divine Persons in the economy of salvation.

The reception of the Holy Spirit is therefore transformative. Through the Spirit, believers are justified, sanctified, and empowered to live according to God's will. As St. Paul teaches, those who are led by the Spirit are no longer slaves to sin but are children of God and heirs with Christ (Rom. 8:14–17). The Spirit frees them from the dominion of sin and enables them to bear the fruits of righteousness, charity, and holiness (Gal. 5:22–23).

Consequently, the Holy Spirit as Gift is both the sign and the means of humanity's participation in the divine life. By dwelling within the faithful, he unites them to Christ, incorporates them more deeply into the Church, and leads them toward their ultimate destiny: eternal communion with the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.

The Seal of the Holy Spirit and Participation in Trinitarian Life

Among the rich images employed by St. Augustine to describe the Holy Spirit, two stand out with particular theological significance: the seal (*signaculum*) and participation (*participatio*). These concepts illuminate the Spirit's role both within the eternal life of the Trinity and within the economy of salvation. Through them, Augustine presents the Holy Spirit as the divine Person who both manifests the communion of the Father and the Son and draws believers into that communion.

The Holy Spirit as Seal

In Sacred Scripture, the image of the seal signifies ownership, authenticity, protection, and irrevocable belonging. St. Paul teaches that believers are “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13) and that God “has put his seal upon us and given us his Spirit in our hearts as a guarantee” (2 Cor. 1:22). The Holy Spirit is therefore the divine seal by which believers are marked as belonging to Christ and incorporated into the covenant life of God.

Augustine extends this biblical imagery by associating the Holy Spirit with the communion of love that unites the Father and the Son. The Spirit is the seal of divine love, eternally proceeding from the Father and the Son and manifesting their perfect unity. In this sense, the Spirit authenticates and reveals the communion of the divine Persons, while also sealing believers for salvation and configuring them to Christ.

The Fathers of the Church frequently linked the seal of the Spirit to Baptism and Confirmation. St. Cyril of Jerusalem taught that through the anointing of the sacred chrism, Christians receive the spiritual seal of the Holy Spirit and are consecrated for divine service. Likewise, St. Ambrose described the Spirit's seal as the mark of Christ impressed upon the soul, safeguarding the believer until the day of redemption.

The Magisterium preserves this teaching by affirming that Confirmation imprints an indelible spiritual character or seal on the soul. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that this seal

signifies total belonging to Christ, enlistment in his service, and divine protection until the fulfilment of salvation.

Participation in Trinitarian Life through the Holy Spirit

The mystery of the Holy Trinity often raises the question of how the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit can each be fully God while remaining one God. St. Augustine responds by emphasizing the unity of the divine essence and the communion of the divine Persons. The Holy Spirit, as the bond of love between the Father and the Son, reveals that divine unity is not isolation but communion.

Beyond the inner life of God, Augustine frequently describes the Holy Spirit as the Gift of God bestowed upon believers. Through this Gift, Christians are enabled to participate in the very life of the Trinity. This participation is not merely symbolic or moral but a real sharing in divine life through grace. As St. Peter teaches, believers become “partakers of the divine nature” (2 Pet. 1:4). Through the indwelling Spirit, the faithful are adopted as children of the Father (Rom. 8:15–17), united to Christ (1 Cor. 12:13), and incorporated into the communion of the Church.

The Fathers consistently viewed salvation as participation in God's life. St. Athanasius famously taught that “the Son of God became man so that we might become god,” not by nature but by grace. St. Basil the Great likewise maintained that through the Holy Spirit humanity is restored to intimacy with God and enabled to share in divine holiness. The Second Vatican Council echoes this patristic

vision by teaching that the Spirit dwells in the Church and in the hearts of the faithful, leading them into communion with the Father through Christ.

Theological Implications

St. Augustine's theology of the seal and participation reveals the Holy Spirit as central to both the mystery of God and the mystery of salvation. As the seal of divine communion, the Spirit manifests the eternal unity and love of the Father and the Son. As the Gift of God, the Spirit draws believers into that same communion, making them participants in the divine life through grace.

Consequently, the Holy Spirit is not only the bond of love within the Trinity but also the source of the believer's transformation and sanctification. Through the Spirit's indwelling presence, Christians are sealed for Christ, incorporated into the Church, and enabled to share in the life of the Triune God. The seal of the Spirit thus signifies both belonging and participation: belonging to God as his adopted children and participating in the eternal communion of love that is the Holy Trinity.

The Sacrament of Confirmation, Consecrated Life, and the Believer's Configuration to Christ

The sacrament of Confirmation perfects baptismal grace and strengthens believers through a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit for witness, service, and participation in the mission of the Church (Acts 8:14–17). Through this sacrament, Christians are more firmly

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united to Christ, enriched with the gifts of the Holy Spirit, and empowered to live their vocation with greater fidelity.

A distinctive effect of Confirmation is the indelible spiritual seal impressed upon the soul. As St. Paul teaches, believers are “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13) and marked as belonging to Christ (2 Cor. 1:22). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that this seal signifies a permanent configuration to Christ and a special participation in his prophetic, priestly, and kingly mission.

The Fathers of the Church viewed this seal as a profound participation in Christ's anointing. St. Cyril of Jerusalem taught that through the sacred chrism Christians become sharers in Christ and recipients of the Holy Spirit's sanctifying presence. St. Augustine likewise understood the Spirit's seal as the mark of belonging to Christ and incorporation into his Body.

This configuration to Christ finds a particularly rich expression in consecrated life. Rooted in Baptism and strengthened by Confirmation, consecrated persons respond to the Holy Spirit through the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience. In this way, they become living signs of Christ's total self-giving and witnesses to the Kingdom of God. Confirmation therefore not only deepens Christian identity but also prepares believers for a life of holiness, mission, and complete dedication to Christ.

Consecrated Life and the Spirit's Empowerment for Ecclesial Mission

The Sacrament of Confirmation completes baptismal grace and strengthens believers through a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit for witness and mission within the Church (Acts 1:8). Through this sacrament, the faithful are more closely united to Christ and more firmly incorporated into the Church, receiving the spiritual strength necessary to proclaim and defend the faith by word and deed.

This missionary empowerment finds a privileged expression in consecrated life. Guided by the Holy Spirit, consecrated persons embody Christ's mission through the evangelical counsels and dedicate themselves wholly to the service of God and the Church. Their vocation reflects the apostolic dynamism of Pentecost, where the Spirit transformed disciples into courageous witnesses of the Gospel (Acts 2:1–4).

The Church Fathers understood this empowerment as participation in Christ's own anointing. St. Cyril of Jerusalem taught that through the Holy Spirit believers become "partakers of Christ," sharing in his mission and witness. Likewise, St. Basil the Great emphasized that the Spirit equips Christians with divine gifts for the building up of the Church and the spread of the Gospel.

Consequently, Confirmation is not merely a personal sacrament of maturity but an ecclesial commissioning. In consecrated life, this grace bears particular fruit, as men and women become visible signs

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of the Spirit's power, dedicating themselves to evangelization, service, and the building up of the Body of Christ.

Consecrated Life and the Rediscovery of the Seal of the Holy Spirit as a Trinitarian Reality

The sealing of the Holy Spirit, received in Baptism and brought to fullness in Confirmation, is fundamentally a Trinitarian act. Scripture teaches that believers are “sealed with the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13–14) and marked as God's own possession (2 Cor. 1:21–22). This seal signifies not merely divine ownership but participation in the life of the Father, through the Son, in the Holy Spirit.

St. Augustine presents the Holy Spirit as the eternal Love and Gift proceeding from the Father and the Son, drawing believers into the communion of the Trinity. Likewise, St. Basil the Great teaches that through the Spirit Christians are united to God and become participants in the divine nature (cf. 2 Pet. 1:4). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* affirms that Confirmation impresses an indelible spiritual character that configures the believer more closely to Christ and strengthens participation in the Church's mission.

In consecrated life, this Trinitarian seal is lived in a particularly radical manner. Through the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons witness to their total belonging to the Father, conformity to Christ, and openness to the sanctifying action of the Holy Spirit.

Their lives become visible signs of the communion, holiness, and self-giving love that characterize the life of the Blessed Trinity.

Toward a Renewed Theology of Confirmation in the Light of Consecrated Life

A renewed theology of Confirmation recognizes the sacrament as an essential completion of Christian initiation, inseparably linked with Baptism and the Eucharist. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, the confirmed are more firmly united to Christ, more perfectly incorporated into the Church, and empowered for witness and mission (Acts 1:8; Eph. 1:13–14).

The Church teaches that Confirmation strengthens baptismal grace and equips believers to spread and defend the faith by word and deed. This missionary dimension was already evident in the early Church. St. Cyril of Jerusalem taught that through the sacred chrism Christians become “partakers of Christ,” sharing in his anointing and mission. Likewise, St. Ambrose viewed the seal of the Spirit as a divine empowerment for Christian witness and holiness.

Consecrated life offers a privileged expression of this theology. Through a radical commitment to Christ under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, consecrated persons embody the fullness of the missionary and sanctifying grace received in Confirmation. Their lives reveal that Confirmation is not merely a rite of maturity but a lifelong participation in the Spirit's work of holiness, communion, and ecclesial mission.

Evaluation

The Pauline affirmation that believers are “marked with the seal of the promised Holy Spirit” (Eph. 1:13) finds one of its fullest sacramental expressions in the Sacrament of Confirmation. While the seal of the Spirit begins in Baptism, Confirmation deepens and strengthens this divine marking, granting the faithful a special outpouring of the Holy Spirit for witness, mission, and ecclesial service (Acts 1:8). The sealing of the Spirit is therefore not merely a symbolic designation but a sacramental reality through which the believer is configured more closely to Christ and incorporated more deeply into the life and mission of the Church.

In biblical tradition, a seal signifies ownership, authenticity, protection, and mission. Thus, when St. Paul speaks of believers being sealed by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13–14; 2 Cor. 1:21–22), he presents the Spirit as God's enduring mark upon those who belong to Christ. The seal confirms the believer's identity as a child of God (Rom. 8:14–17), guarantees participation in the divine inheritance, and empowers a life of fidelity to the Gospel. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* teaches that Confirmation impresses an indelible spiritual character that consecrates the Christian for participation in Christ's prophetic mission and ecclesial witness.

The Church Fathers consistently interpreted this seal as a real participation in the life and mission of Christ. St. Cyril of Jerusalem teaches that through the sacred chrism believers become "partakers of Christ" because they share in his anointing by the Holy Spirit. He

further explains that although the body is anointed with visible oil, the soul is sanctified by the Holy and life-giving Spirit. Similarly, St. Ambrose describes the post-baptismal anointing as a spiritual seal that equips Christians for faithful witness and perseverance in the life of grace. These patristic insights reveal that the seal of the Spirit is inseparable from Christian discipleship, sanctification, and mission.

This theology assumes even greater significance when viewed in relation to consecrated life. The consecrated man or woman embodies in a radical and visible manner the reality signified by the seal of the Holy Spirit. Through the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience, consecrated persons publicly manifest their total belonging to God and their complete availability to the mission of Christ. In this sense, consecrated life may be understood as a privileged flowering of the grace of Confirmation. The Spirit who seals the believer in Confirmation continues to shape and configure the consecrated person to Christ, enabling a life of self-giving love, ecclesial service, and prophetic witness.

The Second Vatican Council teaches that consecrated life is rooted in baptismal consecration and manifests more clearly the believer's total dedication to God. Likewise, St. John Paul II explains that the Holy Spirit is the principal agent of consecrated life, configuring religious more closely to Christ and making them living signs of the Kingdom. Consequently, the seal of the Holy Spirit received in Confirmation is not merely a guarantee of future salvation but an active principle of transformation, calling believers to ever deeper

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conformity to Christ. In consecrated life, this transformation becomes especially evident, as the individual allows the Spirit's seal to shape every aspect of existence according to the pattern of Christ's obedience, poverty, and chastity.

Therefore, the theological significance of the seal of the Holy Spirit extends beyond personal assurance of salvation. It establishes a permanent relationship of belonging to the Triune God, commissions the believer for ecclesial mission, and finds one of its most visible realizations in consecrated life. The consecrated person becomes a living testimony that the seal of the Spirit is not only a mark of divine ownership but also a call to holiness, witness, and participation in the saving mission of the Church until the fullness of the promised inheritance is attained.

Conclusion

Ephesians 1:13 presents the sealing of the Holy Spirit as a profound reality at the heart of Christian identity and vocation. Through the gift of the Holy Spirit, believers are marked as belonging to God, incorporated more deeply into Christ, and assured of their inheritance as children of the Father (Eph. 1:13–14; Rom. 8:14–17). This seal, sacramentally strengthened in Confirmation, is not merely a sign of divine ownership but a participation in the life and mission of the Triune God.

The Church teaches that Confirmation perfects baptismal grace, strengthens believers for witness, and equips them for active

participation in the Church's mission. The Church Fathers likewise understood the seal of the Spirit as a sanctifying and empowering gift that configures Christians to Christ and enables them to share in his prophetic mission. Consequently, the seal calls believers to lives of holiness, fidelity, and service.

This reality finds a particularly visible expression in consecrated life. Through the evangelical counsels, consecrated men and women manifest the fullness of their belonging to Christ and their openness to the transforming action of the Holy Spirit. Their lives become living testimonies to the enduring power of the Spirit's seal and signs of the Kingdom toward which all the faithful journey.

Ultimately, the sealing of the Holy Spirit in Confirmation reveals both a gift and a mission: a gift of participation in the communion of the Blessed Trinity and a mission to bear witness to Christ in the Church and the world. In consecrated life, this mission is embraced with particular radicality, demonstrating that the seal of the Spirit is not only a pledge of future glory but also a present call to holiness, discipleship, and total self-giving to God.

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Studies & Perspectives

**Establishment of Associations Intending to Become
Institutes of Consecrated Life in Nigeria**

Thaddeus Anyaegbu, OP¹

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Abstract

The Church in Nigeria today experiences a proliferation of new associations intending to become institutes of consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Many of the founders and foundresses of

¹ Fr Thaddeus Anyaegbu is a Nigerian Catholic priest who belongs to the Order of Preachers (Dominicans) of the Province of Nigeria and Ghana. He studied both Philosophy and Theology at the Dominican Institute, Ibadan, Nigeria and was ordained to the Catholic priesthood on July 16, 2022. Fr Thaddeus specializes in Canon Law. He has his Licentiate in Canon Law from the Pontifical University of St Thomas (PUST), Rome where he researched on the topic, “The Canonical Erection of Institutes of Consecrated Life of Diocesan Right in Nigeria: A Study of Canon 579.” He is presently doing his doctoral studies in Canon Law at the same university. Fr Thaddeus is the founder of an international apostolate on marriage and family called Catholic Marriage Forum. He is also the president of the association of Anglophone African students of Canon Law of the Pontifical University of St Thomas, Rome, Italy.

the associations intending to become institutes of consecrated life (ICL) and societies of apostolic life (SAL) begin their foundation without following required canonical process. Some of them are not well guided when beginning the foundation. This paper discusses the canonical procedures to be followed before a group is established as a public association in view of becoming an institute of consecrated life. It discusses the 2014 Guidelines and Directives of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), on the four levels that should be followed in founding religious Institutes and associations in Nigeria. It argues that a group seeking to be established as an association in view of becoming an ICL must first begin by carrying out works of charity or apostolate in the local church which will be commended by the bishop. After a period of five years, if the group continues to flourish, the bishop recognises it with a Letter of recognition. At this level, it exists only as a private association. After another five years, the bishop may erect the group as a public association in view of becoming institute of consecrated life, after having first reviewed its statutes and received a written permission from the Holy See. The next level will be its erection an institute of consecrated life.

Keywords: apostolate, association, consecrated life, decree, directive, erection, establish, founders, institute, proliferation.

Introduction

In the Church in Nigeria today, there exist several associations intending to become institutes of consecrated life (ICL). Some lay faithful do not know the difference between associations intending to become institutes of consecrated life and the already established institutes of consecrated life. The truth is that it is not every group in the Church whose members wear habits is considered as an institute of consecrated life or a society of apostolic life. Also, it has been observed that some founders of associations intending to become institutes of consecrated life are not well guided when beginning a new foundation. This paper discusses the canonical procedures to be followed before a group is established as a public association in view of becoming an institute of consecrated life. It also highlights the apostolic nunciature's directives concerning the erection of public associations intending to become a religious Institute in Nigeria.

Canonical meaning of Institutes of Consecrated Life

According to canon 573, life consecrated through the profession of evangelical counsels is a stable form of living by which the faithful follow Christ more closely under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and are totally dedicated to him. Consecrated persons contribute to the building up of the Church, and to the salvation of the world. They “strive for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom of God and, having been made an outstanding sign in the Church, foretell the heavenly glory” (c. 573 §1). The two forms of

consecrated life are: individual form (Hermits or anchorites, c. 603; and Order of Virgins, c. 604) and the associative form. The associative forms of consecrated life are institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life. Within the institutes of consecrated life are the religious institute (cc. 607-709) and secular institute (cc. 710-730). Secular institutes, as a new form of non-religious consecrated life entered the life of the Church through the promulgation of Pope Pius XII's Apostolic Constitution *Provida Mater* on February 2, 1947.

Associations Intending to Become Institutes of Consecrated Life

“In the Church there are associations which are distinct from institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life. In these associations, Christ's faithful, whether clerics or laity, or clerics and laity together, strive with a common effort to foster a more perfect life, or to promote public worship or Christian teaching” (c. 298 §1). There are two forms of associations in the Church: private and public associations. Private associations are associations that are established by Christ's faithful through private agreement for the purpose of fostering a more perfect life or promote public worship or Christian teachings or for works of apostolates (c. 299, §1, §2). Public associations are associations which are established by the competent ecclesiastical authorities (c. 301, § 3). The Church confers a special canonical status upon associations of the faithful which are formed with the purpose of becoming institutes of consecrated life.

“This special canonical status juridically and specifically distinguishes such associations from other associations of the faithful.”²

In order to become a public association, the group that intends to become an institute of consecrated life must meet some requirements, which include that it shows originality, attracts members, and is resourceful, that is, useful to the Church. After necessary scrutiny and approval, the association can be erected as a public association through the formal decree of the diocesan bishop, and its statutes are approved (cc. 312-314). The statutes are the foundations of what would later be the constitutions of the institute of consecrated life.³ At this point, the members of the association may proceed to make private vows with the consent of the bishop. “If the association is clerical, the clerics belonging to it remain incardinated in their respective dioceses, religious institutes, or societies of apostolic life until the association is formally erected as an institute of consecrated life.”⁴ It is significant to note that Pope Francis, through a rescript, legitimated that from June 15, 2022, the erection of a public association in view of becoming an institute of

² E. GAMBARI, *The Canonical Establishment of a Religious Institute*, Florence, Artigraph, 1999, p. 55.

³ Cfr. P. BAEL- A. CORRIDEN- J. GREEN (ed.), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, 748.

⁴ *L. cit.*

consecrated life requires written permission from the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (DICL/SAL). The Holy Father writes:

The diocesan bishop, before erecting - by decree - a public association of the faithful with a view to becoming an Institute of Consecrated Life or a Society of Apostolic Life of diocesan right, must obtain the written permission of the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.⁵

The Proliferation of Public Associations Intending to Become Institutes of Consecrated Life in Nigeria

The Church in Nigeria today experiences a proliferation of new associations that want to become institutes of consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic Life. This is worrisome since some of these associations lack authentic charisms. Many of them carry out the same activities with already established ICL. It is a thing of great concern to the Church in Nigeria. Due to this proliferation, the bishops in Nigeria are very slow in erecting some public associations as ICL. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), in its 2014 Guidelines and Directives on Founding Religious Institutes and Associations in Nigeria, expresses great concern for this proliferation. A commission was set up by the Holy See to

⁵ FRANCISCUS PP., Rescriptum ex-Audientia SS.MI: Rescritto del Santo Padre Francesco circa le associazioni pubbliche di fedeli in itinere, 15 giugno, 2022, in *L'Osservatore Romano*, (2022), 8.

investigate new foundations in Nigeria. This commission was chaired by Bishop Jonas Benson Okoye, who by then was the auxiliary bishop of Awka diocese and the representative of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of the Nigeria for Canon Law in Nigeria. The commission speaking about their observations on associations and new institutes in Nigeria noted as follows:

Most of them lack adequate temporal goods and this exposes the candidates recruited into these new foundations and their members to all manners of temptations that is unhealthy for their religious life or for the image of their institutes. Some of the founders / foundresses tend to view the temporal goods of the institutes as personal property. Because of the lack of temporal goods, these new foundations tax their members to make up for this deficiency.⁶

The commission after its 2021 meeting with all founders and moderators of associations intending to become ICL present the following report:

We observe that some of these new foundations lack good formation and accompaniment. This is in relation to standard universal formation programme in its spiritual, human, intellectual and pastoral and even structural aspects (private apartments, parish environment, places and atmosphere that are not at all suitable for religious formation). During the course of our interaction with founders /foundresses, we discovered that a good number of the new foundations have very little

⁶ Report of the Holy See Commission for Investigating Associations and New Institutes in Nigeria, cited in Matilda Owolagba, "The Case of New Religious Congregations in our Local Church," a paper presented in 34th Convention of the Canon Law Society of Nigeria (CLSN) 2021.

to do with the experienced and older institutes. This creates a yawning gap in the formation process as well as the institutes' integration of its religious values.⁷

Canonical Procedures for the Establishment of Association Intending to Become Institutes of Consecrated Life

Association intending to become ICL begins with a small group of persons coming together as a *de facto* association". Canon 215 stipulates that Christian faithful are at liberty to found or belong to associations for the purpose of promoting Christian charity, of piety or for promoting Christian vocation in the world. Canon 216 warns that "no initiative, however, can lay claim to the title 'catholic' without the consent of the competent authority." The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, in its 2014 Guidelines and Directives on Founding Religious Institutes and Lay Associations in Nigeria, stipulates that the establishment of a new institute of consecrated life consists of four levels or four steps. The first three levels concern the establishment of associations intending to be ICL. According to the document, "advancing to the next level requires the approbation of the appropriate ecclesiastical authority. Groups of

⁷ *L. cit.*

individuals wishing to found new Religious Institutes are advised to allow at least five years for each level or step.”⁸

First Level: The process usually begins with the founder/foundress beginning “some sort of service, charitable work, and (an apostolate). His/her zeal in this service or charitable work attracts some people (mostly young boys/girls) who join him; they participate in this noble work and are happy doing it.”⁹ The carrying-out of the charitable work or works of apostolate could take place for about three or five years. This work is then brought to the attention of the diocesan bishop or perhaps he has been aware of it. The bishop being “pleased with their good work of service in his diocese, writes them a Letter of Commendation, encouraging them in their beautiful apostolate.”¹⁰

Second Level: After being commended by the diocesan bishop, the group continues its work for about five years. It is expected that about this time, more young people will have joined the group. The apostolates undertaken by the group continue to flourish and people praise it. The parish priest and the people within the territory in which the group carries out its apostolate begin to feel the impact of

⁸ CATHOLIC BISHOPS’ CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, *Guidelines and Directives on Founding Religious Institutes and Associations in Nigeria*, Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria, Abuja, 2014, n. 40.

⁹ *L. cit.*

¹⁰ *L. cit.*

the group in the parish and the diocese. “The bishop writes a second letter, Letter of Recognition. In this letter, he recognizes that they are doing some wonderful work in his diocese. They are helping the growth of the church.”¹¹ During this time, the founder/foundress begins to form the members to assume the form of religious life. He/she begins to write some rules (statutes) for them and give them some habits. A good formator is needed to accompany the members of the group. Also, the founder/foundress is required to seek out a canonist to direct and guide him/her. The CBCN acknowledges that a diocesan priest should not be a formator for a Religious. Hence, the founder must find a religious to take up the work of formation. “The bishop at this point should have a team of advisers, a canonist, a psychologist/Counselor, and a theologian, one of these should be a seasoned and experienced Religious.”¹²

Third Level: After another five years, the bishop is expected to review the statutes concerning the life, formation, and apostolate of the foundation. If he is still pleased with their way of life and the apostolate they do, he can raise them to the status of a Public Association of Christian Faithful. With this erection, the association is recognised as a juridical person in the Church, and their apostolate is carried out in the name of the Church.¹³ It should be noted that the bishop needs the written permission of the Holy See to erect “a

¹¹ *L. cit.*

¹² *L. cit.*

¹³ *Cfr. L. cit.*

public association of the faithful with a view to becoming an Institute of Consecrated Life or a Society of Apostolic Life of diocesan right.”

¹⁴ This change was made by Pope Francis in 2022.

Fourth Level: After the association has been erected as a public association of the Christian faithful, the members should continue their life, formation, and apostolate for another five years. If the bishop judges that the association is growing and that the members are faithful to their life and charism, and if he is satisfied with the formation of their members and their apostolate, he can proceed to get the written permission of the Apostolic See to erect the association as a Religious Institute. As discussed in the first chapter, Pope Francis modified the law requiring the bishop to consult the Apostolic See before erecting an institute of consecrated life. Presently, for the validity of the erection of an institute of consecrated life, written permission from the Apostolic See is required (can. 579). This modification is not captured in the CBCN’s *Guidelines* because it was published six years before Pope Francis modified the canon. The *Guidelines* asserts that the bishop should ensure that nothing in the statutes is contrary to canon law. It stipulates as follows:

Once he [bishop] signs their statutes, the Association becomes a Religious Institute and the statutes become constitution. What the

¹⁴ FRANCISCUS PP., Rescriptum ex-Audientia SS.MI: Rescritto del Santo Padre Francesco circa le associazioni pubbliche di fedeli in itinere, 15 giugno, 2022, in *L’Osservatore Romano*, (2022), 8.

bishop actually approves is the statutes. He has to make sure there is nothing in the statutes that is contrary to Canon Law. *Once he signs their statutes, the Association becomes a Religious Institute and the statutes become constitution.*¹⁵ (Being raised to public Association in the Church can also happen within three years after the letter of recognition but then, they would need to remain as a public association for about eight years because the Apostolic See would want the process from beginning the time of approval to be at least twenty years.¹⁶ It must not be rushed. A Religious Institute that is supposed to last thousands of years should not be rushed or allowed to have a weak foundation).¹⁷

The *Guidelines* further outlines the requirements that the Public Association is to meet before the diocesan bishop seeks the permission of the Apostolic See to erect it as a religious institute. It must be noted that these requirements apply to every associative form of consecrated life. The requirements are:

1. The association must have stayed at least twenty years in the process of becoming a Religious Institute.
2. It has the capacity for continuous existence; that is, it must have vocations.

¹⁵ The Dicastery for Institute of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (DICL/SAL) updates the requirements often.

¹⁶ DICL/SAL updates this often.

¹⁷ CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, *Guidelines and Directives*, n. 40

3. It ought to have at least forty members, with some members in perpetual profession and others in temporary profession. The association should provide pictures of its members in their habits.
4. The association is required to have some governance structures. For instance, it should have conducted its general chapter(s) that elected superior general and council members. (Members obtain these offices through election.)
5. Evidence of financial viability and sustainability must be presented.¹⁸

Apostolic Nunciature's Directives Concerning the Erection of Public Associations Intended to Become a Religious Institute

The Apostolic nunciature in Nigeria in 2004 issued a directive concerning the erection of a public association intended to become a religious institute. In this document, the nunciature stipulates some guidelines and directives that should be followed in beginning the foundation of a religious institute. The guidelines are as follows:

1. First step: erection of a Public Association of Christ's Faithful by the bishop of the diocese where the principal seat

¹⁸ Cfr. CATHOLIC BISHOPS' CONFERENCE OF NIGERIA, *Guidelines and Directives*, n. 50.

of the association is located in accordance with canon 312, § 1, 3^o.¹⁹

2. Before the association is erected, it is required that its charism, spirituality, and apostolate are carefully specified and included in the constitutions, which are approved by the bishop of the principal seat *ad experimentum* for three years.
3. In the decree of erection of the Association, the following phrase should be included: “in view of being erected in the future a religious Institute of diocesan right,” so that members of the association may begin to live “as if they were religious.” This will facilitate the regularization of the canonical status of the individual members when the new institute is erected canonically.
4. The association may have its own novitiate and its own government. It may celebrate its General Chapter, considering the small number of perpetually professed members. The association may also establish its houses in other dioceses. The members may pronounce private vows and wear their own religious habits.
5. The vows pronounced by the members of the association are not considered “religious vows.” Once a member leaves the association, the vows cease automatically. Dismissals are to follow canons 694 - 704, making the necessary adjustment

¹⁹ This canon stipulates that the diocesan bishop is a competent ecclesiastical authority to erect public association in his own territory.

of the canons. However, the provisions of canons 684 - 691²⁰ do not concern the members of the association.

6. Before the association establishes a new house outside the diocese of its principal seat, the Superior General must consult the diocesan bishop of the principal seat before requesting the written consent of the bishop of the diocese where the new house is to be established. New houses should have not less less than three professed members.
7. In a situation whereby the association is small in number and is unable to have its own central government, it is due to the bishop of the principal seat of the association to appoint its superiors and admit members to the novitiate and profession. Superiors are to be members of the association who are perpetually professed.
8. If the diocesan bishop considers it necessary that a religious from another religious institute should govern the association, especially during the first years of its existence, or take care of the initial formation of its candidates, this religious is required to request an indult of exclaustation to live together with the members of the association.

²⁰ These canons stipulate the procedures for exclaustation and transfer from one religious institute to another.

The bishops of the dioceses where the association is present are to watch over the formation of the candidates, the government of the association, and the administration of its temporal goods.

Conclusion

In this paper, we have carefully explained the canonical procedures that ought to be followed before any group in the Church is erected canonically as an association intending to become an institute of consecrated life. A group seeking to be established as an association in view of becoming an institute of consecrated life must first begin by carrying out works of charity or apostolate in the local church which will be commended by the bishop when it is brought to his attention. After a period of five years, if the group continues in its good work and begins to flourish, the bishop recognises it with a Letter of recognition. At this level, it exists only as a private association. The members can begin to wear habits and begin to be formed by a religious formator. After another five years, the bishop may erect the group as a public association in view of becoming institute of consecrated life. This will be done after the bishop has reviewed its statutes and after receiving a written permission from the Holy See. The next level will be its erection an institute of consecrated life. Failure to follow these procedures will make the group to exist for a long time without being erected as an institute of consecrated life.

Studies & Perspectives

Understanding and Appreciating the Gift of the Catholic Priesthood in Nigeria: *Its Beauty, Attractions and Challenges*

Fr. BenedictMary O. O. Azebeokhai, IMAC¹

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¹ Fr. BenedictMary Oshiokhamele Obiajulu Azebeokhai, is a Nigerian Catholic Priest of the Missionary Institute of the Friends of Christ (IMAC). He hails from Fugar, Etsako Central LGA of Edo State. He was a Rev. Brother for more than 30 years in the Brothers of St. Stephen Congregation before his readmission into the IMAC Community. He holds Bachelor in Philosophy, BA in Theology, Diploma in Personnel Management, Bachelor in Guidance and Counselling/Economics, Diploma in Pentecostal Theology, Diploma in Psychotherapy Addiction Management, Diploma in Formation of Formators, Masters in Pastoral Theology, and Ph.D. in Pastoral Theology. He is the first Nigerian Male Religious to receive the prestigious Papal Award of *Bene-Merenti* from Pope Francis in 2015. Fr. Benedict is presently the Director of Novices, IMAC Congregation.

Abstract

The Roman Catholic Priesthood is a special gift which God gave to humanity as a sacramental means of reuniting the human race with the Blessed Trinity.² By this sacred priesthood, God, through Christ, empowers the human race with a channel of worship and Thanksgiving to God. An authentically ordained priest of the Holy Church is therefore chosen by Christ through the Church --whose Magisterium has the authority to officially recognise, discern, and validate that the candidate's call is authentic -- to be an intercessor between God and humans and a sacred link between human beings and Divinity. Here, priesthood is not all about the person ordained, but about the Ordination received, the sacred anointing and the essence of the Ordination. The Catholic Church in Nigeria has, over the years, been privileged to be blessed by God with an abundance of this rare gift. Virtually every household prays to be counted among those from where, at least, a priest of God emerges someday. The value of the priesthood is very high in the Nigerian community.

In this article, the author seeks to establish that the Catholic Priesthood is a special gift of God to humanity, and to outline the processes for assessing Vocations to the priesthood in the Church and its formation. It discusses the attention required in the training and care to be given to those who are saddled with this divine assignment in the world with due references to the teachings of the

² Catholic Reviews, 2025. "Priesthood is a gift meant to be given to others."

Magisterium and the Scriptures. There are challenges in the call, but anchoring on Christ, all things are possible.

Keywords: Vocations, Priesthood, Seminary, Formation, Nigeria, Catholic Church, Ordination.

INTRODUCTION

Nigeria and the Catholic Priesthood

Nigeria is a sovereign State of more than 300 million people (unverified), where for ages vocations to the various aspects of life have been recorded as one of the most booming. Vocations to married life, to single state, and to the ministry of soul-winning are becoming so lucrative to the extent that almost in every Christian family, apart from marriage, one or two members are attracted into the Catholic priesthood or evangelical / Pentecostal pasturing.

In particular reference to our topic of discourse, the Catholic Priesthood in Nigeria, it is wonderful to note that over decades Nigeria has enjoyed a geometric “inflow” of young men into the ministry compared to every other part of Africa, closely following the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC). Borrowing records from the ‘Nigeria Statistics of Catholic Priests by Provinces’, and the online Wikipedia analysis, on Catholic Church in Nigeria, 2024; The total number of Arch/Dioceses in Nigeria are 68 and 2 Apostolic Vicariates. Total number of priests as at the end of 2024 was estimated at 4,146 diocesan and religious priests. Total number of

Minor Seminaries rose to 38, Major Seminaries and Institutes 20, while total number of Senior Seminarians is estimated at 3,755. This analysis, supported by the data of the Vatican department of Statistics, clearly indicates an increase in the number of Seminarians in Africa where “Seminarians increased by 1.1% (from 34,541 to 34,924)”, with Congo and Nigeria taking the lead. Research statistics shows therefore, that the percentages of seminarians exceed those of Catholics in Africa, thus, 32.8% of seminarians compared to 20% of Catholics. Needless saying the obvious that Catholic Seminarians in Nigeria top among this group on record.³ This article therefore is to reflect on the vocation to the priesthood in the Nigerian Church, examining the response of the Nigerian youths to embrace the vocation. It goes forward to examine some of the positive and negative experiences of the young ones in embracing the priesthood, the life of the seminarians during formation process, their challenges and best ways to overcome discouragements in the life. We will look into this topic under dual perspectives; divinely and humanly.

VOCATIONS

Understanding vocations

The word vocation is no longer a new English word to both young and old in Nigeria. Everyone created by God believes that he or she is created and called to be relevant to the development and continuity

³ cf. Vatican News online. New Church Statistics. 2025. *vaticannews.va*.

of the human race and the world in its entirety. ***‘God made me to know Him, to love Him, to serve Him and to be happy with Him in eternity’***, hence everyone, male or female, crave for relevance in one way or the other within the social community. In the Christian world, like in Nigeria, every baptised individual believes that God has a purpose for him or her, the destiny of every individual. God knows every individual from his or her mother’s womb and has already programmed what he or she would be if not displaced by the individual himself or herself. *“Before I formed you in the womb I knew you, before you were born, I set you apart”* (Jer. 1:5). This explains the divine dimension of every human person which precedes the physical / human self. Before we came into the world, we have already been fashioned in the spiritual and God’s spiritual endowments implanted in us and given the mandate to continue God’s creation and to be part of the prophetic, salvific mission of Jesus Christ on earth. Whatever we are doing today, if done according to the will of God for us, is a special vocation being fulfilled on earth.

First, God instituted the vocation to the family life (Marriage), *“So God created man in His own Image, in the image of God He created him; male and female He created them. God blessed them and said to them, “Be fruitful and increase in number; fill the earth and subdue it. And God saw all that He had made, and it was very*

good”⁴. God, after creation called the human created to embrace the vocation of marriage and child bearing, and to look after the entire creation under the directives of God Himself.

When man had disobeyed and taken the way of the evil one, God’s relationship with His children became strained, that man wandered away from God. For generations God did everything to return man to his original dignity; “Little less than a god” (Psalm 8:5). He made use of human instruments. But human beings prefer darkness to light. God came in the human form to take His children back to Himself and to redeem us from the grip of the devil, yet humans prefer the world and its glamour to the light of God (cf. John 1:1-5). Having spent 33 years in the world and 3 years preaching and teaching the message of repentance and salvation, Christ initiated a second vocation, the vocation to the Catholic priesthood and to the Consecrated life. He called the twelve together and commissioned them; “*Go ye therefore, and teach all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit*” (Matt. 28:19). By this command, Jesus Christ intends to reunite those who believe with God the Father through Christianization. Baptism therefore readopts us into the family of God through Christ. Baptism becomes the foundation of the second Vocation; “Prophets, Priests, and Kings”, all stemmed from the ministry of Christ, the High Priest and the King.

⁴ Gen. 1: 27-28a, 31a GNB

For the proper fulfilment of this mission of initiation and continued works of salvation among the people of God in the world, and to ensure that those who believe and reincorporated into the Body of Christ are fed with the food of the Divine, Christ established once more, the vocation to the Sacred Priesthood the reason He called the twelve and had trained them (*First Seminarians*) for about three (3) years. At the Last Supper, He cleansed them and ordained them Priests to minister the Word and the Eucharist to those who believes and are baptised and in the state of Grace. A continuity of the spiritual feeding and nourishment while still on our pilgrim journey here on earth (cf. Mat. 26:26-29, Jn. 6: 26-35), food for the journey (Viaticum). The vocation to the Catholic priesthood is therefore a supernatural gift of God to an individual believer and to the Church for divine representation among the people of God and for the re-enactment of Christ's Eucharistic self in the Church.

Aside from the vocation to the Sacred Priesthood, Christ equally proposed a special lifestyle for many who wish to follow Him through the observance of the three Evangelical Counsels. These counsels are not alien to the priesthood but rather foster a more intimate relationship with Christ and the Church; hence, all ordained priests are called to embrace the counsels.

Vocation, in general, is therefore “the relationship that God has with every human being in the freedom of love, because every life is a vocation. It is a clarion call to deeper love”.⁵

The Priesthood and Consecrated Life as Special Gifts

The Catholic Priesthood and Consecrated Life which were established by Christ, are special divine gifts by Jesus Christ Himself to the Church, to be conferred on individual candidates who have been scrutinised, welcomed and trained by the Church through her competent authority in Sacred and administrative communion with the Pope. It is a gift because no one of us merited or deserved this call. It is a sacrament of the Church because Jesus Christ Himself instituted it, like other six sacraments. It confers a specific supernatural gift of the Holy Spirit upon the ordained and consecrated by the laying on of hands by the Bishop and profession of the three vows in communion with the Holy Father and Rome. It is a complete sacrament of commitment like marriage; it is directed towards the salvation of others.⁶

No one human being is holy indeed, but the vocation is a holy sacrament because it has a holy character. A Catholic Priest and a consecrated person could be defined, therefore, as young man and

⁵ Azebeokhai, B. O. *Understanding The Catholic Priesthood: A Reflection On The Life and Mission of the Priest*. Amazon Publication (Kindle Store). 2026. <https://a.co/d/05aWdoNa>.

⁶ cf. CCC 1534

woman chosen by Christ, through the Church, trained by the Church, and authentically ordained or consecrated by the Church to perform priestly rites and liturgical duties in the Church and to follow Christ more closely in a religious community according to the state of life of the various vocation. These individuals are properly tutored in the ways and matters concerning divinity and humanity. They are able to carry out the *sacris administrandis* to the people of God in accordance with the Church's prescriptions.⁷

Catholic Priesthood in Nigeria

Catholic Priesthood in Nigeria is no different from the Catholic priesthood as obtained in the other parts of the world. The Church is one and her priesthood is one in collegiality with the Bishop of Rome and the universal college of Bishops. What is attainable within the circumference of the Church in Nigeria may be slightly different due to permissive local circumstances and certain cultural differences according to local needs. For instance, the formation processes of priests in Nigeria could be a little bit different in strategies and structure from that attainable in Europe and America due to local needs and circumstances. The boom in the vocation to priesthood and religious life in Nigeria could be linked to the cultural and natural affinity with the sacred and sacred space. It reflects the original belief systems by which Nigeria and Africa as a whole is

⁷ cf. Azebeokhai, 2026, Understanding the Catholic Priesthood

known. Every family believes that God is supreme and that He calls certain individuals to serve Him in special sacred areas and worship. They believe in the supremacy of God over all life; “God made me to know Him, to Love Him, to serve Him in this world, and to be happy with Him forever in the next.”⁸

The Catholic Priesthood in Nigeria carries with it that divine embodiment, that sacred grace which originally carries with it an overwhelming honour and dignity, except for some resent human abuses and abnormalities within the Church and society which portrays a wrong picture of the priesthood. Still this abnormality does not remove the sacred nature of the priesthood and the validity of the priest, hence, “a priest is a priest forever”.

The Priesthood in Nigeria should be guided meticulously and be promoted by the church despite the challenges so as not to at any point in time experience the alarming drop of candidacy. Priests and seminarians should be encouraged in all ramifications not to develop coldness towards their calling. They are to be encouraged morally and financially by the hierarchy of the Church and accompanied spiritually too to forge ahead. It should always be borne in mind that priests and religious men and women are human vessels saddled with the yoke of other people’s spiritual and social problems, hence they are, alongside their spiritual and religious responsibilities, trained as psychologists, counsellors, lawyers, social workers, educators,

⁸ Penny Catechism

health managers etc, to help them meet the needs of the times, and for more relevance in the pastoral field.

The number of years of intellectual training of the priests gives them a balanced wheel to manage the spiritual and pastoral load saddled upon their shoulders, yet their frail humanity can sometimes fail them, so at such points they require our care, our prayers, our encouragements and the spiritual direction and renewal by the Bishops and fellow priests. Although the excessive boom of vocations into the priesthood and Consecrated Life in Nigeria has almost made it look too familiar and common, it should be noted that the increase is in par with the prayer of Christ the High Priest when he prayed; “the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are few. Pray the God of the harvest to send more labourers into the field” (Mat. 9: 37-38). There are still a whole lot to be done in the mission, a lot of souls to be won to Christ, a lot of lives to be touched by priests and Religious. The Church needs more Diocesan and Religious priests but quality priests. Priests who are convinced of their sacred calling, priests who are willing to sacrifice their lives and time for Christ, priests who will be humble enough to work with the people, not so much of intellectuals but dedicated and humble, prayerful and pastoral minded.

In these times of socio-spiritual, political and economic confusion, Nigeria need priests to give hope to the people of God. It is time for pastoral care of meeting rather than pastoral care of waiting. Is it not disturbing to observe that the more the number of priests in Nigeria

is increasing, the more many souls are falling away from the fold? Is it not time to move out of the Parish House to meet them on the streets like Christ did? He had no place to lay His head (Mat. 8: 20, Lk. 9: 58). His was a voluntary homelessness. His moving approach to evangelisation brought the people to Him. Priests in Nigeria should be encouraged to meet the people, to feel the pains and situations of the people, to be available to them and to meet them at the point of their needs. We must be courageous enough to do the mission and not to be afraid of what small minds may say, for we cannot continue to dwell on the scandal of the weak and fail to preach the gospel.

Pastoral care of meeting is the pastoral strategy whereby a priest leaves his comfort zone (Rectory), to go after the straying sheep outside the Parish (cf. Luke 15: 3-7). We must be careful not to lose our flocks to miracle peddlers and wolves on a sheep skin. There is also need to continue to appreciate God for the abundance of priestly vocations in Nigeria and take time to continue to enkindle in the young men the fire of that priestly vocation. God has a purpose for everything, and His generosity in allowing this gift of priesthood to flourish in Nigeria must not be undermined.

HELPING THE YOUTHS TO RESPOND TO THE CALL

How can we help the young ones in Nigeria to appreciate and respond positively to this vocation to the priesthood? Nigeria is a fertile ground for vocations, especially to the Catholic priesthood. Even as we boast of already existing high number of existing

Seminarians flourishing in our many seminaries and formation institutes, many young men are yet lined up nurturing the idea and interest to embrace the vocation. We can be assured that out of a thousand passing out of secondary schools each year, not less than 30% are brazing up to apply for admissions into the various dioceses and religious institutes for priestly formation.

There is need for us to begin from their early ages, in the schools and as altar servers to give them the basics of the priestly vocation. The Religious Sisters and Brothers serving in various schools and institutions have great task of using their good offices to foster Vocations into priesthood, through Dioceses and Religious Congregations. The Church in Nigeria and those saddled with the vocation promotions must be careful not to rely on the present boom which appears to be much. We must understand that whatever goes up comes down and what we see and enjoy today as vocation boom may not always be so except we are careful to maintain the present grace, and of course, to continue to move according to the times.

The usual practice of vocation campaigns to parishes and rallies must be revived. That we are enjoying the present wait for them to come is approaching its climax due to the current craze for quick wealth and yahoo era. From the elementary school age, boys are already digging into ways to make quick wealth to be big boys in town and to become politicians. The usual early age spirituality for which Nigerian children are known for is gradually fading out, the global view about life and religion is turning fast to something else due to

scientific and social revelations of the times and Nigeria is not left out. Parents no longer have that usual religious hold and responsibility over their children as it used to be, because near 40% of parents today are products of the same generation, they can only offer what they have to their children. The onus, therefore, rests on the Bishops, the priests, the Seminarians and other vocation agents to rise up to the tasks.

I therefore, recommend that Dioceses and Parishes revisit the former method of moral instructions in Schools, especially the public Schools. It is also recommended that all Mission Schools should create a period in the weekly time table to specially educate children on matters concerning vocations; it could be given more attention during the moral lessons. I personally enjoyed such privilege during my Secondary School days when my Parish Priests and Rev. Sisters took turns to come and teach us once in a week until I passed out. The priests could be encouraged to give time for such apostolate within their parishes, not only when they are employed as lecturers and School teachers in those Schools.

In Matthew 13:3-8, the ‘sower’ went out to sow; the sower here could be referred to as the vocation animator of the Diocese or Religious Congregations or even among the lay vocational associates in the parishes. The vocational animator is more of a sower of vocations than a harvester. Not minding the immediate results of their efforts, the animators are to continue to sow everywhere just like that gospel figure that never paid attention to the quality of the soil. The formators, the Directors of vocations and

the vocation animators or promoters could initiate some strategically ways to bring the youths together through sports, recruit them into the altar knights and pay keen interests on their activities and welfare in the parishes, pay personal interest on the academic situations and performances, and even find a way to assist them financially in school. Personal relationship and touch is one psychological way of encouraging the young ones to direct their vocations in life.

It is on record that one of the easy ways for vocation proposals is within the good boys, those who are regular to Masses, especially morning Masses, the altar servers the lectors, the Catholic Youth Forums and the likes. Majority of these young ones have some inborn desires burning within their hearts that no one has actually dug into. Sometimes it requires the sensitivity of the priests and animators to observe and help them to unravel such hidden mystery. This is the secret of vocational sowing. Jesus himself found out the first priestly candidates and some were already seeking, so He got the first disciples together, the seed of priestly vocation was sowed (cf. Mat. 9:9, Mk 1:14, Jn. 1:38). And “many were called but few chosen” (Mat 22:14).

Many of these young ones are actually seeking to have this vocational encounter with Christ, it burns within their hearts but they really don’t know or understand what they are looking for. The devil uses such opportunity to introduce them into some worldly distractions. So the work of those of us who are already chosen are to candidly focus on helping them to notice how Christ passes

through their lives, chooses them and calls them to leave everything to follow Him, like Matthew the tax collector (Mat 9:9-13) and Zacchaeus (Lk 19:1-10) and the rest of us.

ADMISSIONS AND IDONEITY OF CANDIDATES TO PRIESTHOOD

One of the difficult aspects of vocation promotion into the sacred priesthood is the process of admissions and recruiting quality and genuine candidates into the Seminaries. There is great need to employ well trained and qualified formators to handle the roles of Directors of vocations in Dioceses and Religious congregations in Nigeria. One of the major tasks of these vocation officials is the clear assessment of vocational idoneity.

Vocational Idoneity

By Idoneity we look at the objective criterion applied for vocational discernment, especially for candidates who are interested in joining the Sacred Priesthood. It examines the candidate's right intention; to ensure that candidates approach this holy vocation out of their free will and not out of duress. The candidate who feels called is expected to exhibit some visible qualities and this set of qualities that must be acted upon is what we call the generic concept of "Idoneity".

The qualities for the sacred priesthood should be the aptitude for the ministry which comprises of the possession of those qualities which are recognised and accepted by the competent ecclesiastical

authority. Candidates for the sacred priesthood should be seen with the ability to make a definitive life-long choice and the spirit to carry out the service fruitfully when ordained; this implies understanding the obligations inherent in being a pastor of souls in the manner of Jesus Christ. He needs to have the ability to perform the duties of a ministry that demand a certain hardness of life and require physical endurance, poise, and maturity. This general aptitude is presented under a set of qualities that includes physical and mental health, intellectual gifts, human maturity, specific affective and sexual maturity, and human-moral gifts. This vocation is first of all rooted on the gifts of nature and grace received from God (cf. Rom 12, 3). The existence of these grace and gifts which include personal qualities, the gift of divine grace, personal charismatic gifts, and supernatural virtues guarantees the authenticity of the priestly vocation.

These qualities or idoneity traits are enumerated below:

1. Physical fitness or health: The candidates must be healthy: they are to have good physical development, current health that is sufficiently good, and the absence of family congenital predispositions.⁹

2. Psychic Aptitude: Psychic aptitude points to the condition of balanced males that is desired in the candidates. Only those who

⁹ cf. *Optatam Totius*, 6

possess psychic qualities congruent with the order they are going to receive can be ordained; this is counterbalanced by the presence of mental disorders that may affect the candidate's capacity for free and informed consent, or his capacity to assume the obligations inherent in the ministry.

In the examination of the candidate, an adequate investigation is required on the family environment and on the complete history of the person, including the history of possible influences and psychopathological manifestations; hence the convenience of going to experts in the field of psychology to help the judgment of the ecclesial authority on the aptitude for the ministry.

3. *Intellectual Aptitude:* The candidates for priesthood must be judicious males; fundamentally, human intelligence allows access to reality as it is, so that cognitive development without interference opens access to truth and good. It is expected that the candidate must have sufficient intelligence to access the cultural, philosophical and theological content necessary for the priestly ministry and to understand the substance of the issues managing abstract concepts and reaching personal convictions.

4. *Human Aptitude:* This requires that the candidate for the priesthood must be a mature person; this expression refers above all to the affective and volitional dimension of the subject (which is body, intelligence, affectivity and will).

5. *Moral Aptitude:* Idoneity for the priestly ministry also requires moral aptitudes, which means that the candidate should be a virtuous

man; Moral maturity is situated in the volitional field of the person who tends towards the good. Such a person observes reality, decides what is good and acts accordingly; his virtuous performance gives him virtuous habits and makes him morally mature, a maturity that is verified in daily experience. But human freedom implies that not everyone who sees well follows it, which is why the psychologically mature or healthy person will not always be morally mature or virtuous.

6. *Spiritual Aptitude*: This means that the candidate should be one who is “configured to Christ the Head, Shepherd and Bridegroom”¹⁰; spirituality is the center of the priestly vocation, though the entire dimensions of the personality have to be balanced, the other aspects are to be subjected to the spiritual dimension since the author of our existence and vocation is Spirit. The candidate is to have a good sense of spiritual devotions and attachment in order to carry out the priestly assignments within the human environment. They are to understand that priesthood is an art of enlivening the spirit of Christ among the people.

SEMINARY FORMATION AND COST OF TRAINING

Seminary formation in the Catholic Church is deeply structured and holistic process aimed at preparing candidates for the ministerial priesthood. This formation is guided by ecclesiastical documents

¹⁰ cf. PO 14

such as the code of Canon Law, the Catechism of the Catholic Church and Lumen Gentium, alongside other essential magisterial texts. These documents collectively provide doctrinal, spiritual and practical norms for training of seminarians. In addition to spiritual and intellectual rigor, seminary formation entails significant financial commitment, making the cost of training an important aspect of ecclesial responsibility.

Foundation of Seminary Formation

The Church understands priestly formation as a total formation of the human person. According to *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, issued by the congregation for the clergy, seminary formation is structured around four essential pillars:

1. *Human Formation*: This concerns emotional maturity, discipline and relational capacity.
2. *Spiritual Formation*: deep communion with God through prayer and sacrament is integrated in the formation.
3. *Intellectual Formation*: philosophical and theological education is ensured in order to affirm the psycho-balance needed in the church.
4. *Pastoral Formation*: practical training in the ministry and service to the people of God is essential to the seminarian in

extension to what he may experience in future or in the ministerial field.¹¹

Training of Seminarians

The process of training unfolds in stages and is rooted in both theological and pastoral principles. According to JohnPaul II, in *Pastores Dabo Vobis*,¹² he emphasized that priestly formation must reflect the identity of Christ the Good Shepherd and it highlights the need for balance between being identity and doing mission.¹³ Similarly, Paul VI provides detailed norms on seminary education, including curriculum design and spiritual discipline which are:

1. Propaedeutic stage (introductory spiritual preparation or Spiritual year/ Novitiate)
2. Philosophy stage
3. Theology stage
4. Pastoral internship¹⁴

¹¹ (Dicastero Per Il Clero, 2016: The Gift of the Priestly Vocation: *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*. n.89. L'Observatore Romano – Vatican City 2016. <https://www.clerus.va>

¹² John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 1992

¹³ PDV. 43 – 59

¹⁴ Paul VI, Second Vatican Council, “optatam totius, 1965.21, *Aspects of Formation*

To this, the “*Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*” stresses careful evaluation at each stage to ensure suitability for priesthood.

Period of Formation

The total duration of formation generally spans from 6 to 8 years, although it may extend further depending on pastoral needs or specialisation. The theological grounding for this long formation is supported by Paul VI in *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, which explains the profound responsibilities of priests in teaching, sanctifying and governing the faithful. Because of this sacred responsibility, formation must be gradual, thorough and transformative.

Cost of Living and Training

The financial dimension of seminary formation is substantial and unavoidable. The cost of training a seminarian typically includes tuition and academic fees, academic materials and health care as well as personal upkeep. Globally, the annual cost of training one seminarian can be significant and in many regions including Africa, it represents a heavy burden on dioceses and congregations as well. The Church teaches that the training of priests is a shared responsibility whereby the diocese or congregation provide primary funding, the faithful contribute through donation while external benefactors and mission organisations assist.

Theological Significance of Seminary Formation

Seminary formation is not a mere professional training but a spiritual transformation into Christ-like service. *Lumen Gentium* presents priests as co-workers in the mission of Christ. The Catechism of the Catholic Church affirms the sacramental identity of the priesthood and *presbyterorum ordinis* underscores their pastoral responsibility. Thus, formation prepares seminarians to act in *persona Christi* for the sanctification of the faithful (*Salus animarum! Suprema lex!*)

We therefore sum up here that Seminary formation in the Catholic Church is a comprehensive and demanding process grounded in authoritative Church's teachings. Documents such as *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, *Pastores dabo Vobis* and *Optatam Totius*, provide essential structure and depth to this formation. Despite the high cost of seminary training, the Church considers it a necessary investment in its mission. The responsibility is shared among dioceses, and same is applicable to religious congregations, the faithful and the Universal Church. Ultimately, seminary formation is a sacred journey of transformation, forming men to serve God and humanity with dedication and competence.

APOSTOLIC/ PASTORAL EXPERIENCES

Pastoral and apostolic experiences in the Catholic Church in Nigeria are not merely institutional requirements but deeply formative and existential encounters. They provide seminarians with the

opportunity to integrate theological knowledge with lived reality. In this way, the experiences become not only an external activity but an internal transformation, where one gradually assumes the identity of a servant in an imitation of Jesus Christ.

Apostolic Experience, Structure and Practical Engagement

Apostolic work in seminary/religious formation is typically carried out within a period of six weeks. Within this limited time frame, the quality and depth of the experience largely depend on the seminarian's personal initiative, planning and openness to learning. Many seminarians, for instance, organise a structured weekly programme to ensure that the entire period is used meaningfully.

However, the nature of apostolic experience is significantly shaped by the place of assignment. There are clear distinctions between apostolic work done in urban communities, such as Lagos, Abuja, Port-Harcourt and that done in rural communities.

Apostolic Experience in Urban Parishes

In major cities like Lagos, seminarians are usually accommodated within the parish premises. Their duties are structured and largely confined to parish life.

These Include:

1. Teaching of Catechism to children in collaboration with the catechists in the parish

2. Organising Parish programmes especially with the youth but with the consent of the Parish priest.
3. Visiting Societies and organisations in the parish, still with the consent of the priest in-charge.
4. Assisting priests in liturgical celebrations especially at the sanctuary.

Within this environment, the seminarian gains practical knowledge of parish administration and church organisation. He learns directly from the clergy and acquires pastoral skills that will be useful in his future ministry.

Apostolic Experience in Rural and Village Settings

In contrast, seminarians assigned to villages or smaller towns encounter a more demanding and immersive apostolic experience. Often, they reside with parishioners rather than within parish facilities, fostering closer relationship with the faithful. Their responsibilities are:

1. Attending and assisting at Mass
2. Visiting homes across different villages under the parish
3. Visiting the sick and the elderly
4. Teaching catechism
5. Organising youth programmes, recognising the young people are the driving force of the church.

A distinctive feature of village apostolate is the rhythm or dimensions of daily spiritual life. The seminarian often begins the day early by ringing the bell in the parish to call the faithful for the angelus and morning devotions in the Church, which begins as early as 6:00am, lasting about thirty minutes, followed by mass at 7:00am. Thereafter, the day's pastoral activities continue.

Existential dimension of apostolic experience

Whether in urban or rural settings, apostolic work is fundamentally existential. It involves direct encounters with the lived realities of the Faithful, their joys, sufferings, poverty, hope and faith. The seminarian does not merely teach but also learns from the people. There is a mutual exchange of experiences. The faithful benefit from his presence, while he is enriched by their lived faith.

Pastoral Experience, a Year of Deep Formation

Unlike apostolic work, pastoral experience is a more extended programme, usually lasting one full year. During this period, the seminarian is placed in a parish or Institute where he works closely under the supervision of the priest in-charge. The activities carried out are similar to those of apostolic work, liturgical assistance, catechesis and parish engagement but with a more structured and evaluative dimension. Home visitation however, is often subject to explicit permission.

This stage allows the seminarian to develop practically what he has learned intellectually in the seminary. It is a period of deeper assimilation and maturity. During this period, the priests are expected to give more attention to the life and activities of the Senior Seminarian who is supposed at this time an acolyte installed a step away into the diaconate.

Formation through Observation and Evaluation

During pastoral placement, the supervising priest carefully observes the seminarian in multiple dimensions:

1. Liturgical competence
2. Social interaction
3. Sense of responsibility
4. Psychological and emotional maturity
5. Cultural Assimilation/Blend
6. General conduct and discipline.

The overall evaluation ensures that formation is not limited to academic excellence but extend to the total personality of the seminarian.

Documentation and pastoral awareness

At the end of his pastoral experience, the seminarian is required to prepare detailed reports of his activities. These reports are submitted to the priest in-charge and serve several important purposes such as:

1. To provide insight into how the parish and its outstations function
2. The seminarians document the conditions of the sick and elderly parishioners, mostly to those working in rural or villages not necessarily seminarians working in cities. It also depends on the discretion of the parish priest.
3. The document assists the parish priest in understanding the needs of the communities under his care.

Pastoral and apostolic experiences in the Catholic Church in Nigeria are indispensable elements of priestly formation. Though differs in duration and structure, both programmes aim at a common goal, the holistic formation of the seminarian. Whether serving in the structural environment of the city parish like Abuja or in the demanding condition of the rural villages like Nzam in Onitsha Archdiocese, the seminarian undergoes a profound existential journey. He learns to serve, to adapt and to grow through real human encounters.

MORAL AND FINANCIAL SUPPORTS FROM PRIESTS, PARISHIONERS, AND FAMILIES

The life and ministry of priests and ecclesiastically consecrated persons are anchored in the community in which they serve, because for the Church and the local community they were chosen and ordained. The Church, as a community of believers, expresses a mutual relationship between the priest and the lay faithful. This relationship is not merely a functional act but a theological *art* rooted

in the vision of Christ for the Church as the people of God. Within this foundation, the parishioners and families are called to provide both moral and financial support to their priests, ensuring the effectiveness and sustainability of pastoral ministry.

Moral Support of Priests

Moral support is foundational to the wellbeing and effectiveness of a priest. Though ordained for sacred service, priests remain human, with emotional, psychological and social needs. Parishioners and families have a primary duty to uphold their priests in prayer. Constant intercession for their spiritual strength, sincerity and holiness sustains them in their demanding vocation. Simple acts of encouragement, kind words, appreciation and recognition of effort, have a profound impact. Priestly ministry often involves hidden sacrifices, acknowledging these sacrifices encourages commitment and dedication.

Respect for the office and dignity of a priest is essential. Parishioners are called to avoid destructive criticism, gossips and undue aggression or hatred; instead, they should approach concerns constructively, recognising the burdens and responsibilities carried by their priests. Families in particular, play a unique role by offering hospitality and a sense of belonging. Inviting priests into family life-meals, celebrations and informal interactions helps reduce isolation and strengthens the bond between clergy and laity.

Financial and Material Support of Parish Priests

The material wellbeing of priests is a collective responsibility shared among or by the faithful. The Church explicitly teaches this obligation in the codes of canon law affirming that those who serve the altar should be supported by the community. Parishioners are responsible for ensuring that their priests have access to essential needs such as food, shelter, health care and means of transportation. This enables them to focus on their spiritual and pastoral duties without undue hardships. Regular financial contributions through personal gifts, offertory collections and donations form the backbone of parish support. These contributions sustain not only the priest but also the broader mission of the church.

Beyond personal needs, financial support extends to parish development, evangelisation programmes, charitable outreach and maintenance of Church facilities. In situations of illness, emergencies or special circumstances, parishioners and families are called to provide additional support. This reflects Christian charity and solidarity.

Reciprocal Responsibilities of Priests

While parishioners and families are called to support their priests, this responsibility exists within a reciprocal relationship. Priests in turn are obliged to serve the faithful with dedication and integrity.

1. They must live life of holiness and transparency by inspiring trust.

2. They should manage parish resources responsibly and ensure accountability.
3. They are called to show gratitude and pastoral sensitivity towards those who support them.
4. They must ensure that financial goods are used for the good of the Church and the Community.
5. They must carry along both the rich and the poor alike without prejudice.

The Role of the Families as Domestic Church

Families occupy a central place in supporting priests. As the domestic Church they:

1. Model Christian charity and generosity
2. Raise future vocations to the priesthood and religious life
3. Provide a natural environment of care, friendship and encouragement for priests.

Their involvement ensures that the priest does not function in isolation but within a living supportive community.

The immediate family of any seminarian or priest, which includes the father, mother and siblings, and other extended members of the family often play a very vital role in providing a continued care for their son/s embracing the vocation to the priesthood. Fr. Azebeokhai B (2026), emphasised that “Parents, and of course, all members of the family, may offer guidance, moral support, and a

sense of stability, especially during challenging times in the priest's career." He further asserts; "Siblings can also contribute by offering companionship and understanding, which is crucial in a role that often involves long hours of service and emotional strain. First and most enduring form of family support is emotional and spiritual encouragement. Even after a man is ordained, his family remains a fundamental source of love and acceptance".¹⁵

A priest, therefore, should not be too far from his own family. He should make frequent visitations to his parents and siblings spend quality time with them especially during his annual holidays, and to be a source of spiritual and psychological motivation to them also. Like Christ, his first point of ministry is his home for he remains a light to enlighten their belief in Christ and moral guide. The priest is to also bear in mind that he is not visiting to be a burden or to drag family belongings or properties, but his presence and contributions would help strengthen their mutual relationship, understanding and bridge gaps in communication between members of his family. He stands always in the middle when disagreements arise.

In many religious traditions, the priest stands as a bridge between divinity and humanity. The priest is an *Oracle*. This responsibility

¹⁵ Azebeokhai, B. O., Understanding the Catholic Priesthood: A Reflection on the Life and Mission of the Priest. *Amazon Publication, March 2026, USA. Care of the Priest: no. 12.*

requires not just spiritual insight but a strong sense of community integration and belongingness. The care provided by the people of God helps the priest to maintain a balanced life, ensuring that he can serve with firmness, but also with great humility, compassion, and integrity. This reciprocal relationship between the priest and the community and families is a testament to the sacred nature of the priest's ministry and importance of the people of God in sustaining it.¹⁶

The moral and financial support of priests in the parish by parishioners and families is not optional but essential to the life of the church. The church is a communion where each member contributes to the mission of Christ. While priests dedicate their lives to serve the faithful through the sacraments, teaching and pastoral care, the faithful in turn sustain them through prayer, encouragement and material support.

SOME CHALLENGES SEMINARIANS FACE IN EMBRACING THE CATHOLIC PRIESTHOOD IN NIGERIA

It may not be an exaggeration, asserting that just as a nation called Nigeria is beclouded with multifaceted and multi-dimensional problems, so are, the challenges facing seminarians in embracing the catholic priesthood in the above-mentioned geographical area. One

¹⁶ *ibid*

may say, why sound this way? It is obvious that anyone who lives in a very cold region, cannot claim or deny the effects of such a poor climate on him or her. So, does that suggest that the seminarians would have challenges at all? Not so! Instead, it points to the Nigerian factors. It is from this perspective, that we shall begin taking a closer look at various challenges therein.

Challenges may suggest difficulties, obstacles or problems existing and hindering progress over a particular issue or thing. Challenges could be of various forms: Environmental challenges, financial challenges, Materialistic challenges, lack of support from elderly priests, Intellectualism verses spirituality, and Unchecked Relationships.

Environmental Challenges

Environmental challenges are those challenges which come from particular environment, peculiar to that particular ecclesiastical or geographical region. This is because one environment or cultural area may not be the same as others in many respects. The socio-political situation in Nigeria, equally pose challenges to the growth of vocation to the priesthood. Nigeria's timing population, which may not be less than 300 million, join with high level of poverty created by decades of bad governance directly or indirectly led to what may be termed a vocation boom. Now there are many who have become seminarians for the priesthood with more still aspiring to join. And, due to the vast number of candidates aspiring, various strategies are now being employed to reduce the number of

admissions. The years of studies and formation in Nigeria have been elongated, quite different from the programme of many countries in the Western world. It takes not less than 11 to 12 years of training before one is ordained a catholic priest in Nigeria, which is a good arrangement to ensure extensive preparation for difficult pastoral works, and to prepare the candidate for future challenges.

To be more realistic, Seminarians in Nigeria are given poor attention in terms of care. They are often left alone to cater for themselves and for their needs, especially when on vacations. This makes those who have no benefactors and well to do families to fall prey to certain temptations in the society. The ecclesiastical authorities and religious congregations are to take care to follow-up situations faced by many of their Seminarians. It is not out of place for a well-groomed seminarian to do some extra works for financial incomes to augment and to contribute to the community's efforts, but that should be a lesser distraction to their studies and lifestyle.

Most formators in our seminaries and institutes pose certain challenges to the seminarians and formandi by their ways of life within and outside the Seminaries. All formation agents are to be chosen carefully, and they are to know that the future behaviours of those candidates depend much on the influence they imparted during the formation process. Formation extends beyond classroom lectures, work and prayer to character formation.

We may also view environmental challenges from the point of insecurity, in the wake of many terrorist activities in the Nigerian society today. A situation in these times when seminaries are been attacked by hoodlums and seminarians and priests kidnapped for alarming ransom, and sometimes killed. For these seminaries are often closed and seminarians vacated for safety. Even though the seminarians desire to pursue their priestly vocation, their families may be reluctant to see allow their sons to remain in such areas.

Financial challenges

Financial challenge is another aspect we must not ignore especially during these present times. The cost of training a seminarian is not a small bargain, especially in the Nigeria context. Majority of the candidates and aspirants to the priesthood in Nigeria are from very poor families and backgrounds. We have a very high ratio of seminarians from poor families. And so, finance becomes a challenge to their vocation. In most cases they are advised to seek for sponsors. The Church may put in a lot or give support in the whole process, but still not enough. Where a seminarian loses a benefactor or unable to find one, the thought of becoming a Catholic priest becomes a nightmare. See these; in Nigeria, a set of breviary sells for Two Hundred and Fifty Thousand Naira (₦250,000), a white Soutane goes for Forty Thousand Naira (40,000) and other requirements for studies are equally high in prices. How does a seminarian from poor background, who actually has the vocation, cope if he has no financial backing? And it is obviously clear that it

is not always easy for sponsors to provide the needed fund, given the economic situation in the country, among other things facing them as the case may be. So, when a seminarian had already given himself for the call, and then having financial concerns, it becomes a double challenge on the seminarian in embracing the priesthood. We have very many of such candidates in Nigeria.

It is necessary at this point to encourage the Dioceses and Religious institutes to always make budgets for training of their candidates for the Sacred priesthood and to admit based on their available funds, while seminarians are equally encouraged to do some vacation programmes, e.g. part-time teaching, farm works, etc, works that are dignified, to raise little sums to support their minor needs. It is not still wise enough for one to lay all his burdens on his benevolent benefactor.

The Support of Elderly Priests

One of the challenges faced by young seminarians and candidates aspiring to the priesthood in Nigeria is the discouraging attitudes of some priests toward the seminarians from their Parishes and those assigned to them. When two priests living together are at dagger-drawn relationship with each other, and this is visibly displayed before the aspirants, Seminarians and the entire parishioners, is that not bad enough to send wrong and discouraging signals? When a Priest refuses to welcome a seminarian to the rectory and parish with open arms, and treats the seminarians as one or two irrelevant errand

boys, what signals does that send to the youths of that parish? In most Dioceses and Parishes, Seminarians on Apostolic work no longer have a place in the Parish Houses, they are better pushed to live permanently or rotationally in the homes of Parishioners, left at the mercy of the villagers until they complete their assignment, all in the names of Pastoral experiences. When exactly does the parish priest get to know the candidate, encourage him and corrects his mistakes?

There is need to re-examine the above-mentioned practice. Many seminarians have met their waterloo due to the unnecessary distance between them and their bosses. We must remember that apostolic work is an extension of the candidate's formative process and the priests they are sent to are automatically formators by proxy. Elderly priests are encouraged to be generous to their Seminarians as they are by so doing, assisting those to take after them when they are no longer able to play on the open field.

We must be careful not to treat our Seminarians with contempt and as though are some pieces of trash. Their vocation is as precious to God as ours. Fostering vocations for Christ and His Church must be separated from personal dislike and hatred. Vocation is an unmerited treasure gifted us by Christ, and must be nourished and encouraged with love. If Christ could accompany Judas until the end, we too, should do well to sincerely accompany our younger candidates with agape love.

Worldly or Materialistic Distractions

Obviously, worldly distractions abound facing the seminarians in their journey to the priesthood. The craze for luxuries, materialism, beautiful women, the social media and trending issues with wide range of pleasure pouring in from across the world are serious matches for the seminarians. This is a wide area to actually delve into, but they are constantly there, tempting seminarians away from their special vocation.

Intellectual and spiritual activities in the seminaries are quite demanding. Bishops as well as superiors of various religious institutes charges their seminarians to do better in the seminaries. Having two or more carryovers in one's courses, could make one's bishop or superior withdraw one from the seminary. And if he is not measuring up with formation, he could be withdrawn. Examination malpractice is a taboo in the seminaries; its effect is expulsion. Seminarians are therefore highly encouraged to tighten their belts to face their studies and be self-controlled at all times. They must strive to avoid all that may distract their attention from studies and formation. They must be careful not to trade their vocation for a pound of dog meat.

Unchecked Relationship

Another challenge which seminarians face in the course of their vocation is the problem of unchecked relationships. Any relationship

which does not promote or contribute morally to sustaining your vocation must be jettison. Whether such relationship is between a seminarian and females or between seminarians i.e., cases of homosexual or its tendencies can be a serious problem if not checked carefully. At times, these unchecked relationships may go with one of the parties pressurising the other to give in, to such wrong act. Whether caught in the act or showing the tendencies, jeopardizes vocations of those involved. Sometimes the individuals involved, may be deceived to believe that they could handle such wrong relationship at the early stage, and little they knew it, it is already beyond them. Unchecked relationships not only distract many seminarians; it goes as well to mar their vocations.

In a nutshell, challenges facing seminarians in embracing the catholic priesthood abounds in Nigeria, somehow it may make the seminarian stronger if aided and properly guided relying on the grace of God. Hence, the Church in Nigeria should do some adjustment where necessary to aid their seminarians.

CHECKING DISCOURAGEMENTS AND APPRECIATING THE CATHOLIC PRIESTHOOD AMONG THE YOUTHS IN NIGERIA

It is indeed an irrefutable truth that catholic priesthood is a noble and highly demanding vocation. Calling into this sacred vocation emanates from God, hence the letter to the Hebrews 5:4 stated thus “No one takes this honour on himself, it needs a call from God as in Aaron’s case.” This makes every priest a partaker in the eternal high

priesthood of Jesus Christ who is a priest forever in the order of Melchizedek of old (psalm 110:4). In our world today, especially in Nigeria, many factors are discouraging the young ones from joining the catholic priesthood. Most of these factors are superficial in nature and tries to divert the interest of the young ones to mundane things. Some of them are Global influence, quest for quick wealth (yahoo boys' factor), high rate of moral decadence in our society, fear of unknown factor amongst others Despite the status quo described above, there are some attitudes which can help young ones to appreciate catholic priesthood in Nigeria despite the many challenges in our times.

Prayer Life

Active prayer life is one of the most essential practices a candidate aspiring for catholic priesthood must make part of his daily life. Prayer is the key to success. Our Lord and Master, Jesus Christ know this very well hence he embarked on a prayerful journey to wilderness for forty days and forty nights before coming out to defeat Satan (Mt 4: 1-11). He equally repeated prayerful journey to Gethsemane (Mt 26:36-46) before he successfully underwent the agony of Calvary which culminated in human redemption. Prayer according to the catechism of the Catholic Church is described as the 'raising of one's mind and hearts up to God', or the requesting of

good things from God.¹⁷ Prayer makes communication between humanity and Divinity possible. Just as umbilical cord connects the child to the mother for nourishment and warmth, so prayer connects one to God for spiritual nourishment, hope, direction and encouragement especially during trial periods.

Prayer helps young aspirants to the sacred priesthood to remain undaunted despite all odds. Just as Fish cannot do without water, Christians especially those for priestly vocation cannot do without prayer. Priests and priesthood candidates are hereby encouraged to put on the garment of prayer; it is the only way to surmount the different distractions that may come their way to dampen their zeal and efforts to serve God and humanity as catholic priests. To actualise this, it is very imperative to adopt the “PUSH” mentality which implies pray until something happen.

Focusing on Christ

This point is well captured in the scriptures; Hebrews 12:2 says; “Look unto Jesus the author and finisher of our faith”. Everything about priesthood is centered on Jesus Christ hence the whole focus should be on him. As the body cannot function well without the central nervous system, Priests cannot perform well without their role model and master Jesus Christ. The primary focus of every

¹⁷ Catechism of the Catholic Church, 2nd ed. (Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vatican, 1997), no 2559.

aspirant should be Jesus Christ who is the master of the vineyard and concomitantly infallible. Doing this will help the aspirants to remain tenacious in their efforts to become priests even when they experience some inauspicious dispositions from people closer to them, and in some cases their formators who are not immune from mistakes. In Christ they will find encouragement when in low spirits. One of the best ways to achieve this is to study the Bible and internalize the word of God which is Christ Himself.

Openness to Formation Process

Openness to formation is a situation whereby the candidates under formation embrace formation processes without reservation. In this case, they pass through formation and allow formation to pass through them. In doing this, the candidates become aware of the basic things expected of them and hence become more ready to remain firm in their quest to become priests notwithstanding the waves of life that may come their way.

Formation is a very systemic and enduring process that an aspiring candidate has to undergo before his ordination if found worthy at the end of the formation process. This process is fundamental in preparing candidates for catholic priesthood. Aspiring candidates are like raw materials to be processed into finished products. This process therefore helps to mould and shape the candidates appropriately for the catholic priesthood, by groomed and reputable formators. Process of formation is categorized into various stages

and can last up to fifteen years and beyond. At each level of formation there are copious things that the candidates are expected to learn and make them part and parcel of their lives. To achieve this, openness to formation is inevitable.

Conviction and Determination

Conviction and determination are like the two sides of a coin. They work hand-in-hand in pursuit of one's target. While conviction is a firm belief that what one is pursuing is the right thing, determination on the other hand offers the ability to remain firm in pursuing what one is convinced of to be the right thing despite how arduous the process may be. In the scope of our discourse, conviction is an assured belief that God is calling one to be a catholic priest. A person with such conviction should be ready to pursue it with all the vigour and vitality in him despite some human elements that may pose as stumbling block. Conviction and determination have helped to resurrect the vocation of countless number of candidates and at the end their persistence rewarded. This can serve as a beacon of hope to those undergoing vocation crises.

Humility of the Candidate

Humility is obligatory for anyone who wants to be a catholic priest. Humility is the mother of all virtues hence it is that virtue that unlocks other virtues for the candidate to assess. In the history of human redemption all the major figures were known for their extraordinary humility. First among them is our Lord Jesus Christ

who the scripture stated that He was extremely humble regardless that he was in the form of God and for this reason God highly exalted Him and gave Him a name above every other name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bend, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Phil 2: 2-11).

Furthermore, the uncommon humility of the Blessed Virgin Mary was crucial in her becoming the mother of God (*Theotokos*). According to the scripture, Mother Mary responded to Angel Gabriel's message thus; "*Behold the handmaid of the Lord, be it done to me according to your words*" (Lk 1:38). From the foregoing analysis it is very glaring that humility is inevitable for anyone who desires to be a priest. One of the reasons is that the journey to priesthood is a lengthy and rigorous one. On the process the aspirant passes through many formators and each Formator has a stake in his success. If such aspirant is not humble and obedient to his formators, there is every possibility that he will be dismissed; hence knowing that such will be his fate is enough encouragement for him to be humble to every constituted authority and seniors so that the expected crown of glory will be his at the end.

Spiritual Direction

Spiritual direction is a very sensitive and essential medium through which candidates for priesthood get enough encouragement to continue in their aspiration to become priests in spite of the

enormous encumbrances involve in the process. This exercise provides conducive opportunity for spiritual and confidential discussion between a candidate for priesthood and a priest who is an authority in spiritual matters (Spiritual director). The candidate on spiritual direction uses such occasion to discuss his fears, challenges (economic, academic, spiritual, health) and others to the spiritual director who listens keenly to him and at the end offers him piece of advice and encouragement. This practice has helped to save many vocations in Nigeria and across the globe and it is encouraged that going for spiritual direction should be a priority to candidates under formation.

Catholic priesthood is a special vocation from God with high expectations and responsibilities. The process to this noble vocation is very onerous and full of suspense. Many have tried it and succeeded while many have been shown the exit doors due to one reason or the other. Today, many are still in the system and others are willing to join the system but unfortunately, they are being discouraged and disillusioned due to one reason or the other. However, with active prayer life, focusing on Christ, openness to formation, humility of the candidate, and constant spiritual direction, candidates in this category will find their zeal renewed to continue their quest to serve God and humanity as catholic priests.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the above x-ray on vocation to the Catholic priesthood in Nigeria, which of course may be applicable to other

Catholic Nations around the world, is generally meant to throw more light on the process of nurturing, promoting and preserving this wonderful gift of priesthood which Christ has offered to us. It enlightens our young ones both aspiring in various parishes and those already under formation more on the training and life expected of the seminarians during their formation stage.

The call into the priesthood is a special gift and a sacrament from God to humanity, meant for the sanctification of the human race but yet few are granted the gift to minister on the priestly altar. As a gift therefore and attached to the eternal priesthood of Christ, we who are privileged to have a share in it are to preserve and guide this gift more jealously. The onus lies on us to afire the same zeal and interest on the younger ones so as to ensure its continuity. The individuals themselves have great roles to play in order to keep this vocational gift intact, the Church who selects have great role in guiding, supporting, tutoring and counselling those she chose not to be discouraged. The parents are called upon to realise that it is a great recognition of one's family for God to call one of their own and chosen by the Church to benefit from this divine gift, therefore they are to do more to support their priest. They are to spend to assist their chosen member to answer the call to the full, they are to keep on encouraging by regular visits, advice, prayers, and living by example in their own way of life within their community and parish.

The Home Parishioners and Priests of the same Parish and Parish Priests are to be interested in the success of the candidates chosen

from their Parishes. They are encouraged to pay attention to their young seminarians, during holidays, apostolic/pastoral experiences, and even when in school. They are not to abandon the candidates knowing full well that vocation to the Sacred Priesthood is very delicate, vulnerable and a treasure in an earthen ware. The vocation boom in Nigeria must not be taken for granted. It must be properly utilized, for I foresee Nigeria as one of those nations Christ has prepared ahead of the turbulent days when attraction and admissions to priesthood in most international regions may become almost impossible. We must not kill the current zeal of young ones who are still struggling to say yes to the call of God, yet the Church in her constant wisdom is to continue to guide against abuses, unhealthy infiltrations into the priesthood. More trained formators and counsellors are to be appointed by Dioceses and Religious Congregations as Directors of Vocations and vocation promoters and empower them adequately to do the task.

Finally, the Dioceses and Congregations are encouraged to always make adequate long-term plans on how to bear the major financial burdens of their candidates in the seminaries while the families and friends support with whatever they can offer for the personal needs of the candidates. Dioceses and Congregations should never be tired of creating and appealing to vocation supporters and international bodies for the training support of their candidates. And Seminarians on apostolic and pastoral works must keep on building up more vocation groups among the youths and families within the Parishes

they are assigned to serve with the resident priests giving adequate backings.

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Studies & Perspectives

**Preferential Option for the Poor:
The Church in Nigeria and the Teachings of *Dilexi Te***

Anselm Kole JIMOH¹

*St. Theresa Catholic Church, Fugar
Catholic Diocese of Auchi*

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Abstract

This paper is a critical review of the preferential option for the poor in Pope Leo XIV's Encyclical Letter, Dilexi Te – I Have Loved You, within the context of the Church in Nigeria. It analyzes the concept of the preferential option for the poor, tracing its origin and development as a core principle of Catholic social teachings, and

¹ Anselm Jimoh is a Catholic priest of the Diocese of Auchi, a Professor of Philosophy who spent well over two decades as a Formator at All Saints Major Seminary, Ekpoma, and SS. Peter and Paul Seminary, Bodija-Ibadan respectively. He is currently the Vicar General II of the Diocese of Auchi and Parish Priest of St. Theresa Catholic Church, Fugar, Edo State. He is a seasoned author of six books and multiple academic papers in International and local journals both in Philosophy and Religion.

*Preferential Option for the Poor:
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examined how applicable it has been in the Church in Nigeria. While acknowledging the efforts of the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria to implement the provisions of the preferential option for the poor, I highlighted the need to be more practical, especially at the grassroots to ensure that the Catholic Church in Nigeria truly prioritize the poor and marginalized in the country. My conclusion is that there is a lot more to be done, especially by the clergy to truly prioritize the poor, marginalized, and vulnerable in the Church in Nigeria.

Keywords: Catholic Social Teaching, Church in Nigeria, *Dilexi Te*, Preferential option for the poor, Poverty.

Introduction

The preferential option for the poor is a call on Christians to prioritize the needs of the poor, the vulnerable, the marginalized, and the oppressed of society. It is a core principle of Catholic Social Teachings that is deeply grounded in the Bible, the teachings of Jesus Christ, and the tradition of the Church. Pope Leo XIV revisited this call in his first Apostolic Exhortation, *Dilexi te* – I Have Loved You, issued on October 4, 2025. In this paper, within the context of the Church in Nigeria, I critically examine and analyze the preferential option for the poor as elucidated in *Dilexi te*. My aim is to highlight what the Church in Nigeria can do to truly make the poor and marginalized her priority.

Understanding the Idea of the Preferential Option for the Poor

The phrase “preferential option for the poor,” which I shall henceforth refer to as POP in this paper, was first employed by Fr Pedro Arrupe, the then Superior General of the Society of Jesus (Jesuits). He used the phrase in a 1968 letter to his Jesuits confrere in Latin America. The phrase was warmly embraced and later popularized by the Conference of Latin American Bishops (CELAM)² and the liberation theology movement. In 1987 and 1991, Pope St. John Paul II integrated the phrase into his encyclicals, *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*³ and *Centesimus Annus*⁴ respectively. In *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, he considers POP as a “Special form of primacy in the exercise of Christian charity,” which should shape our lives and approach as individuals to the development of the world.⁵ The emphasis being that authentic development must give priority to the needs of the most vulnerable and justice for the poor must be upheld. In his 1991 *Centesimus Annus*, he expands the

² United States Catholic Mission Association, (2025), “Serving the poor: Jesus’ little ones – Missionary commentary for Sunday, January 26, 2025. <https://uscatholicmission.org>

³ John Paul II, (1987), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis* – The Social Concern. <https://www.vatican.va>

⁴ John Paul II, (1991), *Centesimus Annus*. <https://www.vatican.va>

⁵ John Paul II, (1987), *Sollicitudo Rei Socialis*, no. 42. See also, Caritas Singapore (2021), “Choosing to love and prefer the poor.” <https://www.caritas-singapore.org>

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concept of the poor in the POP to include spiritual and material poverty,⁶ stressing that it is not an optional charity to prioritize the love for the poor but a demand for justice. Pope Benedict XVI embraced the concept and extended its use to include widows, children, people of disabilities, and victims of oppression.⁷ Pope Leo XIV's *Dilexi Te*⁸ (which develops on Pope Francis' *Dilexit Nos*⁹), considers poverty as a multifaceted phenomenon expressed in many forms. According to Leo XIV, "In fact, there are many forms of poverty: the poverty of those who lack material means of subsistence, the poverty of those who are socially marginalized...moral and social poverty, cultural poverty, the poverty of those who find themselves in a condition of personal and social weakness...the poverty of those who have no rights, no space, no freedom" and the poverty of knowledge and lack of access to

⁶ John Paul II (1991), *Centesimus Annus*, no. 57. See also U.S. Catholic (2015), "What is the preferential option for the poor?" <https://www.uscatholic.org>, and Midwest Augustinians, "Preferential option for the poor." <https://www.midwestaugustinians.org>

⁷ Kira Dault, (2015), "What is the preferential option for the poor?" *U. S. Catholic*, vol. 80, no. 1, p.46.

⁸ Leo XIV, (2025), Apostolic Exhortation *Dilexi te* (I Have Loved You). <https://www.vatican.va>

⁹ Francis, (2024), *Dilexit Nos*, Encyclical Letter on "The Human and Divine Love of the Heart of Jesus Christ. <https://www.vatican.va>

basic education.¹⁰ These, according to the Holy Father, are serious constraints on human dignity.

As one of the “major developments in Catholic social teaching in the 20th century,”¹¹ POP is a call on Christians to promote social justice, care for, and assist the poor and vulnerable as a precept of the Lord Jesus Christ.¹² It is not just a requirement for charity, for while charity is inclusive, POP explicates a deep moral obligation that we consider the world from the standpoint of those whose economic, social, and cultural situations confine to the margins of society. Thus, it is a call to be proactive in the advocacy for change in the structures that breed and sustain poverty and oppression in society.

The idea of a POP is a moral principle that provides a framework aimed at healing the entire community of humanity by purging it of the structural architecture of poverty, oppression, and division. It is about placing justice over charity, regulation of the earth’s resources for equitable distribution, and inclusivity. Justice over charity recognizes the importance of almsgiving, aids and relief provision, it however, emphasizes the need to dismantle systemic inequities in access to education, healthcare, and fair labour. The aim here is to

¹⁰ Leo XIV, (2025), *Dilexi Te*, no. 9.

¹¹ Kira Dault, (2015), “What is the preferential option for the poor?”

¹² *Code of Canon Law: Latin-English Edition*, (Washington DC: Canon Law Society of America, 1983), Can. 222 §2.

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ensure the preservation of true human dignity. This provides the grounds for equity in the distribution of the resources of the earth.

Concerning the equitable distribution of the earth's resources, POP upholds that God created the resources of our world for the benefit of all, rather than the exclusive preserve of the rich and powerful. Therefore, it rejects economic systems that are exclusionary and unregulated, especially when it further pushes the poor into poverty. In this light, POP advocates a regulation in the distribution of the earth's resources while advancing the principle of inclusivity. While it acknowledges the universality of God's love, special attention should be given to those who are marginalized to ensure that the existential conditions that make them vulnerable are not exploited. This guarantees the preservation and respect for their human dignity and rights.

Against exclusivity, the term "preferential" in the preferential option for the poor is not to be interpreted as excluding the wealthy and privileged of society, but a recognition and acknowledgement of God's special compassion for the poor and marginalized who are not to be denied of their access to resources that would enable them actively to participate in society.

POP is therefore, about the justice that uplifts those most burdened when we ensure that the policies and principles that guide our ministries always take into cognizance their effect on the poor. Such policies and principles should ensure that the poor, oppressed, and vulnerable are beneficiaries instead of being relegated to the fringes.

The Theological Grounding for the Preferential Option for the Poor (POP)

The preferential option for the poor (POP) is a theological mandate that is grounded on scripture, the life of Christ, and the tradition of the Church. According to Pope Leo XIV in *Dilexi te* (DT), the Christian love, which is modelled on the love of Christ derives its authenticity from prioritizing the marginalized. Thus, the visible and concretized solidarity with the poor is the mark of authentic Christian discipleship. The love of the poor is central to the Christian life and holiness since the love for Christ cannot be separated from the love for the poor.¹³ In other words, to love Christ necessarily implies to love the poor, which the early Christian communities exemplified in their charity and care for the needy. Therefore, *DT* theologically grounds the POP on Sacred Scripture, Christology, and the lived Tradition of the Church.

The primary scriptural grounding for the POP revolves around Christ affirmation of his divine love for the marginalized and oppressed in a powerless community (Rev 3:8-9), and Mary's Magnificat of divine justice wherein God "Casts down the mighty" and "exalts the lowly" (Lk 1:52-53). These major passages were reinforced by prophetic traditions from Isaiah 1:17, 23; 10:1-4; 25:4; 32:2; 61:1-2; 11:4; 58:6-7, Amos 2:6-7; 4:1-3; 5:11-14, 21-24; 3-6, and Micah 2:1-5. 9-10; 3:1-1, 9-12; 4:6-7; 5:2-4, that show how God consistently stood by and with the poor throughout the history of

¹³ Leo XIV, (2025), *Dilexi Te*, nos. 3 & 5.

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salvation. These prophets denounced exploitation and called for justice, indicating that God “has a special place in his heart for those who are discriminated against and oppressed.”¹⁴ These scriptural foundations exhibit that the love for the poor is not optional, but a necessary and required direct participation in the mission of Christ.

Christ himself who is the Christian model, exemplified the POP when he identified with the poor and marginalized in his incarnation (Jn 1:14; Matt 1:23; Phil 2:6-7; Gal 4:4). He established by this that divine love is not and should not be separated from solidarity with the poor. When he declared his mission in Lk 4:18, Christ squarely placed himself in the circumstances and situations of the poor declaring that his mission is to bring good news to the poor.¹⁵ At the beginning of his public ministry in the Beatitudes, which can easily pass as his divine manifesto, Christ appropriates blessedness to the poor in spirit, the meek and those who hunger for righteousness (Matt 5:3-12). And throughout his public ministry, Christ consistently identified with the poor, marginalized and the outcasts of society (Matt 25:40; Lk 6:20; 14:13-14; Mk 2:16-17; Jn 8:1-11). At the end of his life, in and through his passion he radically identifies with suffering humanity (Is 53:4-5; Phil 2:7-8; Heb 2:17-18; Matt 27:46; 1Pet 2:24).

¹⁴ Leo XIV, (2025), *Dilexi Te*, no. 16.

¹⁵ Leo XIV, (2025), *Dilexi Te*, no. 59.

The lived tradition of the Church amply indicates that our forebears understood and took literally Christ's POP. The accounts in Acts 2 and 4 provide us the model of community sharing practiced by the early Church to ensure that no one who may be in need is left out. And the likes of St. Francis of Assisi and St. Vincent de Paul remain for us till date embodiments of the care for the poor and needy. Recognising the scriptural basis, the example of Christ, the early ecclesial practices, and the examples of the saints, the Magisterium has maintained the centrality of the POP in the mission of the Church. Thus, *Rerum Novarum*¹⁶ (1891) defends the right of workers, *Populorum Progressio*¹⁷ (1967) emphasized the integral human development, and *Evangelii Gaudium*¹⁸ (2013) emphasized that the poor are the privileged recipients of the gospel, and *Dilexit Nos* (2024) explicated the human and divine love of the heart of Jesus Christ. *Dilexi Te* – I have loved you, continues to emphasize the love of Jesus for the lowly and suffering as the Christian model.

¹⁶ Leo XIII, (1891), *Rerum Novarum*, Encyclical Letter on Capital and Labour. <https://www.vatican.va>

¹⁷ Paul VI, (1967), *Populorum Progressio*, Encyclical on The Development of Peoples. <https://www.vatican.va>

¹⁸ Francis, (2013), *Evangelii Gaudium*, Apostolic Exhortation "On the Proclamation of the Gospel in Today's World. <https://www.vatican.va>

The Nigerian Ecclesial Identity

The ecclesial identity of Nigeria is a very complex one denoted with diverse denominations that may be grouped into the Orthodox, Protestant and Pentecostal. In this paper, my focus is on the Catholic ecclesial community and identity. The Nigerian Catholic population is placed at 35,097,000 as of March 8, 2026.¹⁹ The Catholic ecclesial identity in Nigeria is rooted in community life that struggles to adapt to the various cultures in Nigeria by blending the universal traditions of the Catholic Church with Nigerian cultural expressions. What this brings to the Church is the beautiful and colourful liturgy, the vibrant display of faith in Catholic worship that marks out its religious identity. It also instils a sense of social belonging as most Catholics easily and happily identify with their fellow Catholics regardless of tribe or culture. A notable aspect of the Catholic ecclesial identity in Nigeria is that it has a very strong institutional presence, well and highly organized structures visible in how she provides social services, education, health care, and pastoral activities. Despite her heavily hierarchical top-down administrative structure, she has a very deep grassroots presence and engagement.

¹⁹ GCatholic, (2026), “Catholic Church in Nigeria.” <https://gcatholic.org>. See also, Tony Onyima, (2025), “Nigeria records 35m Catholics, as Faith shifts to Global South.” *ITREALMS*, <https://www.itrealms.com.ng>

The Church in Nigeria and the Preferential Option for the Poor (POP)

Technically, and in principle, it is correct to say that the Catholic Church in Nigeria as an institution embodies and actively upholds the POP. However, in terms of practice, we may not be able to say the same without qualifying it, especially at the grassroots. Through her pastoral teaching, social programmes and initiatives of charity, the Church emphasizes the importance and necessity to care for the poor and marginalized, she provides education through the various Catholic institutions at all levels, healthcare through Catholic hospitals, seek justice through the Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC), promote charity programmes that include feeding of the poor and providing other basic necessities. Catholic Bishops and priests speak on issues of justice, compassion, and care for the poor and needy, and many of them go on outreach programmes to provide necessities for the needy within their pastoral jurisdictions, and some beyond. There are priests who have different initiatives and foundations aimed at alleviating the burden of the poor. As an ecclesial institution, the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN), and individual Bishops speak out against corruption and government policies that are harmful to the poor, they seek social justice and accountability from our public officials.

There is no doubt that the national economic hardship of the country is taking its toll on the Nigerian people, especially the rural parishes where limitedness of resources is a serious challenge. Thus, regardless of the efforts of the Church in Nigeria, widespread

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poverty remains very visible in our parishes. In many parishes, there are visible divides between the few who have and the many who do not have, and a third layer/level of those who lack and are barely struggling to survive. Also notable is how some of our priests exploit available avenues (anniversary and birthday celebrations are particularly prominent here) to squeeze resources from the parishioners.

Although the Church in Nigeria does, in principle embodies the POP, the exorbitant cost of accessing education and healthcare in our Catholic education institutions and hospitals presents antithetical scenarios to the very notion of POP. I do not overlook the fact that these institutions require funds to run and sustain reliable and trustworthy standards, nonetheless, I strongly believe that provisions can be made to accommodate access to these institutions (especially the healthcare) by the poor. Such provisions can include appreciably discounted rates for those who fall within the category of the poor. This should include institutional scholarship funds specifically for the poor who qualify to study in Catholic (or Christian owned) educational institutes. The model of the Apostolic Era where all contribute to a common purse to equitably meet the needs of all (Acts 4:32-35) should be projected.

The episcopal leadership of the Catholic Church in Nigeria is doing a lot with the periodical statements contained in the communiques from the CBCN, following their bi-annual plenary sessions. However, Nigerian Catholic Bishops can be more practical in

actively pursuing and ensuring that the marginalized are a priority in parishes within their local Churches. This would imply a check in the seemingly unbridled drive for money at every diocesan celebration, untamed levies to parishes, and a more realistic appraisal of parish capabilities before levies are imposed on them. Those who bear the brunt of these drives and levies are the poor who continue to deprive themselves of the little they have, to meet with the requests of these drives and levies.

While Catholic Bishops in Nigeria, collectively and individually, issue statements concerning the mandate of POP, it behooves Priests to take the statements of the bishops seriously, disseminate and implement what the bishops teach. It does not seem that many priests pay attention to these statements from the Bishops' conference, less a lone, disseminate nor try to implement them at the grassroots, in their various parishes and/or places of ministry.

Priests should identify more with their poor parishioners to give them a sense of belonging. This is not a suggestion to exclude the rich, it is instead, a demand for inclusivity. To give equal respect and value to both the rich and the poor in our parishes. To this end, the rich should be catechised to understand that they have a Christian obligation of love to provide from their wealth to uplift the burden of the poor. If the rich notice a genuine attachment by the priest to uplifting the poor, they are likely to naturally key in to his vision. If the priest is always calling the rich when he wants to celebrate his anniversary, birthday, change his car, put up a building, replace the generator or install an alternative power generation system, but never

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calls the rich to handle a case of injustice done to a widow, help with the surgery of the son/daughter of a struggling parishioner, help with the schooling, or skill acquisition of a struggling youth, provide a health scheme for the many sick poor parishioners who think that paracetamol cures all ailments because that is all they can afford, the priest clearly has no understanding of the POP and he is not incarnating the Church's teaching in his parish. To be a living Church, there must be a synergy of the gospel teachings and the practice of faith, where what we do is a reflection of what we teach and profess.

This raises the question about how our worship and the Eucharist bring us into a closer encounter with the Lord, in and through the poor. *DT* emphasizes that there is a direct, inseparable link that exist between the Eucharist and the love for the poor. Care for the poor and marginalized is a continuation of our liturgy. A Christian who cannot recognize and serve Christ in the poor cannot genuinely worship Christ in the liturgy.²⁰ Christ was not crucified in a Cathedral between two candles beautifully burning on a golden candle stand, he was crucified on a crossroad between two thieves. If our Mass, the celebration of the Eucharist is (which it is) a re-enactment of the passion and death of Christ, it should go beyond the beautiful voices of the choir, the wonderful chants of the prayers, preface, and eloquent homily of the priest, the solemn and

²⁰ Leo XIV, (2025), *Dilexi Te*, nos. 3 & 27

orderliness of worship, to include the recreation of Christ's love in the lives of the poor, suffering, and unremembered parishioners outside the walls of our Church, right in their homes and in the streets where we encounter them. Every true and authentic worship should necessarily be preceded or accompanied with the care for the poor. *DT* cites St Lawrence who emphasized that feeding the hungry takes precedence over golden vessels.²¹

The Eucharist is a service; it is the sacramental expression of charity and justice that Jesus' life, which includes his teachings and deeds, embodied. Therefore, our Eucharistic adoration and worship should translate into actions of service to those who are in need. To this end, priests and the lay faithful who function at Mass should adequately prepare to encounter Christ in the Eucharist to make him visible in their roles and functions at Eucharistic worships and celebrations.

Specifically, therefore, Lectors at Masses should adequately practice before they ascend the pulpit to read. Priests should do likewise; they should familiarize themselves with the day's readings, prepare the homily, taking into consideration the congregation, the practical applicability of the Word of God to the existential circumstances of the members of the congregation, pay attention to the rubrics and follow the rubrics, never rush through any part of the celebration, and never any part of the celebration as an avenue to display intelligence, singing skills, and entertainment quality. Priests should

²¹ Leo XIV, (2025), *Dilexi Te*, no. 38

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preserve the solemnity and dignity fitting and conducive for encountering Christ in worship that all the worshippers can in turn become Christ to those they encounter after their worship.

The choir should be careful to maintain the responsorial psalm as a meditative song and not an avenue to showcase new tunes. In the same way liturgical songs should be kept liturgical, hymns and songs that the congregation can engage in. The congregation, especially the locals, uneducated and illiterate should never be cut off in any part of the Mass, be it homily or singing. While specialized songs and music are beautiful and welcomed, they should be at minimal during the public worship (liturgy) of the Church. This is to enable the active participation of all, educated or not, literate or not, rich or poor. Church wardens/ushers should be careful about disrespecting some persons (on account of their poverty) while privileging other persons (on account of their wealth). Everyone who walks through the doors of the Church must be accorded equal respect and dignity, ushered to available spaces to sit comfortably and participate fully and actively. Reserving seats for special people who are coming late while many ordinary parishioners are standing should be discouraged. This does not mean we cannot reserve seats at special occasions and celebrations, but even then, adequate preparation should be made for the ordinary parishioners who may be displaced because of such reservations. In this way, we would make our worship and liturgy a real Eucharistic celebration where all are dignifiedly welcomed and accommodated.

These recommendations require adequate formation on the part of both the priests and the laity to actualize. Formation, just like conversion, is an ongoing process as no one is ever completely formed or converted. For the formation of priests, seminaries should de-emphasize hierarchical and slavish obedience and emphasize the idea of true authority as service. This will help curb the triumphalism of priests, especially newly ordained priests. Formation of priests should instil in the formandi that every position of authority is a call to serve and that true authority derives, not from power of position but from the service rendered in your position. The faithful should be able to see Christ in their priests. When the faithful cannot see beyond their priests, it is likely that the priest has made himself larger than Christ. This is particularly common among those involved in the healing ministry. In their pastoral roles, priests should embody the compassion of Christ who himself is a wounded healer. They should learn not to be obstacles or pains to the faithful. As *DT* puts it, “the doctrine of Christ must be clothed in compassion or it becomes a stone thrown at sinners.”²²

Even as priest drive for funds to execute legitimate church projects, they should resist the lure to corruptly enrich themselves. Priests should be open to ongoing formation by attending conferences, seminars, retreats/recollections, engage in personal studies, discussion with their fellow priests on ecclesial matters, be intentional about detribalizing themselves, make efforts to model

²² Leo XIV, (2025), *Dilexi Te*, no. 48

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their lives after the suffering Christ who came to serve and not to be served (Matt 20:28; Mark 10:45), avoid flaunting their positions as the parish priest, be mindful of the fact that financial prosperity is not an indication of faithfulness to Christ. In this regard *DT* calls for a change in mentality from self-centeredness to self-giving.²³

Conclusion

What I have done in this paper is to present a critical analysis of the preferential option for the poor as entrenched in the social teachings of the Church and explicated in various magisterial documents and papal encyclicals and exhortations, especially Pope Leo XIV's *Dilexi Te*. I examined how the Church in Nigeria has imbibed or not imbibed the mandate of the preferential option for the poor. As I acknowledged the efforts of the Nigerian Catholic hierarchy, I noted that much more needs to be done, especially at the grassroots. Thus, I pointed out areas that need to be furthered polished and improved upon in our liturgical celebrations and social services to make the Church in Nigeria a home that is truly welcoming and accommodating for the poor and marginalized.

²³ Leo XIV, (2025), *Dilexi Te*, nos. 7 & 11.

Studies & Perspectives

**Jesus' Identity and Christian Identity in Joseph Ratzinger's
*Jesus of Nazareth***

Uwanaka Maria Assumpta Eberechukwu¹

eberesister@gmail.com

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Abstract

In the Gospel narratives, Pilate's question to Jesus, "Where are you from?" (John 19:9) resonates profoundly with the issue of identity, both for Jesus and his followers. This question probes the essence of Jesus' identity and its implications for Christian identity. At the core of Jesus' identity lies the doctrine of the Incarnation, where the

¹ Maria-Assumpta Eberechi Uwanaka, is a Passionist Sister of St. Paul of the Cross. Holder of a B.A Religious Studies, from Dominican University, Samonda, Ibadan, BTH Theology from Institute de Théologie de la Compagnie de Jésus and currently Pursuing a Masters in Scripture in the Institute de Théologie de la Compagnie de Jésus, Abidjan, Cote-D'ivoire. Her interest in Scripture focuses on the Patristic contributions in the interpretation of the Bible, theological anthropology and African hermeneutics of the Scripture, particularly the New Testament Studies.

eternal Word became flesh (John 1:14), revealing the fullness of God's being and the true nature of humanity. Through an exploration of the Joseph Ratzinger's Work Jesus of Nazareth, it shall be established that the incarnational reality forms the foundation of Christian identity, as believers are called to embody the life and teachings of Christ, living as children of God and members of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). Furthermore, Jesus' identity as the crucified and risen Savior shape Christian identity through the call to self-denial, suffering, and resurrection hope (Mark 8:34-35). Believers are invited to participate in Christ's suffering and death, dying to self and embracing the new life offered through his resurrection (Romans 6:4-5). Jesus' identity as the incarnate Son of God and the Saviour of humanity defines the essence of Christian identity, calling believers to a life of faithful obedience, sacrificial love, and transformative witness. Jesus' universal identity or genealogy affirms the equal dignity of all peoples. In multi-religious and pluralistic African contexts, this universality fosters interreligious dialogue and peaceful coexistence while maintaining Christological distinctiveness.

Keywords: Origin, Identity, Genealogy, Christianity, African Church.

Introduction

Pilate's unexpected question during Jesus' interrogation, particularly regarding Jesus' origin and identity, invites theological reflection,

and Joseph Ratzinger's book *Jesus of Nazareth* provides valuable insights into understanding this aspect. Additionally, other theological contributions on the topic can help deepen our comprehension. When examined through Ratzinger's lens and complemented by other theological perspectives, Pilate's question reveals a multi-layered exploration. It is a historical inquiry and a theological investigation into the mystery of Jesus' identity, purpose, and origin. The interplay of divine and human elements, the cosmic nature of Jesus' mission, and the clash of cultural expectations all contribute to a richer understanding of this crucial moment in the Gospel narratives.

Hence, engaging with Joseph Ratzinger's insights from *Jesus of Nazareth* alongside other theological contributions allows for a more comprehensive examination of Pilate's unexpected question, contributing to a deeper understanding of the theological complexities surrounding Jesus' origin and mission in connection with the Christian identity. Thus, this essay argues that Jesus' divine and human provenance, especially as interpreted by Ratzinger, forms the foundation of Christian identity, shaping how believers understand their origin, mission, and participation in God's life.

Where are you from? (Jn. 19:9): Pilate's Dilemma

Pilate's unexpected question, "Where are you from?" reflects his attempt to grasp Jesus' identity and purpose. The question arises in response to the accusation that Jesus claimed to be the Son of God,

a charge with serious consequences under Roman law.² In Roman society, the emperor was often referred to as the “Son of God” or “*Divi Filius*” (Son of the Divine).³ The title “Son of God” had strong political and religious connotations, signifying the divine nature and authority of the emperor.⁴ The accusation against Jesus claiming to be the Son of God is rooted in various statements made by Jesus himself in the Gospels. In the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to God as His Father uniquely and profoundly, emphasizing a special relationship: “..., but he was even calling God his own Father, making himself equal with God” (John 5:18). The Synoptic Gospels also contain instances where Jesus’ divine identity is implied or acknowledged. In the Gospel of Matthew, Peter confesses Jesus as the “Son of the living God” (Matt. 16:16), and during Jesus’ trial, the high priest charges him with blasphemy, a claim to be the Son of God (Matt. 26:63-65). The divine sonship claim of Jesus is considered treasonous or seditious, leading to severe consequences under Roman law, including the possibility of crucifixion because several emperors were called Son of God (Augustus, Caesar, Apollo,

² Cf. Sehyun Kim, *The Kingship of Jesus in the Gospel of John* (Eugene, USA: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2018), 43.

³ Cf. Paul B. Duff, *Jesus Followers in the Roman Empire* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Win B. Eerdmans Publishing Co, 2017), 86.

⁴ Cf. Francios P. Viljoen “The Superior Authority of Jesus in Matthew to Interpret the Torah” In *Skriflig (Online)* (South Africa: Pretoria, 2016), vol. 50, No. 2, Pg. 1-7.

Julius Caesar.⁵ In this regard, Pilate expressed skepticism regarding the concept of truth.⁶

Are you the King of the Jews? (Jn. 18:33)

Interestingly, Jesus' assertion of a kingdom "not of this world" and his claim to divine sonship challenged the conventional understanding of kingship and authority in the Roman context.⁷ Jesus' claim to kingship, albeit one "not of this world," and his mysterious origin and purpose baffles Pilate. Unlike others who resisted Roman domination for the restoration of the kingdom of Israel, Jesus appears different, prompting Pilate to inquire about his origin.

Meanwhile, The Gospel narratives emphasize that Jesus' claim to be the Son of God is not merely a political challenge but a profound theological truth about his divine nature. This Son of God claims in the context of Roman law underscores the gravity of the accusations against him and the clash between the divine claims of Jesus and the

⁵ Cf. Michael Peppard, "The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in its Social and Political Context," in *Voice, Dallas Theological Seminary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

⁶ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth* (Trans.), Philip J. Whitmore (London, New York: Bloomsbury, 2012), 12.

⁷ Cf. Mark J. Keown, "Who is Jesus? New Testament, Christology, Historical Jesus" in *Academia* (USA: Academia Edu Publishing, 2022), P. 66.

political-religious context of Roman rule.⁸ Thus, Ratzinger suggests that Pilate, though skeptical, cannot easily dismiss the uniqueness of Jesus. The encounter between Pilate and Jesus becomes a significant moment of tension, with Pilate grappling with the paradoxical nature of Jesus' claim to kingship and his otherworldly origin.⁹

Matthew's Genealogy - A Key to Jesus' Human Origin

Matthew's genealogy, according to Ratzinger, serves as a theological introduction to the Gospel. It establishes Jesus' provenance in the context of God's promises to Abraham and David, emphasizing his universal mission, the inclusion of women, and the unique circumstances of his birth. The genealogy becomes a symbolic framework for understanding Jesus' identity and mission.

Abraham and David

Ratzinger emphasizes the importance of Abraham and David in Matthew's genealogy. The genealogy, structured in three sets of fourteen generations, traces the lineage from Abraham, highlighting the promise of a universal blessing through Abraham's descendants. David's role as the king with an eternal kingdom is central to the structure, leading to the fulfillment of the promise in Jesus.¹⁰

⁸ Cf. Marcus J. Borg & John Dominic Crossan, *The First Christmas* (New York: HarperCollins, 2007), 96.

⁹Cf. Ratzinger, "Jesus of Nazareth," 12.

¹⁰Cf. Ratzinger, "Jesus of Nazareth," 14.

Abraham in the genealogy of Matthew's Gospel according to Ratzinger refers in the first instance to his descendants. Still, it also extends further: "All the nations of the earth shall bless themselves by him" (Gen 18:18). Thus, the whole history, beginning with Abraham and leading to Jesus, is open toward universality through Abraham, blessing comes to all.¹¹ He emphasizes Abraham as a wayfarer, symbolizing a journey from the present into the future. "Abraham's life points forward, creating a dynamic of walking along the path of what is to come".¹²

Therefore, Abraham's inclusion in the genealogy highlights his faith and obedience. His journey becomes a model for the faith required in the coming of Jesus, the ultimate fulfillment of God's plan. "By faith, Abraham obeyed when he was called to go out to a place that he was to receive as an inheritance. And he went out, not knowing where he was going." (Heb 11:8-10) His role as the patriarch of promise, the faithful wayfarer, and the recipient of God's covenant underscores the continuity of God's redemptive plan culminating in Jesus Christ.¹³ In essence, the genealogy portrays Jesus as the long-awaited fulfillment of the Abrahamic covenant, bringing blessings to all nations and embodying the faithfulness of God.

¹¹ Cf. Ratzinger, "Jesus of Nazareth," 14.

¹² Cf. Ratzinger, "Jesus of Nazareth," 14.

¹³ Cf. Keith H. Essex, "The Abrahamic Covenant" in *The Master's Seminary Journal* (1999), Vol. 10. No. 2. Pp. 191-212.

Davidic Promise

The genealogy serves various purposes, including establishing Jesus' legitimacy as the Messiah and tying him to the Davidic lineage. The Davidic Promise is a significant aspect of this genealogy, and its symbolism is deeply rooted in the Messianic expectations of the Jewish people.¹⁴ This refers to the covenant that God made with King David, promising that his lineage would endure and that a descendant of David would rule on the throne forever (2 Samuel 7:12-16). Meanwhile, this genealogy underscores the fulfillment of this covenant in Jesus, presenting him as the rightful heir to the Davidic throne.

Noteworthy is that the genealogy and the history that it recounts are largely structured around the figure of David, the king to whom the promise of an eternal kingdom had been given: "Your throne shall be established forever" (2 Sam 7:16). The genealogy that Matthew puts before us is steeped in this promise.¹⁵ Notice that most places in the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus is often referred to as the "Son of David" (Matthew 1:1; 9:27; 15:22; 20:30-31, etc.). The inclusion of this promise in the genealogy serves as a link between the historical narratives of the Old Testament and the arrival of the promised Messiah in the New Testament. Nevertheless, the genealogy highlights the royal titles of Jesus, such as "Christ" (Messiah) and

¹⁴ Cf. Hans-Ruedi Weber, *Immanuel: The Coming of Jesus in Art and the Bible* (India: W. B. Eerdmans, 2008), 13.

¹⁵ Cf. Ratzinger, "Jesus of Nazareth," 15.

“Son of David,” emphasizing his role as the anticipated king who fulfills the Davidic Covenant.

Thus, through careful construction, numerical patterns, and the inclusion of key figures, Matthew emphasizes that Jesus is the fulfillment of the covenant made with David, embodying the long-awaited Messiah and rightful heir to the Davidic throne.

The Inclusion of Women

The genealogy includes the names of several women, including Tamar, Rahab, Ruth, and Bathsheba (referred to as “the wife of Uriah”).¹⁶ The inclusion of these women, who are neither perfect nor direct descendants of David, symbolizes the irregular or unexpected nature of the Davidic line, foreshadowing the unexpected arrival of the Messiah.¹⁷ Their inclusion here would serve to indicate that Jesus took upon himself their sins and with them the sins of the world—and that his mission was the justification of sinners.¹⁸ Their inclusion also indicates that through them the world of the Gentiles enters the

¹⁶ Cf. Victor P. Hamilton, *The New International Commentary on the Old Testament: the Book of Genesis Chapters 18-50* (Grand Rapids, Michigan: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co. 1995), 92.

¹⁷ Cf. Nell Sunukjian, *Women in Jesus' Genealogy* in Biola University Podcasts (La Mirada: Biola University Inc., 2013). Retrieved on 2/01/2024 from <https://www.biola.edu/blogs/good-book-blog/2013/women-in-jesus-genealogy>.

¹⁸ Cf. Ratzinger, “Jesus of Nazareth,” 15.

genealogy of Jesus his mission to Jews and Gentiles is made manifest.¹⁹

Little wonder, the genealogy ends with a woman: Mary, who truly marks a new beginning and relativizes the entire genealogy.²⁰ Hence, The inclusion of these women in Matthew's genealogy challenges traditional expectations and norms. Each woman's story involves unconventional or even scandalous elements, emphasizing God's ability to work through imperfect and unexpected situations.²¹

Mary: The New Beginning

While Matthew's genealogy in Chapter 1 primarily focuses on the male lineage of Jesus, it does make a significant mention of Mary, albeit indirectly. Matthew 1:16 states, "...and Jacob the father of Joseph the husband of Mary, and Mary was the mother of Jesus who is called the Messiah." However, the genealogy traces the legal lineage through Joseph, who is referred to as the husband of Mary. However, it is important to note that Joseph is not the biological

¹⁹ Raymond E. Brown, *The Birth of the Messiah: A Commentary on the Infancy Narratives in Matthew and Luke* (New York: Doubleday, 1993), 71–74.

²⁰ Ratzinger, "Jesus of Nazareth," 15.

²¹ Cf. Craig L. Blomberg "Matthew" in G. K. Beale & D. A. Carson (Eds.) *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1960), 14.

father of Jesus according to the narrative in Matthew.²² Instead, Mary is highlighted as the mother of Jesus, and this acknowledgment holds profound theological significance. It affirms that the one she bore is truly God incarnate. The Church's title *Theotokos* ("God-bearer"), defined at the Council of Ephesus (431), protects the doctrine that Jesus is one person in two natures-divine and human.²³

To call Mary "Mother of God" does not imply she precedes God but that the child she bore is fully divine. Thus, her maternity safeguards orthodox Christology: the Word truly became flesh (John 1:14). Without Mary's real motherhood, the Incarnation would risk becoming symbolic rather than historical. Anthropologically, Mary's maternity affirms the goodness of human embodiment. God enters history through a woman's womb, sanctifying human birth, motherhood, and bodily existence.²⁴

In 1:18-25 of the Gospel, Matthew goes on to explain that Mary conceived Jesus through the Holy Spirit, emphasizing the miraculous and virgin birth of Jesus. This concept aligns with the

²² Cf. Craig L. Blomberg "Matthew" in G. K. Beale & D. A. Carson (Eds.) *Commentary on the New Testament Use of the Old Testament* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 1960), 17.

²³ Council of Ephesus, in Norman P. Tanner, *Decrees of the Ecumenical Councils*, vol. 1 (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 1990), 40–44.

²⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth: The Infancy Narratives*, trans. Philip J. Whitmore (New York: Image, 2012), 49–52; cf. Aloys Grillmeier, *Christ in Christian Tradition*, vol. 1 (Atlanta: John Knox Press, 1975), 542–545.

prophecy in Isaiah 7:14, which Matthew quotes to reinforce the fulfillment of Messianic expectations. However, the genealogy in Matthew establishes a connection between the Old Testament prophecies and the birth of Jesus. In verse 23, Matthew quotes Isaiah 7:14, stating that Jesus' birth fulfills the prophecy of a virgin giving birth to a son named Immanuel, meaning "God with us." Mary's role in the virgin birth underscores the divine nature of Jesus.²⁵

Furthermore, Mary's inclusion in the genealogy symbolizes a new beginning in God's redemptive plan. The virgin birth represents a unique and unprecedented event in history, signaling the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies and the inauguration of a new era in salvation history.²⁶ While Joseph's legal lineage connects Jesus to the house of David in Matthew's genealogy, Mary's role ensures that Jesus also shares the bloodline of David.²⁷ This dual connection reinforces Jesus' identity as the rightful heir to the Davidic throne.

²⁵ Cf. Knox Chamblin, *Commentary on Matthew: Commentary and Lesson on Matthew 1:18-25* (USA: Third Millennium Ministries Inc., 1999), Vol. 1, No. 2. Available online in IIIM Magazine.

²⁶ Cf. Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church: Letter of Cardinal Angelo Sodano* (Rome: Vatican, 2004), 28-29.

²⁷ Cf. Ratzinger, "Jesus of Nazareth," 16.

Luke's Genealogy - Structure of Historical Time

The genealogy in the Gospel of Luke, found in Luke 3:23-38, differs significantly from Matthew's genealogy. Luke traces the genealogy of Jesus backward, starting with Jesus and going all the way to Adam. Unlike Matthew, Luke does not focus on the Davidic lineage but presents Jesus as the Son of God and the Savior of all humanity. The genealogy in Luke has been interpreted by scholars as having symbolic and theological significance, representing a universal perspective on salvation history.

Adam

By tracing Jesus' genealogy back to Adam, Luke emphasizes the universal nature of Jesus' mission. Ratzinger puts it clearly in his distinction between Matthew's genealogy and Luke's genealogy, he writes: "... this genealogy introduces the public ministry, it, so to speak, legitimizes Jesus in his public mission, whereas Matthew presents the genealogy as the very start of the Gospel...."²⁸ Jesus is presented as the Savior not only of the Jewish people but of all humanity. This universal perspective aligns with the overarching theme in Luke's Gospel of salvation for all nations.²⁹ Luke refers to Adam as "the Son of God" (Luke 3:38). This characterization establishes a theological connection between the first human and

²⁸Cf. Ratzinger, "Jesus of Nazareth," 16.

Robert J. Karris, "The Gospel of Luke" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Eds.), Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (USA: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1990), 688.

God, emphasizing the divine origin of humanity. The genealogy suggests that Jesus, as the Son of God, has come to restore and redeem humanity, put differently, his mission is restoration of humanity.

Numeric Symbolism

While not as pronounced as in Matthew's genealogy, there is still a sense of structure in Luke's genealogy. The genealogy is divided into three sets of 14 generations each, similar to Matthew's structure. The number 14 holds significance in Hebrew numerology, as it represents the numerical value of the name David (D=4, V=6, D=4).³⁰ Although there is no specific division into sets of 14 generations, the genealogy in Luke covers a span of 77 generations from Adam to Jesus (Luke 3:23-38). The number 7 is often considered a symbol of completeness or perfection in biblical numerology, and the repetition of this number ($7 \times 11 = 77$) may symbolize the fullness of time or God's complete plan unfolding in history.³¹ The symbolism of 7 convey the idea that Jesus' arrival is the fulfillment and completion of God's plan for salvation, encompassing all of human history.³²

³⁰ Cf. Charles L. Quartes, *Sermon on the Mount: Restoring Christ's Message to the Modern Church* (Nashville, Tennessee: B&H Academic, 2011) 41.

³¹ Cf. Ratzinger, "Jesus of Nazareth," 18.

³² Cf. Karris, Robert, "The New Jerome Biblical Commentary" 688.

Ratzinger states; “Luke’s genealogy descending from the treetop, down to the root, to show that in the end the ultimate root is found not in the depths but rather in the heights God is there at the beginning of human existence.”³³ Unlike Matthew’s genealogy, which focuses on the Abrahamic and Davidic lineage, Luke’s genealogy traces Jesus’ ancestry back to Adam. The genealogy includes figures like Enoch and Noah, who are not part of the Israelite lineage. This universal approach underscores Jesus as the Savior of all humanity, not just the Jewish people.

The genealogy sets the background for Luke’s emphasis on the inclusive nature of God’s redemptive plan. By tracing Jesus’ lineage to Adam, Luke draws a parallel between Jesus and Adam.³⁴ Jesus is portrayed as the “new Adam” who comes to undo the effects of sin introduced by the first Adam (1 Corinthians 15:45). This theological connection underscores Jesus’ role in bringing about a new creation and redemption.³⁵ Luke’s genealogy began with Jesus being “the son (as was supposed) of Joseph, the son of Heli” (Luke 3:23). This legal connection is significant in understanding Jesus’ rightful claim to the Davidic throne.

³³ Cf. Ratzinger, “Jesus of Nazareth,” 17.

³⁴Cf. Karris, “The New Jerome Biblical Commentary,” 687.

³⁵Cf. Karris, “The New Jerome Biblical Commentary, 688.

John's Prologue Defining Jesus' Origin and Christian Identity

John the evangelist, who repeatedly raises the question of Jesus' provenance, does not present a genealogy at the beginning of his Gospel, but in the Prologue he grandly and emphatically proposes an answer to that question; "Where are you from?" at the same time, he expands his answer to the question into a definition of Christian life: based on Jesus' provenance he sheds light upon the identity of his followers.

The Word Made Flesh

This theme is the core of the proclamation, indicating the Incarnation of God taking on human form in the person of Jesus Christ. Καὶ ὁ Λόγος σὰρξ ἐγένετο καὶ ἐσκηνώσεν ἐν ἡμῖν The Incarnation is a central Christian doctrine, affirming that God became fully human while retaining his divine nature. By the use of σὰρξ (Flesh) instead of σῶμα (body), John ascertains that truly the Word whom he had described from the beginning to be God took the human form. This allows for a profound connection between God and humanity. However, the use of "Word" is derived from the Greek term "Logos," which carries rich philosophical and theological meaning. In ancient Greek philosophy, Logos represented the principle of

order and knowledge. In the context of John's Gospel, it signifies the divine, creative, and revelatory aspect of Jesus Christ.³⁶

Hence, the prologue sets the stage for the unfolding narrative of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection, emphasizing that through him, humanity can experience redemption, salvation, and a restored relationship with God.³⁷ In the prologue, Jesus is not only represented as the Word made flesh, he is also the light that shines in darkness and the darkness could not overshadow it. Through Him nothing was made that was made, He is indeed full of grace and truth, the revelation of the Father. With this John describes the mission of Jesus. Thus, John's proclamation of Jesus as the Word made flesh in the prologue is a theological foundation that encapsulates the identity, purpose, mission, and significance of Jesus Christ in the Christian faith. The imagery of the Word becoming flesh captures the profound mystery of the Incarnation and God's redemptive plan for humanity.³⁸ Transposed to African concept of words, this can be

³⁶ Cf. Francis J. Moloney, "The Gospel of John" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary* (Eds.), Raymond E. Brown, Joseph A. Fitzmyer, Roland E. Murphy (USA: Prentice Hall, Inc., 1990), 1420.

³⁷ Cf Elmer L. Towns, Mal Couch, *The Gospel of John: Believe and Live* (USA: AMG Publishers, 2002), Pp. 379

³⁸ Cf. Drum, Walter, "The Incarnation" in *The Catholic Encyclopedia* (New York: Robert Appleton Company, 1910), Vol. 7. Retrieved on 11/01/2024 from <http://www.newadvent.org/cathen/07706b.htm>.

related to the effect of spoken words manifesting in the life of the recipient.

Jesus' Identity in the Virgin Birth and Faith's New Birth

In the prologue of John's Gospel (John 1:1-18), there is a profound connection between the confession of Jesus' birth from the Virgin Mary and the believers' new birth through faith. This connection is rooted in the theological themes of incarnation, spiritual rebirth, and the transformative power of faith. John introduces the idea of being "born, not of blood nor the will of the flesh nor of the will of man, but of God" (John 1:13). This concept aligns with Jesus' teaching to Nicodemus in John 3:1-15 about the necessity of spiritual rebirth. The Christian life, according to the prologue, involves a radical transformation initiated by God.³⁹

The prologue explicitly connects the act of receiving Christ with the right to become children of God (John 1:12). The language of becoming children of God echoes the themes of new birth and adoption into God's family. This reception and adoption are made possible through faith in the Word incarnate, Jesus Christ.⁴⁰ Thus, the connection between the confession of Jesus' virgin birth from his mother and believers' new birth through faith in the prologue of

³⁹ Cf. David Guzik, "Commentary on the Gospel of John 1".

⁴⁰ Cf. Scott M. Lewis, "The First Letter of John," in Daniel Durken (Ed), *New Collegeville Bible Commentary: One Volume Hardcover Edition* (Collegeville, Minnesota: Liturgical Press, 1991), 1466.

John's Gospel is deeply rooted in the themes of incarnation, spiritual rebirth, receiving Christ, and ongoing transformation through faith.⁴¹ The theological language used in the prologue establishes a profound connection between the miraculous birth of Jesus and the spiritual rebirth experienced by those who believe in him.

Theological Significance of Jesus' Origin in the Gospels.

Jesus' provenance, as presented in the Gospels, is a central theme that shapes the understanding of Jesus Christ within the Christian faith.⁴² The Gospels (Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John) provide insights into Jesus' origin, identity, and mission, emphasizing his divine nature and the fulfillment of Old Testament prophecies. the question about Jesus' provenance in the Gospels is an inquiry into the deeper origin and true being of Jesus. It involves exploring not only his earthly lineage but also his divine nature, pre-existence, and unique identity as the Son of God and the Son of Man.⁴³ The Gospels present a multifaceted and profound portrait of Jesus' provenance, inviting readers to contemplate the mystery of the Incarnation and the divine-human identity of the Savior.

⁴¹ Cf. Scott M. Lewis, "The First Letter of John," 1163.

⁴² Cf. Kevin J. Vanhoozer, Craig Bartholomew, Daniel Treier, *Dictionary for Theological Interpretation of the Bible* (London: Grand Rapids, 2005), 85.

⁴³ Cf. Ratzinger "Jesus of Nazareth," 19.

Paradox in Jesus' Origin

In the Gospel of John, there exists a paradox in the presentation of Jesus' provenance, particularly in the prologue (John 1:1-18). This paradox centers on the tension between Jesus' divine origin and preexistence, as highlighted in verses 1-14, and his earthly life and manifestation, as emphasized in verses 14-18. This paradox challenges human comprehension and invites contemplation on the mystery of the Word becoming flesh yet fully God and fully human in the person of Jesus Christ. It is a paradox that highlights the profound depth of God's love and the extraordinary nature of Jesus' mission in the world (John 1:1-18).⁴⁴

The tension between Jesus' claim to divine origin and the skepticism of those who know his earthly family is a theme that surfaces in the Gospels, particularly in the context of Jesus' ministry in Nazareth.⁴⁵ This tension adds a foundation of complexity to the understanding of Jesus' identity and mission (Mk 6:1-6; Matt 13:54-58). The skepticism in Nazareth prompts Jesus to remark that "a prophet is not without honor, except in his hometown" (Mk 6:4). This realization appears to contribute to a shift in Jesus' mission, as he begins to send out the twelve disciples to other places (Mk 6:7-13).

⁴⁴Cf. David Guzik, "Commentary on the Gospel of John 1".

⁴⁵Cf. Michael Peppard, "The Son of God in the Roman World: Divine Sonship in its Social and Political Context," in *Voice, Dallas Theological Seminary* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012).

The resistance in Nazareth does not deter Jesus from continuing his broader mission.

In sum, John has recapitulated the deepest meaning of the genealogies, and he has taught us (Christians) to understand them as an interpretation of our origin, our true “genealogy.” Just as the genealogies break off at the end, because Jesus was not begotten by Joseph, but was truly born of the Holy Spirit from the Virgin Mary, so it can now be said of us that our true “genealogy” is faith in Jesus, who gives us a new origin, who brings us to birth from God.⁴⁶

The Christian Identity

The prologue sets the background for the transformative power of faith. Believers, having received Christ and been born of God, are invited to abide in Christ (John 15). This ongoing relationship implies a continual transformative process, reminiscent of the ongoing work of the Spirit in the life of a believer. Christian identity poses the same question posed to Jesus “where are you from,” in this sense this question shifts from Jesus and is addressed to Christians. This is an inquiry into the belief that human life is a gift from God and that each individual possesses an inviolable dignity that must be respected and protected, this human identity and dignity is rooted in the belief that human beings are created in the image and likeness of

⁴⁶Cf. Ratzinger, “Jesus of Nazareth,” 19.

God, this is the foundation for Godly Humanism as noted by Francis Cardinal George.⁴⁷

This dignity, is not derived from external factors such as wealth, power, or social status, but rather from the very fact of being created by God and bearing the divine imprint. George emphasized that Christian identity is intrinsically linked to Jesus' identity, the pursuit of virtue and the cultivation of moral character. He believed that true human flourishing and fulfillment could only be achieved by living the teachings of Christ and the Church, which offer guidance on ethical conduct, interpersonal relationships, and the pursuit of justice and the common good.⁴⁸

Pope John Paul II, in his book *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* notes the centrality of Christ in defining Christian identity, stating that "the Christian identity is not a mere abstraction; it is truly Christ living in us." He asserts that a genuine Christian identity is rooted in a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, nurtured through prayer, the study of Scripture, and the reception of the sacraments.⁴⁹ Moreover, Christian identity is not just an individual pursuit but a shared experience within the Body of Christ, the Church. Christians are

⁴⁷Francis Cardinal George, *The Difference God Makes: A Catholic Vision of Faith, Communion, and Culture* (New York: Crossroad Publishing Company, 2009), 67.

⁴⁸ Cf. George, *The Difference God Makes*, 92.

⁴⁹John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1994), 87.

called to be active participants in the life of the Church, contributing to its mission of evangelization, service, and the promotion of human dignity and solidarity.⁵⁰

John Mbiti, an African theologian, offers a complementary perspective on Christian identity that is deeply rooted in African cosmology and the concept of community. In his seminal work, *African Religions and Philosophy*, Mbiti emphasizes the communal nature of African societies, where the individual is inextricably linked to the community, both living and ancestral.⁵¹ His understanding of Christian identity is shaped by this communal worldview, where the individual's identity is derived from their relationship with God, the community, and the natural environment. He argues that the Christian message of fellowship and belonging to the body of Christ resonates with the African understanding of community, where one's identity is defined by their connections and relationships with others.⁵²

Little wonder, then that Jesus said to Philip “to see me is to see my father” explaining his identity as that embodied in the identity of his father. Paul Pobee asserts that, Christian identity promotes social justice, human rights, and the empowerment of marginalized

⁵⁰ Cf. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 145.

⁵¹ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Oxford: Heinemann, 1990), 102-114.

⁵² Cf. John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity* (Nairobi: Oxford University Press, 1986), 73-89.

communities, it acknowledges and incorporates compatible elements from indigenous belief systems.⁵³

Jesus' Identity and the Christian Identity

In the prologue of John's Gospel (John 1:1-18), John not only establishes Jesus' divine provenance but also expands the theological implications into a profound definition of Christian life.⁵⁴ The prologue emphasizes the concept of receiving Christ: "But to all who did receive him, who believed in his name, he gave the right to become children of God" (John 1:12). Christian identity is tied to the act of receiving Jesus, believing in him, and thereby entering into a familial relationship with God.⁵⁵ This stresses the personal and transformative nature of faith in Jesus Christ.

The prologue declares, "And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us" (John 1:14). Christian life is modelled after the Incarnation the idea that the divine Word took on human form and

⁵³ Cf. John S. Pobee, *Toward an African Theology* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1979), 43-61.

⁵⁴ Cf. Richard Van Egmond, An Exegetical Study of The Prologue of John (John 1:1-18) in *McMaster Journal of Theology and Ministry* (London: Biblical Studies, 2009), Vols. 1-10.

⁵⁵ Cf. Ephraim, Radner, *Church* (Eugene, USA: Wipf and Stock Publishers, 2017).

entered into the human experience.⁵⁶ This implies an invitation for believers to embody the love, grace, and truth of God in their own lives. John speaks of the grace of God in abundance: “For from his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace” (John 1:16). Christian life is characterized by an ongoing experience of God’s grace. Believers are recipients of God’s unmerited favor, and this grace continually sustains and transforms them.⁵⁷ The prologue describes Jesus as full of grace and truth, and John asserts, “We have seen his glory” (John 1:14). Christian life involves an encounter with the glory of God in the person of Jesus Christ. This encounter shapes believers and directs their worship and devotion.⁵⁸

It is important to note that, a true Christian identity is characterized by a commitment to moral virtues such as love, justice, mercy, and the defense of human rights, particularly for the most vulnerable members of society, as evident in Christ’s identity. The spirit of ecumenism and interreligious dialogue is also an essential component of Christian identity.⁵⁹ Christian identity also incorporates the importance of evangelization and the propagation of the faith. Christians have a responsibility to share the good news

⁵⁶ Cf. David Guzik, “Commentary on the Gospel of John 1,” in *Enduring Biblical Commentary* (USA: Enduring Word, 2018).

⁵⁷ Cf. Andrew Murray, *Abide in Christ* (USA: NavPress, 2020), 7

⁵⁸ Cf. Christopher Ash, “The Christian Life” in *The Gospel Coalition Essays*, USA Edition (USA: The Gospel Coalition Inc., 2014).

⁵⁹ Cf. John Paul II, *Crossing the Threshold of Hope*, 198-233.

of the Gospel and to bear witness to their beliefs through their words and actions, thereby contributing to the spiritual and moral renewal of the world.⁶⁰

Thus, John's prologue not only establishes the divine origin of Jesus but also lays the foundation for a rich and transformative Christian life. It involves receiving Christ, being born of God, modeling one's life on the Incarnate Word, experiencing grace, encountering God's glory, bearing witness to the truth, and abiding in Christ. The prologue sets the theological framework for understanding the depth and significance of the Christian identity and life in relationship with Jesus Christ.

Relevance for the Church in Africa

Christian identity in African point of view is closely connected with the origin/identity of Christ as an ancestor; African theologians believe that the incarnation of Christ is a new life and model for all humanity. Nyamiti notes that Christ not only fulfills the role of an ancestor but also transcends and perfects it. He asserts that through his incarnation, death, and resurrection, Christ became the source of new life and the true model for human existence. This understanding of Christ as the Proto-Ancestor provides a framework for African Christians to embrace their cultural heritage while also affirming the

⁶⁰ Cf. George, *The Difference God Makes*, 145.

unique and salvific role of Christ.⁶¹ In addition, John Mbiti explores the concept of “Christ as Elder Brother,” which aligns with the African respect for elders and the hierarchical structure of traditional societies. By presenting Christ as the Elder Brother, Mbiti offers a culturally relevant framework for African Christians to relate to and understand the role and significance of Christ within their cultural context.⁶²

Understanding Jesus’ identity becomes crucial for the Church in Africa as she engage with diverse belief systems, contributing to interfaith dialogue and understanding. Jesús’ identity helps Christians articulate their faith within pluralistic environments, fostering mutual respect and dialogue. It provides a foundation for inculturation. African cultures emphasize origin, ancestry, and relational belonging. Jesus’ teachings and moral principles contribute to Christian perspectives on contemporary ethical dilemmas, guiding believers in making informed ethical decisions.

Furthermore, Christian identity in Africa integrates faith in Christ with communal belonging, ancestral continuity, and relational dignity. the notion of Christ as Proto-Ancestor supports a contextualized understanding of salvation. In African societies, ancestors sustain communal life and moral continuity. Presenting

⁶¹ Cf. Charles Nyamiti, *Christ as Our Ancestor* (Gweru: Mambo Press, 1984), 30-45.

⁶² John S. Mbiti, *Bible and Theology in African Christianity*, 90-105.

Jesus as the living Ancestor affirms cultural heritage while proclaiming Christ as the unique mediator of life. Jesus' call for love, compassion, and solidarity becomes a guiding principle for Christians actively engaging in social justice and addressing global issues. Jesus' provenance and the Christian identity offer the Church a source of hope and meaning, influencing her responses to personal and societal challenges.

Just as Jesus' identity revealed his mission as a liberator, the Church in Africa finding its identity in Christ should also be a source of liberation to the people of Africa. Incorporating the image chosen by the African synod of Bishops in the synod of 1994 as presented by Pope John II in his encyclical *Ecclesia in Africa*, where the synod fathers chose the family as a model for the communal aspect of the Church in Africa with the theme "the Church as the family of God"⁶³ takes us back to the genealogy which presented the family of Jesus Christ from whom Christianity comes about with its name Christ-like. In addition, the image of the family aligns with the relational ontology expressed in Mbiti's dictum, "I am because we are." Participation in Christ therefore reinforces communal responsibility, reconciliation, and social ethics within African societies.

Thus, Jesus' universal genealogy establishing his identity affirms the equal dignity of all peoples, in multi-religious and pluralistic African

⁶³ John Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa: Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation* (Rome: Italy, 1995).

contexts it fosters interreligious dialogue, contribute to global solidarity, and offer hope and meaning in diverse contexts. Engaging with these themes allows Christians to navigate the complexities of the modern world while staying true to their faith.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it is pretty clear that a theological exploration of Jesus' provenance (origin or lineage) and Christian identity is multifaceted, drawing from biblical narratives, theological reflections, and historical contexts. The theological discussion on Jesus' provenance and Christian identity intertwines biblical narratives, theological doctrines, and the lived experiences of believers. In this essay, we have exposed Jesus' provenance in connection with Christian identity. This essay established that from the genealogy of the Gospel of Matthew, Luke, and the prologue of John, Jesus' provenance refers to his dual identity, this shapes the way Christians perceive themselves, relate to God, and engage with the world, fostering a sense of purpose and hope grounded in the person and teachings of Jesus Christ.

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Studies & Perspectives

Pope Leo XIV: The First Year of A Pontificate

Nihal Abeyasingha¹

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Abstract:

This study examines the first year of the pontificate of Pope Leo XIV, highlighting the theological, pastoral, and social priorities that have emerged since his election in 2025. Born in the United States but formed through extensive missionary service in Peru, Leo XIV embodies the global character of contemporary Catholicism. His pontificate is deeply rooted in Augustinian spirituality, emphasizing interior conversion, communal charity, truth, unity, and service. Drawing on his formation in canon law, he presents authority as a ministry of communion exercised through listening, dialogue, and synodal collaboration. The choice of the name Leo XIV signals continuity with the social vision of Leo XIII's Rerum Novarum, while

¹ Nihal Abeyasingha, Catholic Priest in Sri Lanka. Degrees in Civil Law, Buddhism and Catholic and non-Catholic theology. He has been involved in pastoral ministry, teaching in seminaries and at the University of Kelaniya (Sri Lanka). He is now retired.

addressing the ethical challenges of the digital age, particularly artificial intelligence, communication, and technological transformation. His engagement with digital evangelization, social justice, ecumenism, and the Church's mission among the poor suggests a papacy that integrates contemplative depth, intellectual clarity, and pastoral responsiveness in a rapidly changing world.

Keywords: Pope Leo XIV; Augustinian Spirituality; Synodality; Authority as Service; Canon Law; Artificial Intelligence; Digital Evangelisation; Catholic Social Teaching; Ecumenism; Missionary Church.

The election of Pope Leo XIV in 2025 marked an important moment in the contemporary history of the Catholic Church. For much of the modern period it seemed unlikely that a citizen of one of the world's major geopolitical powers might become pope, since such an election might risk the perception that the papacy represented the political interests of that country. Yet the election of an American-born pope has occurred in a context where the Church is increasingly global and where pastoral experience among the poor and marginalized is often considered a decisive qualification for leadership.

Robert Prevost, elected as Leo XIV, embodied precisely such a synthesis. Though born in the United States, his pastoral and missionary formation took place largely in Latin America, particularly Peru, where he served for many years and eventually

acquired citizenship. As a result, his outlook reflects not the political center of global power but the perspective of the Church on the peripheries.

The scale of support he received in the conclave was also striking. Joseph Ratzinger and Jorge Mario Bergoglio had each reportedly received approximately seventy percent of the votes in their respective conclaves. Prevost, however, appears to have secured approximately eighty percent of the votes, suggesting an unusually strong consensus among the cardinal electors. Such support indicates that the electors perceived in him a figure capable of guiding the Church through a moment marked by technological transformation, geopolitical tension, and cultural fragmentation.

From the earliest moments of his pontificate, Leo XIV has signaled both continuity and distinctiveness. In his first *Urbi et Orbi* greeting on 8 May 2025 he proclaimed: “Peace be with you all,” emphasizing the peace of the risen Christ. At the same time he introduced himself as “an Augustinian, a son of Saint Augustine,” invoking Augustine’s famous words: “With you I am a Christian, and for you I am a bishop” (Sermon 34). In doing so he indicated that his papacy would be deeply shaped by Augustinian spirituality while remaining in continuity with the missionary vision articulated by Pope Francis in *Evangelii Gaudium* and the pastoral orientation of the Second Vatican Council’s *Gaudium et Spes*.

The first year of Leo XIV’s pontificate, therefore, reveals several emerging themes: an Augustinian spirituality centred on interior

conversion and communal charity; a conception of authority as service rooted in canonical and ecclesiological reflection; and a renewed engagement with the social and ethical challenges posed by technological transformation, especially artificial intelligence. Together these elements suggest the contours of a papacy that seeks to combine contemplative depth with practical engagement in the moral challenges of the modern world.

The Election of Leo XIV in a Changing Church

The election of Leo XIV took place within a Church whose demographic center of gravity has shifted significantly over the past century. Whereas Catholicism was once concentrated largely in Europe and North America, today the majority of Catholics live in Latin America, Africa, and parts of Asia. This transformation has inevitably reshaped the composition of the College of Cardinals and the perspectives that influence papal elections.

By the time of the 2025 conclave, the traditional European-American axis represented roughly half of the electors. Many of the remaining cardinals had been appointed by Pope Francis and shared his emphasis on missionary outreach, pastoral closeness to the poor, and dialogue with contemporary culture. In this context the electors appear to have sought a leader capable of maintaining continuity with Francis's pastoral priorities while providing theological clarity and administrative stability.

Prevost's background made him an attractive candidate. His service as Prior General of the Augustinian Order (2001–2013) had given him extensive international experience. Later he served as Bishop of Chiclayo (2015–2023) and then as Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops (2023–2025). These roles provided both pastoral and institutional experience at the highest levels of the Church.

Observers have described him as “the least American American,” highlighting his strong identification with the global Church rather than with any particular national perspective. His election therefore reflects not a geopolitical shift but rather the global character of contemporary Catholicism.

Augustinian Spirituality as the Foundation of the Pontificate

The theological and spiritual framework of Leo XIV's pontificate is strongly shaped by Augustine of Hippo. Augustine wished originally to devote his life to contemplative study, retreating from Milan to live a life of *otium* in Thagaste (Confessions 8.6.13). Yet he was “unwillingly” ordained and drawn into the responsibilities of episcopal leadership. This created a tension between contemplation and pastoral duty, a tension he described as the conflict between *otium sanctum* and *negotium justum* (Letters 21.3; 48.1; 98.8).

Augustine ultimately resolved this tension by interpreting pastoral responsibility as an expression of charity. Love of truth requires contemplation, but love of neighbor requires service. This dynamic

became central to Augustinian spirituality and continues to influence the Augustinian Order.

Leo XIV frequently draws upon this tradition. In a message delivered at Villanova University on 28 August 2025, the feast of St Augustine, he emphasized the values of *veritas*, *unitas*, and *caritas*. Truth is pursued through study and dialogue; unity emerges through communion in Christ; and charity represents the ultimate expression of Christian life.

Another well-known Augustinian theme also appears frequently in the pope's addresses: the restlessness of the human heart. Augustine's famous phrase—"Our hearts are restless until they rest in you"—captures the spiritual longing that drives the search for God. For Leo XIV this restlessness is not merely a psychological condition but a spiritual dynamic that opens human beings to grace and transformation.

The communal dimension of Augustinian spirituality has also influenced symbolic aspects of the pontificate. Augustine himself lived with his clergy in a form of communal life resembling monastic discipline. In a similar spirit, Leo XIV has chosen to live communally with members of his religious order in the papal apartments, marking the first time in modern history that a pope has adopted such an arrangement.

Authority as Service: Governance and Canon Law

Another distinctive element of Leo XIV's vision derives from his academic formation in canon law and from his doctoral dissertation, *The Office and Authority of the Local Prior in the Order of Saint Augustine* (Angelicum, 1987). In this study he argued that authority in the Church should be understood not as domination but as service directed toward communion.

The dissertation draws heavily on the Constitutions of the Augustinian Order, which describe leadership as “not an office of power, but of fraternal love; not of honour, but of obligation; not of domination, but of service.” Authority is therefore exercised within clear canonical structures while remaining rooted in relationships of trust and dialogue.

Prevost also emphasised that freedom and law should not be seen as opposing realities. “Freedom and law are not terms which contrast with one another,” he wrote, “but values which must be integrated with each other.” Law provides the framework that allows communities to pursue the common good.

This vision has clear implications for papal governance. Rather than relying primarily on centralized decision-making, Leo XIV appears to emphasize consultation, listening, and structured dialogue. Early in his pontificate he convened an extraordinary consistory of the cardinals in January 2026 in order to hear their perspectives on the priorities of the Church. The cardinals identified two principal

priorities: the missionary vision of *Evangelii Gaudium* and the final document of the Synod of 2025.

Such initiatives suggest a model of leadership that integrates authority with synodal consultation. In this perspective the pope serves as the principle of unity within the Church while encouraging participation and discernment among the faithful.

From Leo XIII to Leo XIV: The Social Question

The choice of the name Leo XIV provides an important key to understanding the new pontificate. The pope himself explained that the name refers primarily to Leo XIII and his encyclical *Rerum Novarum*. Issued in 1891, that document addressed the social consequences of the industrial revolution and laid the foundations of modern Catholic social teaching.

Leo XIII examined the conditions faced by workers during rapid industrialization. Many labored long hours for low wages in unsafe environments and lacked legal protections. *Rerum Novarum* responded by affirming the dignity of labor, defending the right to a just wage, and supporting the right of workers to form associations. At the same time it rejected both socialist collectivism and unrestrained capitalism, insisting that economic life must serve the common good.

Leo XIV has suggested that the Church now faces a similar moment of transformation. Instead of the industrial revolution driven by mechanical power, the contemporary world is experiencing a

technological revolution driven by artificial intelligence, automation, robotics, biotechnology, and digital platforms.

These developments raise new ethical questions concerning employment, economic inequality, and the meaning of human work. Just as industrialization transformed the social structure of the nineteenth century, intelligent machines may reshape the nature of labor in the twenty-first century.

In this context Leo XIV proposes that the Church's social teaching must once again provide ethical guidance. The dignity of the human person must remain the central principle guiding technological development.

Artificial Intelligence and the Ethics of Communication

One of the earliest themes of Leo XIV's pontificate has been the ethical responsibility associated with communication and media. In his first address to journalists he warned against what he described as a "war of words and images." Such communication, he argued, often relies on ideological framing, sensationalism, and aggressive rhetoric that intensifies social polarization.

Instead he called journalists to become "peacemakers in communication," echoing the Beatitude: "Blessed are the peacemakers" (Mt 5:9). This appeal reflects Augustine's commitment to truth and humility in discourse.

Leo XIV has also spoken frequently about the ethical implications of artificial intelligence. Algorithms increasingly shape how information is distributed, how opinions are formed, and even how human relationships develop. Such technologies can easily create echo chambers characterised by “easy consensus and easy outrage.”

For this reason, the pope has advocated transparency in algorithmic systems and careful regulation of AI technologies. Artificial intelligence, he insists, must remain human-centered, supporting human judgment rather than replacing it.

Digital Mission and Evangelization

Another significant development during the early months of the pontificate has been Leo XIV’s engagement with digital missionaries. During the Jubilee of Digital Missionaries and Catholic Influencers in Rome (28 July 2025), he acknowledged the growing importance of online evangelization.

For many years the Church viewed the internet primarily as a communication tool. However, testimony presented during the Synod process—particularly by digital missionary Xiskya Valladares—revealed that online spaces function as genuine environments of pastoral encounter. People seek spiritual guidance, community, and accompaniment through social media.

Leo XIV therefore encouraged digital missionaries to see themselves as agents of communion capable of overcoming polarization and

individualism. Their mission, he said, is to communicate “the beauty and light of Truth” (cf. Jn 8:31–32).

At the same time he cautioned against using artificial intelligence to produce homilies or other forms of preaching. Faith-sharing, he insisted, must remain a personal encounter rooted in prayer and pastoral experience.

Apostolic Journeys and Emerging Priorities

The pattern of Leo XIV’s early apostolic journeys also reveals emerging priorities. His first international trip, to Türkiye and Lebanon (27 November–2 December 2025), commemorated the 1700th anniversary of the Council of Nicaea. Although the trip had originally been planned by Pope Francis, it reflected Leo XIV’s interest in ecumenical dialogue and the historical foundations of Christian unity.

Subsequent planned journeys include visits to Monaco (March 2026), four African nations—Algeria, Cameroon, Angola, and Equatorial Guinea (April 2026)—and Spain (June 2026). Within Italy he has announced visits to the shrine of Our Lady of the Rosary of Pompeii, the tomb of St Augustine, and the island of Lampedusa.

These destinations suggest three emerging axes of the pontificate: ecumenical and historical consciousness, attention to the rapidly growing Church in Africa, and pastoral concern for contemporary social challenges such as migration and secularization.

Synodality and the Future of the Papacy

A final dimension of Leo XIV's early pontificate concerns the concept of synodality. Drawing on Augustine's emphasis on listening and discernment, the pope has repeatedly encouraged the Church to cultivate what he calls "the ears of the heart."

In an address on 28 August 2025 he reminded the faithful that before speaking they must learn to listen—to the Holy Spirit, to one another, and especially to the voices of the poor and marginalized. Augustine had expressed the same principle in a striking phrase: "Do not have your heart in your ears, but your ears in your heart."

This understanding of synodality does not imply an absence of authority. Rather, it reflects what might be called ordered collaboration. In Prevost's dissertation the superior is described as the "principle of unity for the community," exercising authority while remaining attentive to the insights of others.

Such an approach may lead to what could be described as a "synodalization" of the papal office—an exercise of leadership that combines clear authority with structured consultation and shared discernment.

Conclusion

The first year of Pope Leo XIV's pontificate reveals the outlines of a leadership style deeply rooted in the Augustinian tradition while attentive to the challenges of the contemporary world. His emphasis

on interior conversion, communal charity, and the integration of contemplation with action reflects Augustine's spiritual vision.

At the same time his background in canon law provides a framework for understanding authority as service directed toward communion. Governance in this perspective involves dialogue, listening, and participation within structures that preserve unity.

The choice of the name Leo XIV signals engagement with the social challenges of a new technological era. Just as Leo XIII addressed the social consequences of industrialization in *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIV seeks to guide the Church's response to the ethical questions raised by artificial intelligence and digital culture.

Early initiatives—ranging from engagement with digital missionaries to reflections on responsible communication and global peace—suggest a papacy committed to integrating intellectual clarity, spiritual depth, and pastoral engagement.

If the first year provides a reliable indication, Leo XIV's pontificate may be characterized by continuity with the missionary vision of Pope Francis while introducing a distinctive Augustinian emphasis on truth, unity, and charity. In an age marked by division and rapid technological change, this synthesis may offer a framework through which the Church seeks to witness to the enduring dignity of the human person and the transformative power of the Gospel.

Studies & Perspectives

**The Leonine Magisterium in the Light of Anthony Akinwale's
“The First Leo, The Last Leo and The New Leo”**

Fidelis Stephen Agala¹

&

Joshua Ebuka Ugwu²

Dominican University, Ibadan.

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Abstract

The leadership of the Church built on Peter the Rock by Christ does change hands. The most recent person called to shepherd the universal Church in this capacity is Pope Leo XIV, initially Robert Prevost. The Church in every age is blessed with many spiritual and

¹ Fidelis Stephen Agala, OP, is a Dominican friar from Cross River State, Nigeria, affiliated to the Province of St. Joseph the Worker, Nigeria and Ghana. He holds a Bachelor of Science degree in Mathematics from Cross River University of Technology, Calabar. He is currently pursuing his philosophical studies at Dominican University, Ibadan, Oyo State.

² Joshua Ebuka Ugwu, OP, is a Dominican friar of the Province of St. Joseph the Worker, Nigeria and Ghana. He hails from Enugu State, Nigeria. He holds a Bachelor of Arts (Education) degree in English and Literature from the University of Benin, Benin City. He is presently a student of Philosophy at the Dominican University, Ibadan, Oyo State.

corporeal gifts, but always challenged and has had to combat different unorthodox teachings opposed to the authentic teachings of the Church on the Truth and the right way to live Life. Over the centuries, the different Magisterium of the Church has adapted herself to various epochs without faltering in her fidelity to the truth. It is to this end that this paper investigates the Leonine Magisterium in history, with particular focus on the commencement of Pope Leo XVI's pontificate in the light of Anthony Akinwale's reflection "The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo." The paper weighs on the benefits of the Leonine Magisterium to the Church in Africa as Akinwale identifies doctrinal and social concerns such as: false teachings, prosperity gospel, syncretism, and factionalism as areas impeding authentic Christian witnessing in the Church in Africa. It is the hope of the millions of Christians in the Church in Africa that Pope Leo's Magisterium will usher a new era of renewal for the Church in Africa.

Keywords: Leonine Magisterium, Leonine Popes, Christology, Church in Africa.

Introduction

Within the long history of papal teaching, certain pontificates stand out for their particular contributions to the development of doctrine and exercise of authority on the chair of Peter. Many holy men blessed with the gift of wisdom have shepherded the Church wisely through even and uneven times. Among these, the popes who bear the name Leo have left an indelible mark on the Church's history. In

his insightful essay "The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo", Anthony Akinwale, A Nigerian Dominican Priest underscores the unique contributions of Pope Leo I who was a model of doctrinal clarity, Pope Leo XIII who wrestled with modern social, political and economic problems, while anticipating a similar trend in the pontificate of the New Leo, Pope Leo XIV³ which is just commencing. For Akinwale, these pontificates reflect a unified magisterial vision which stays true to tradition while tackling evolving historical problems with creativity.

Thus, this paper investigates the Leonine magisterium in the light of Anthony Akinwale's treatise. It posits that the pontificates of Leo I and Leo XIII can be regarded as a single magisterium exercised in distinct but complementary forms. Also, the paper appraises Akinwale's anticipations for the pontificate of "New Leo" as a yearning for a similar magisterial orientation ready to tackle contemporary issues.

By way of methodology, we shall start by clarifying the concept of magisterium as understood in this work and particularly, the Leonine Magisterium. We shall then consider briefly a historical background of the fourteen Leonine popes who make up the totality of the Leonine Magisterium, after which we shall highlight the golden

¹ Anthony Akinwale, "The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo," National Catholic Register, published May 24, 2025, <https://www.ncregister.com/commentaries/first-leo-last-new-leo>.

thread (of the Holy Spirit) which binds them together. Afterwards, we shall examine the unique contributions of the two Leonine popes and the Akinwale's expectations from Pope Leo XIV. We shall end by taking a close look at the relationship between these three Leos—First Leo, Leo XIII and Leo XIV. Akinwale's analysis will guide us as we explore the theological and practical implications of his reflection on the Leonine Magisterium-especially with respect to the church in Africa.

What a Magisterium is in the Life of the Church

Magisterium: Etymologically, the word magisterium originates from the Latin *magister* which translates “teacher.” In its modern usage, the term magisterium can be explained in different senses. Two of such senses which has import for this paper are as follows: first, it refers to the office, that is, the teaching authority which Christ has entrusted to the church.⁴ Second, it refers to the pope in communion with the bishops who exercise the teaching authority. *Donum Veritatis* explains it thus “as successors of the apostles, the bishops of the Church receive from the Lord, to whom all power is given in heaven and on earth, the mission of teaching all peoples, and of preaching the Gospel to every creature, so that all men may attain to

⁴ Jimmy Akin, “Magisterium”, *Catholic Answers Magazine*, accessed January 13, 2019. <https://www.catholic.com/magazine/print-edition/magisterium>.

salvation.”⁵ This sense is further buttressed in *Lumen Gentium* which designates the bishops as authentic teachers endowed with the authority of Christ.⁶ Again, Vatican II emphasized this role when it says “the task of authentically interpreting the word of God, whether written or handed on, has been entrusted exclusively to the living teaching office of the Church, whose authority is exercised in the name of Jesus Christ.”⁷ This teaching authority is further divided into ordinary and extraordinary magisterium.

Ordinary Magisterium: This refers to the daily or regular teachings of the Pope and Bishops, in form of encyclicals or preaching. This only requires a religious submission of mind and will.⁸ While, the *Extraordinary Magisterium* is a solemn declaration on matters of faith and morals by an ecumenical council or the pope when he

⁵ Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith, *Donum Veritatis*, May 24, 1990, n. 14,

https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_19900524_theologian-vocation_en.html.

⁶ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, November 21, 1964, n. 25

⁷ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on Divine Revelation: Dei Verbum* (November 18, 1965), n.10, https://www.vatican.va/archive/hist_councils/ii_vatican_council/documents/va-t-ii_const_19651118_dei-verbum_en.html

⁸ *Lumen Gentium*, 25.

speaks *ex cathedra*. These definitions are irreformable by their very nature.⁹ And according to the catechism, adherence to it requires the obedience of faith.¹⁰

The Leonine Magisterium: From the foregoing, the Leonine magisterium refers to the teaching authority of the popes who took the name Leo. In line with Akinwale's publication, the focus of this paper is on the first Leo (Leo the Great), the last Leo (Leo XIII) and the new Leo (Leo XIV).¹¹ The very name 'Leo,' is of Latin origin which translates as Lion. In some sense of biblical usage, it is likening to one with legendary strength and it invokes the Lion of the tribe of Judah (Rev 5:5).¹² By adopting this name, these pontiffs, from the first Leo to the thirteenth gestured an identity of courage, vigilance, and regal authority.

⁹ *Lumen Gentium*, 25.

¹⁰ CCC, 891.

¹¹ Anthony Akinwale, "The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo."

¹² Leland Ryken, James C. Wilhoit, and Tremper Longman III, eds. *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery: An Encyclopedic Exploration of the Images, Symbols, Motifs, Metaphors, Figures of Speech, and Literary Patterns of the Bible* (USA: InterVarsity Press, 1998), 143.

The Leonine Popes in History:

Leo I (the Great): He was elected a pope on the 29th of September 440AD and he reigned till 461AD. He was a Roman, a Tuscan aristocrat by birth and the definitive architect of the medieval papacy. He famously met Attila the Hun in 452, persuading him to turn back from Rome. He made immense Contribution to the Council of Chalcedon's (451) definition of the two natures of Christ through his work the Tome of Leo.

Leo II: He was born around 611AD, a Sicilian of Greek descent. He was known for his musical talent and for bridging the gap between the Eastern and Western Churches. He was elected a pope in 681 but consecration was delayed until 682 due to negotiations with the Byzantine Emperor. The major contribution his papacy brought about was the official ratification of the acts of the Third Council of Constantinople that ended the Monothelite heresy. His papacy also translated the acts from Greek into Latin. He is also credited with reforming the Gregorian chant.

Leo III: He was a Roman, a commoner by birth who rose through the ecclesiastical ranks. He was born around 750AD. He was elected a pope in December 795AD and reigned till 816AD. His papacy was characterised by violent local opposition; he survived a brutal assassination attempt by Roman's aristocrats in 799. The major contribution of his pontificate was the crowning of Charlemagne as

Emperor of the Romans on Christmas Day, 800AD, an action which established the precedent for the Holy Roman Empire.

Leo IV: He was born around 790AD. He was a Roman monk of the Order of St. Benedict. He was elected a pope during a period of frequent Saracen raids on Italy. His papacy which lasted for eight years began with his election in April of 847 AD and he reigned till 855AD. His major contributions consist in the fortification of the Vatican by building the “Leonine Wall” and organized the defense of Italy against Saracen invaders.

Leo V: He was born around the late 9th century in Ardrea, a town located in the region of West Italy. At the time of his election, he was a priest and not a cardinal. He was elected in July of 903AD and ruled only two months, that is till September 903AD. His reign was cut short when he was overthrown and imprisoned by the antipope Christopher. His death in prison remains a subject of historical debate.

Leo VI: He was born around 880AD and given the name Leo Sanguineus. He was the son of a high-ranking Roman official named Christopher. He was elected pope in June of 928AD, during the “Dark Age” of the papacy when the family of Theophylact controlled Rome. He is primarily remembered for his efforts to settle ecclesiastical disputes in Dalmatia; he issued decrees regarding the jurisdiction of bishops in Dalmatia and worked to maintain order during a corrupt era. His papacy ended a year later, precisely 929AD.

Leo VII: He was born around early 10th century. He was a Roman and a Benedictine monk and was appointed a pope by the Roman dictator Alberic II in January 1036AD. He reigned till 939AD. He was a staunch supporter of the Cluniac Reform. He invited the Odo of Cluny to Rome to reform the city's monasteries and improve clerical discipline.

Pope Leo VIII: Leo VIII was born in 915. His pontificate was marked by controversy. After Otto I left Rome, supporters of John XII expelled Leo and restored John as pope. Following John's death in 964 and the brief papacy of Benedict V, Otto reinstated Leo VIII, who then ruled until his death in 965. Basically, his papacy reflects the growing influence of the German emperors in Roman ecclesiastical affairs.

Pope Leo IX: Leo IX was born Bruno of Egisheim-Dagsburg in Alsace in the year 1002. He served as pope from 1049 until his death in 1054. He worked tirelessly to combat simony and clerical marriage, promoting moral and institutional reform within the clergy. During Leo IX's pontificate, escalating tensions between Rome and Constantinople culminated in the 1054 Great Schism, marked by his legates' excommunication of Patriarch Michael Cerularius, symbolising the formal split between the Western and Eastern Churches.

Pope Leo X: Pope Leo X's birth name is Giovanni de' Medici. Born in 1475, he served as pope from 1513 to 1521. Leo X's pontificate

is most historically significant for its role in the outbreak of the Protestant Reformation, particularly through the authorisation of indulgence preaching to fund projects like St. Peter's Basilica, which provoked Martin Luther's protest in 1517. After initially underestimating the movement, Leo condemned Luther's teachings and excommunicated him in 1521, events that hastened the division of Western Christianity.

Pope Leo XI: Pope Leo XI was born Alessandro Ottaviano de' Medici in 1535. He was elected pope in April 1605 and reigned for only 27 days. Before his election, Leo XI served as Archbishop of Florence and later as papal nuncio to France, where he played an important diplomatic role during the French Wars of Religion. Though his reign was too short for major reforms or doctrinal initiatives, he was regarded as a man of personal piety, moderation and pastoral concern. He fell ill after participating in strenuous ceremonial duties shortly after his election and died soon thereafter.

Pope Leo XII: Born Annibale Francesco Clemente Melchiorre Girolamo Nicola della Genga in 1760, Leo XII served as pope from 1823 to 1829. As pope, Leo XII sought to reaffirm religious orthodoxy and moral reform within the Papal States. He encouraged popular missions, supported religious education and strengthened ecclesiastical discipline. He also took measures against what he viewed as dangerous modern influences, including secret societies such as the Carbonari, and he reinforced censorship through the Index of Forbidden Books.

Pope Leo XIII: Pope Leo XIII, born Vincenzo Gioacchino Raffaele Luigi Pecci in 1810, served as pope from 1878 until his demise in 1903. He is best known for shaping modern Catholic social teaching. His seminal encyclical *Rerum Novarum* addressed the conditions of the working class during the Industrial Revolution. Intellectually, Leo XIII strongly promoted the revival of Thomistic philosophy, especially through the encyclical *Aeterni Patris*, which encouraged the study of St. Thomas Aquinas as a guide for engaging modern thought. He also supported biblical scholarship, notably in *Providentissimus Deus* (1893), which provided principles for Catholic scriptural studies.

Pope Leo XIV: Pope Leo XIV, born Robert Francis Prevost on September 14, 1955, in Chicago, Illinois, is the first American-born pope and also a naturalised citizen of Peru. He is a member of the Order of Saint Augustine and holds a Doctorate in Canon Law from the Pontifical University of St. Thomas Aquinas. Before his election, he served as Prefect of the Dicastery for Bishops and Prior General of the Augustinians. By choosing the name Leo, in continuity with Leo XIII, he signals a commitment to intellectual engagement, social teaching and pastoral renewal within the contemporary Church.

N.B.: It is worth noting that for several early medieval popes, birth names were often the same as their papal names, as the tradition of changing names upon election did not become standard until the late 10th century.

A Common Wheel Among the Leonine Popes

A defining characteristic of many of the Leonine popes was their unwavering commitment to orthodoxy, which functioned not only as a theological stance but also as a strategy for preserving Christian unity. Beginning with Leo I in the fifth century, this legacy took doctrinal form. His *Tome* articulated a balanced Christology that steered between Nestorianism and Monophysitism, earning Rome a decisive voice in doctrinal disputes. Two centuries later, Leo II reinforced this tradition by addressing the aftermath of the Monothelite controversy. For these early Leos, orthodoxy served as the “shield of Peter,” safeguarding the Church’s doctrinal integrity amid theological instability in the East and asserting the Bishop of Rome’s role as guardian of the faith.

In later centuries, particularly during the so-called “Dark Ages”, the defence of orthodoxy expanded from doctrinal clarity to moral and institutional reform. Leo IV protected the physical centre of Christendom by constructing the Leonine Wall, symbolising the defence of the Church against external threats. Meanwhile, Leo VII supported the Cluniac Reforms, recognising that right belief required right practice. By promoting monastic discipline and confronting clerical corruption, especially during the era of Roman pornocracy,

these later Leos sought to restore moral credibility to the papacy and preserve the integrity of the Christian tradition.¹³

Anthony Akinwale on the Magisterium of First Leo, The Last Leo and New Leo.

The Times and Influence of Pope Leo I – The First Leo

Pope Leo I, who is commonly referred to as Leo the Great, reigned from 440 to 461 A.D. He was quite an influential pope and a foundational representative of what is called Leonine magisterium in this paper. Leo the Great's pontificate occurred during a period of immense doctrinal controversy and ecclesial consolidation, particularly concerning the person of Christ and the authority of the Roman See. In the light of these happenings, Leo's magisterial legacy is most clearly expressed in his unwavering commitment to doctrinal clarity, ecclesial unity and the pastoral exercise of authority.

Furthermore, Leo I's most significant contribution to Christian theology is his decisive intervention in the Christological debates of the fifth century.¹⁴ Confronted with the Eutychian heresy which compromised the reality of Christ's human nature, Leo articulated a carefully nuanced Christological position in his *Tome to Flavian*. In

¹³ Eamon Duffy, *Saints and Sinners: A History of the Popes*, 4th ed. (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2014), 37–65.

¹⁴ Akinwale, "The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo."

this authoritative text, he affirms that Jesus Christ is one person subsisting in two distinct natures, divine and human, united without confusion or separation. The reception of the *Tome* at the Council of Chalcedon (451), where the assembled bishops acclaimed that “Peter has spoken through Leo,” marked not only a doctrinal victory but also a decisive affirmation of the teaching authority of the Roman pontiff within the universal Church. Leo’s intervention thus exemplifies a magisterium exercised in the service of both doctrinal truth and ecclesial unity.

In addition, Leo I’s magisterium displays a pronounced pastoral orientation. His theological interventions were not driven by abstract speculation but by a deep concern for the salvation of souls and the moral and spiritual integrity of Christian life. Whether addressing doctrinal deviations, questions of ecclesial discipline or matters of liturgical order, Leo consistently sought to strengthen the faith of the faithful and to safeguard the unity of the Church. In this regard, his magisterium exemplifies an authoritative teaching office which is both doctrinally rigorous and pastorally attentive.

From Anthony Akinwale’s perspective, Leo I is regarded as a foundational expression of the Leonine magisterium, a model characterised by doctrinal clarity, ecclesial authority and theological confidence exercised in moments of crisis. In Akinwale’s own words, he “was noted for clarity and depth in his teaching on the person of Christ who is true God and true man in one person, the Son

of God, in whom ‘the Invisible made himself Visible’”.¹⁵ His pontificate illustrates how the magisterium can function as a soothing force within the Church, championing orthodoxy while also fostering unity in the midst of doctrinal fragmentation.

The Times and the Influence of Leo XIII – The Last Leo

Pope Leo XIII (1878–1903) represents a mature and forward-looking expression of the Leonine magisterium, exercised within the challenging context of modernity. Unlike Leo I who addressed doctrinal divisions within the early Church, Leo XIII dealt with the intellectual, social and political upheavals of the modern world, including the rise of secularism, liberalism, industrial capitalism and the increasing disregard for traditional religious authority. His pontificate marks a decisive moment in the Church’s effort to articulate its teaching in dialogue with modern society while maintaining fidelity to its doctrinal heritage. Also worthy of note is his publication of the encyclical *Providentissimus Deus* (1893) and establishment of the Biblical commission which intensified the study of Sacred Scripture in Catholic circles.¹⁶

Among Leo XIII’s magisterial legacies includes his renewal of Catholic intellectual life, most notably through his promotion of Thomistic philosophy. In the encyclical *Aeterni Patris* (1879), the

¹⁵ Akinwale, “The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo.”

¹⁶ Akinwale, “The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo.”

pope calls for a return to the philosophical and theological synthesis of Thomas Aquinas as a stable and enduring guide for engaging contemporary thought. This initiative was not intended as a nostalgic retrieval of the past but as a strategic response to the intellectual crises of modernity, providing the Church with a rational and systematic foundation for dialogue with modern philosophy, science and culture. Through this encyclical, Leo XIII exercised the magisterium as an instrument of intellectual renewal, balancing continuity with tradition and openness to development.

Another remarkable achievement of Leo XIII is his contribution to the Church's social teaching, particularly as articulated in the encyclical *Rerum Novarum* (1891). In response to the social disruption caused by industrialisation, he criticises both unchecked capitalism and revolutionary socialism. He affirms the dignity of the human person, the rights of workers to just wages and humane working conditions, the legitimacy of private property and the moral responsibilities of the state toward the common good. In doing so, he lays the foundation for modern Catholic Social Teaching and demonstrates the capacity of the magisterium to address concrete social realities with both moral clarity and pastoral concern.

In his closing remarks on the Last Leo, Akinwale joins his voice with Leo XIII's to affirm that private ownership is morally legitimate only insofar as it serves the common good and promotes the dignity of the human person. When this social orientation of property is neglected, economic life degenerates into the heartless subjugation of persons to impersonal and unregulated market forces where excessive quest

for profit obscures the primacy of human dignity. Read from this vantage point, the magisterium of Leo XIII is indeed a decisive intervention against such distortions, articulating a vision of social order in which economic rights are inseparable from moral responsibility. His teaching affirms that the Church's magisterium must not only defend doctrinal truth but also challenge social structures that undermine justice, solidarity and the integral flourishing of the human person.

The Times and Anticipated Influence Pope Leo XIV – The New Leo

As divine providence would have it, the election of Pope Leo XIV invites the Church to anticipate a renewed expression of the Leonine magisterium. The symbolic force of this pontificate is already evident in the pope's deliberate choice of name and in his decision to be installed as Successor of Peter on May 18, 2025, the 134th anniversary of *Rerum Novarum*.¹⁷ These gestures function as signals which indicate not only continuity with the past but also an intention to retrieve and rearticulate the Church's teaching authority in response to contemporary global realities.

Interestingly, Pope Leo XIV himself offers a clue to interpreting the orientation of his anticipated magisterium. In explaining his choice of name, he explicitly aligns his pontificate with that of Leo XIII

¹⁷ Akinwale, "The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo."

whose historic engagement with the social question addresses the commotions of the first industrial revolution. By analogy, Leo XIV identifies the present moment as marked by a new technological transformation, specifically developments in artificial intelligence and digital economies which raise urgent questions concerning human dignity, justice and labour. In this context, the Church's social doctrine is presented not as a relic of the past but as a living treasury capable of guiding moral discernment in a rapidly changing world.

In the same vein, Akinwale rightly notes that the anticipated magisterium of Leo XIV cannot be understood solely through its Leonine inspiration. It is equally shaped by a profound Augustinian heritage. As a son of the Order of Saint Augustine, Leo XIV stands within a tradition that unites philosophical depth with pastoral concern, intellectual rigour with spiritual insight. Augustine's example as a bishop and theologian, one who read Scripture with Christ at the centre and addressed the moral crises of his age, suggests that the New Leo's magisterium will be attentive not only to social structures but also to the interior transformation of persons.

Further enriching this anticipation is Leo XIV's intellectual formation at the Pontifical University of Saint Thomas Aquinas (the Angelicum).¹⁸ This Dominican influence points toward a magisterium marked by clarity of thought, confidence in the

¹⁸ Akinwale, "The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo."

harmony of faith and reason and a strong Christocentric orientation. Taken together, these converging traditions (Leonine, Augustinian and Dominican) allow one to anticipate a magisterium that is both authoritative and dialogical, doctrinally grounded yet pastorally responsive. In this sense, the "New Leo" emerges, in Akinwale's vision, not as a rupture with the past but as a renewed embodiment of the Church's teaching office, poised to address the challenges of the contemporary world with intellectual depth and evangelical courage.

The Golden Thread Interconnecting the Three Leos

The relationship between Leo I, Leo XIII, and Leo XIV is best understood not in terms of historical repetition but as a continuity of magisterial orientation expressed under differing historical conditions. As Anthony Akinwale suggests, the three Leos represent distinct yet interconnected moments in the Church's exercise of teaching authority, united by a shared commitment to safeguarding human dignity, ecclesial unity and doctrinal truth in times of profound transition.¹⁹ Their relationship is therefore theological rather than merely nominal, revealing a coherent Leonine magisterial trajectory across centuries.

To begin with, Leo I stands as the foundational figure of this trajectory. His magisterium was exercised primarily in the realm of

¹⁹ Akinwale, "The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo."

doctrinal clarification, particularly in response to Christological controversy. By articulating the unity of Christ's person in two natures and asserting the Petrine responsibility of the Bishop of Rome, Leo I established a model of authoritative teaching that secured orthodoxy and preserved ecclesial communion. His magisterium reflects the Church's need in moments of doctrinal crisis.

Next, Leo XIII represents a significant development of this Leonine vision. While remaining faithful to doctrinal continuity, his magisterium shifts the focus from in-house doctrinal disputes to the Church's engagement with the modern world. Through encyclicals such as *Rerum Novarum*, Leo XIII extends the magisterium into the social, political and economic spaces, thereby addressing the moral implications of industrial capitalism, labour relations and the role of the state. In doing so, he demonstrates that the magisterium is not only a guardian of revealed truth but also a moral guide for society, capable of responding creatively to new historical realities without abandoning the Church's theological foundations.

Also, the anticipated magisterium of Leo XIV, the New Leo, arises within this established continuity while responding to the unique challenges of the contemporary world. According to Akinwale, Leo XIV stands at the intersection of doctrinal fidelity and social engagement, inheriting the Christological clarity of Leo I and the social consciousness of Leo XIII. His deliberate retrieval of the Leonine name signals an intention to exercise the magisterium in response to a new technological and cultural revolution marked by

artificial intelligence, global inequality and shifting conceptions of human dignity.

Hence, the relationship shared between the three Leos thus reveals a dynamic unity, that is, a single magisterial spirit expressed diversely across time, each pontificate interpreting the demands of fidelity and relevance in light of its own historical context. Although separated by centuries and confronted with different realities, the three Leos each wield the magisterium in a manner that reflects a similar spirit.²⁰ This does not, however, translate into uniformity of content or methodology but showcases a continuity of purpose, responding creatively to the concrete challenges of each age while staying faithful to the deposit of faith.

Akinwale's Comparative Analysis on the Three Magisterium

Akinwale's article, written on the occasion of the election of Pope Leo XIV in 2025, uses the pontificates of Leo the Great and Leo XIII as lenses through which to understand the possibilities and responsibilities of papal teaching authority today. While separated by centuries, Leo the Great and Leo XIII shared certain characteristics that Akinwale identifies as essential to the effective exercise of their magisterium.

First, both popes combined doctrinal clarity with pastoral sensitivity. Leo the Great's Christological teaching and Leo XIII's social

²⁰ Akinwale, "The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo."

encyclicals addressed real challenges facing the faithful, not merely abstract theological questions. Second, both exercised teaching authority with confidence, grounded in their understanding of the papal office rather than personal charisma. Third, both engaged with the intellectual and social contexts of their times rather than retreating into defensive isolation.

Further, Akinwale's concept of the "New Leo" suggests that these characteristics remain relevant for the contemporary exercise of papal magisterium. The challenges facing the Church today differ from those of the fifth or late nineteenth centuries, but the Leonine approach offers a model, that is, authoritative teaching that engages rather than simply condemns, intellectual rigor that takes contemporary thought seriously, and pastoral concern that addresses real human needs. The comparative basis of Akinwale also highlights the development of doctrine and the exercise of teaching authority. The magisterium is not static but develops in response to new questions and challenges while maintaining continuity with apostolic teaching. Leo the Great's Christology and Leo XIII's social teaching both represented developments that were faithful to tradition while addressing the needs of their time.

Theological and Practical Implications of the Magisterium of New Leo for the Church in Africa

Anthony Akinwale's "The First Leo, the Last Leo and the New Leo" is of profound significance to the Church today because it offers a constructive theological guide for understanding the exercise of the

magisterium in a rapidly changing world. Rather than treating the magisterium as a static or merely juridical institution, Akinwale presents it as a living and historically responsive teaching authority, capable of addressing new challenges without betraying its doctrinal foundations. By drawing together the pontificates of Leo I and Leo XIII and projecting the figure of a New Leo, Akinwale stresses the continuity of the Church's teaching mission while highlighting its capacity for renewal and adaptation.

One of the most important contributions of Akinwale's treatise lies in its insistence that authentic magisterial authority must be both faithful to tradition and attentive to historical realities. In an age marked by globalisation, technological advancement and economic inequality, the Church is continually called upon to preach the Gospel in ways that speak meaningfully to contemporary human experience.²¹ Akinwale's reference to Leo XIII's social magisterium, particularly *Rerum Novarum*, serves as a reminder that the Church's teaching office cannot remain silent in the face of social injustice, the erosion of human dignity and the subjugation of persons to impersonal economic systems. His work thus reinforces the relevance of Catholic social teaching as an integral dimension of the magisterium.

²¹ Second Vatican Council, "Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, *Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December, 1965," in *Vatican Council II*, no. 3.

For contemporary Church leadership, these insights suggest that effective exercise of magisterial authority requires several elements. Such elements will include a deep grounding in theological tradition, serious engagement with contemporary thought and social realities, intellectual courage to address difficult questions, and pastoral sensitivity to the real struggles of the faithful. The Leonine model offers a middle way between rigid traditionalism that refuses all engagement with the contemporary world and uncritical accommodation that compromises essential truths. This, Akinwale optimistically expressed that, the “New Leo” owing to his Augustinian heritage and Dominican intellectual tradition is well disposed for this task. Thus, he says: “In him, therefore, we can look forward to a Christocentric pontificate draped in Augustinian and Leonine heritage, and the clarity and depth of the Dominican intellectual tradition he received at the Angelicum.”²²

In addition, Akinwale’s treatise serves as a clarion call to the church in Africa to rise up to myriads of false teachings and practices which threaten its unity and authenticity. These teachings and practices include but are not limited to the following: preaching of prosperity gospel, syncretism, and factionalism. While the prosperity gospel preaches a cross-less Christ, syncretism which is a mixture of Christian faith with traditional religious beliefs leads to an inauthentic faith, factionalism stands opposed to one of four marks of the church, namely oneness, that which Christ prayed for in John

²² Akinwale, “The First Leo, the Last Leo, and the New Leo,”

17:21. Given this unfortunate reality, the church's hierarchy in Africa must rise up to the occasion and ensure that orthodoxy, as upheld by the Leonine magisterium, is lived and propagated among the faithful.

Possible Challenges for Pope Leo XVI's and Hope for Renewed Vision

The Leonine model of papal magisterium, as explored through Akinwale's article, presents both enduring strengths and contemporary challenges. The strength of the model lies in its demonstration that authoritative teaching needs no isolation from the world. Both Leo the Great and Leo XIII engaged their respective ages with intellectual rigor and pastoral sensitivity, proving that doctrinal fidelity and contemporary relevance are complementary dimensions of effective magisterial exercise.²³

However, the Leonine emphasis on strong, centralised papal authority must be evaluated in light of the Second Vatican Council's recovery of collegiality and synodality. *Lumen Gentium* emphasizes that bishops, as successors of the apostles, form a college that shares responsibility for the universal Church with the Pope.²⁴ The contemporary emphasis on synodality, that is walking together as the

²³ Akinwale, "The First Leo, the Last Leo, and the New Leo,"

²⁴ Second Vatican Council, *Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (Lumen Gentium)*, November 21, 1964, no. 23.

People of God challenges an exclusively top to bottom kind of authority. This prompts the question: can the lion learn to walk with the flock rather than simply roaring from above?

Additionally, the historical effectiveness of the Leonine model occurred within specific contexts. Leo the Great's authority was amplified by the political vacuum left by Rome's declining imperial power. Leo XIII addressed an era when papal pronouncements carried weight in Catholic societies. In today's secularised and pluralistic world, the leonine roar may not resonate as it once did.²⁵

²⁵ Joseph Cardinal Ratzinger, "Homily at the Mass for the Election of the Roman Pontiff," April 18, 2005, https://www.vatican.va/gpII/documents/homily-pro-eligendo-pontifice_20050418_en.html.

²⁴ Leo XIV, *Dilexi Te* (Apostolic Exhortation to all Christians on Love for the Poor), The Holy See, October 4, 2025, no. 110.

Nevertheless, these challenges do not negate the Leonine model's value but rather call for its development and integration with other dimensions of papal ministry.

Moreover, at the time of writing this essay, an Apostolic Exhortation titled *Dilexi Te* has been published by Pope Leo XIV. In the document, the pope lends his voice to the propagation of the Church's social teaching, as inaugurated by Leo XIII. According to him, concern and care for the poor is at the very heart of our Christian faith because "the poor are not a sociological category, but the very 'flesh' of Christ."²⁴ He goes on to assert that he wonders why many Christians think that they can safely disregard the poor even though the Sacred Scripture teaches about the poor so clearly. From the foregoing, it is quite evident that Pope Leo XIV, like other Leonine popes, stands for orthodoxy which, he teaches, is inseparable from love for the poor.

Conclusion

In this paper, the Leonine magisterium has been explored through Anthony Akinwale's comparative study, examining how Leo the Great and Leo XIII exercised papal teaching authority in response to the defining challenges of their respective ages. Leo the Great's Christological contributions at Chalcedon established the papacy as a definitive voice in doctrinal controversies, while Leo XIII invigorated this Leonine spirit by directing magisterial authority toward the social disorders of industrialization through *Rerum Novarum* and the intellectual renewal of *Aeterni Patris*.

This paper has also traced the development of Leonine magisterium from the Christological controversies of late antiquity through the social challenges of industrialisation, demonstrating through Akinwale's lens. The paper highlights the fact that the teaching authority entrusted to the successors of Peter can address every age's distinctive challenge while maintaining continuity with apostolic faith. Contextualizing this truth to the Church in Africa, the paper identifies some problems peculiar to it and shows how Akinwale's treatise serves as an implicit road map towards redemption. In sum, the paper suggests that the roar of the Lion, when joined with the heart of the shepherd and the service of Christ, remains a powerful witness to the truth that sets humanity free.

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Studies & Perspectives

On the Difference between Prayer and Magic

***Mirabel Nagei Kenduanyi*¹**

Dominican University, Ibadan (Nigeria)

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Abstract

What is the difference between prayer and magic? Prayer in the Christian tradition is an act of worship which originates in a divine

¹ Mirabel Nagei Kenduanyi is a Lecturer in the Department of Philosophy and Religious Studies, Dominican University, Ibadan, Nigeria. She also teaches systematic theology and the Philosophy of Thomas Aquinas at the Dominican Institute and at SPRE (School of Pastoral and Religious Education), an online theology program run by the Dominican Institute. She holds a B.A. degree in Linguistics from the University of Buea, Cameroon. She then studied theology at the John Paul II Institute of Theology, Buea, Cameroon. She holds an MA in Theology from Duquesne University, Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, USA and is currently a Doctoral Candidate in Theology. She is a member of the *Catholic Theological Association of Nigeria* (CATHAN) and is a former Vice Secretary of the Association. She is also a member of the *Patristic Association of Nigeria* (PATRAN).

ordinance. The Christian Cultus is said to be at once a sacrifice and a sacrament. In worship, says Gregory of Nysa, we follow Christ closely from behind and do not look at Him face to face —because a face-to-face implies that we are on opposite directions. The praying person is one who, with Catherine of Siena, acknowledges that “God is everything and she is nothing.” Magic on the other hand is about ‘expediency,’ it is about this world. Josef Pieper describes magic as prayer that does not transcend this world. He says “there exists a form of prayer in which ‘this’ world is not transcended, in which, rather, the attempt is made to incorporate the divine in the instrumental network of the workday as a functioning component.” The idea behind such prayer is to tame God. He decries this degeneration in prayer saying “there is the degeneration of religion into magic—not devotion to the divine, but rather the attempt to overpower the divine and to make it available. There is the degeneration of prayer into practice, precisely in order to continue making life under the dome bearable.” Chesterton makes a distinction between a praying Christian, a healthy heathen, and a spiritualist.

Faith and worship in the Church in Africa seem to be grossly influenced by the need for bread. Because of the poverty of the mind, many Christians become gullible and fall into the hands of so-called ministers of God instead of leading them to authentic worship, trust and faith in God, but rather lure them into a magic. G.K. believes that magic is real because superstition recurs in all ages and superstition occurs in a rationalist age like ours because it rests on

something which, if not identical with rationalism, is not unconnected with scepticism, is at least connected with agnosticism.”

Keywords: Prayer, Magic, Superstition, Safeguard, Love

Authentic Prayer as Opposed to Prayer as Magic

The word prayer is not exclusively a Christian word. All religions including the heathen religions have some forms of prayer. Prayer however always indicate worship offered to God or a god—deity. History attest to the existence of different cults of worship dedicated to different gods in different places at all times in history. African traditional religions, the Greeks, the Egyptians, other Europeans groups have documented evidence of worship of gods and sacrifices, priests and temple rituals.

According to Thomas Aquinas’ *Commentary on the Sentences*, the word prayer comes from the Latin *oratio* which means “mouth’s reason” *oris ratio*. Thus, *oratio* means “the expression by way of mouth, of some act of reason.”² For him, “prayer is an act of the reason, bringing the will’s desire into relationship with him who is our Superior, not subject to our control, namely God. He makes recourse to Damascene’s definition that “prayer is a petition made to God for things that are fitting.” Thus, prayer in all forms—whether

² Albert and Thomas, *Selected Writings*, Trans. Simon Tugwell, O.P. (New York, Paulist Press, 1988), 367.

the public worship of a people or an individual's communications with God ought to have the essential nature of prayer to be considered authentic.

When Pieper made the distinction between genuine prayer and prayer as magic, he was particularly concerned with the idea of authentic prayer. When he talks of prayer that does not transcend this world, a form of prayer in which an "attempt is made to incorporate the divine in the instrumental network of the workday as a functioning component," *a kind of prayer meant to tame God*, he was definitely concerned about the "praying act" as a transcendental experience which when one truly engages in, in a leisurely fashion becomes an experience of philosophical wonder which transforms the praying person and yields insights in the form of inspiration from the wellspring of God's Loving heart. The opposite of such devoted prayer according to Pieper is nothing else short of magic—which is what he calls "prayer that does not transcend this world." The inability of such prayer to transcend the world is precisely because it is very earthly, it is prayer aimed at incorporating the divine in the instrumental network of the workday as a functioning component of the world. The goal of such prayer is not a search for union with God, rather, it proves itself to be an attempt to "overpower." Such prayers seek to make God do our bidding instead. It does not require man's total submission to God's will. This form of prayer manifests itself in a real concern for bread "alone," the desire for signs and wonders and often degenerate into real superstition, and a love for esoteric knowledge—which is usually a love of mystery gone wrong.

Magic and Mystery: Oracles and Prayer

The attempt to distinguish between prayer and magic is not new. Christine Chaundler in a wonderful book connects the origins of superstition to problems in human existence which primitive man tried to solve by observing certain patterns in nature and trying to conciliate with through certain developed rites. John Henry Newman makes the same assertion about the origin of religion. Religion exists because there exist problems in human that man cannot solve on his own and relies on a Superior Being to provide solutions.³ Prayer and Superstition are both concerned with problems of human existence. The one real difference between superstition and prayer is that superstition a pagan practice (even though some Christians are Superstitious) while authentic prayer is an act of revealed religion. Writing on the prevalence of superstition in the human community, Chaundler writes:

scholars tell us that many of the superstitions which to some extents are still in vogue to-day can be traced back to the worship of deities in whom men believed even before they bowed down to the gods of Olympus and Asgard, Babylon and Assyria. Some of them, it is thought, are relics of primitive fertility rites, such as those connected with the reaping of our British harvests. The practices are not really believed in now, even by those who, to be on the safe side as it were, still carry them out. But they were of great importance to the early inhabitants of the earth, as they are yet to native tribes in the

³ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, (New York, Image Books, 1960), p. 71.

backward parts of the world. It is easy to see why. Early man found himself helpless in a hostile environment, vulnerable to all kinds of disasters which came to him from he knew not where. Flood and famine, extremes of heat and cold, lightening and thunder, sickness and death, descended upon him without warning. Where did they come from? It seemed to him that he must be surrounded by superhuman beings, possessed of great powers for good or evil, and he must do what he could to conciliate them, to avert the harm they might do to him and persuade them to bring him good. Little by little, he and his fellow tribesmen evolved a system of religious rites and ceremonies which were handed down from generation to generation, changing gradually with the growth of civilization and the enlightenment of the human mind. To-day, only vestiges of those ancient ceremonies, which once meant so much to our ancestors, survive in this country.⁴

These superstitious practices which began in primitive times still hold sway on human communities today—even Christian communities. Chaundler relates a real case of superstition in a Church in England related to bees which she says “of all the insects known to man bees are perhaps the most important to his welfare.” She says in Sussex:

...If bees swarmed at any distance from their original hive unless the owner collected them nobody else would do so until the owner had been traced and fitting sale arranged. There is a Church in a West Sussex village in which, some sixty years ago, a swarm of bees settled in the roof. The owner was unknown and for many decades

⁴ Christine Chaundler, *The Book of Superstitions*, (New Jersey, The Citadel Press, 1972), 9-10.

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the colon stayed there, growing bigger and bigger, until the dripping honey became a nuisance to the worshippers. At last, a rector came to the living and refused to believe that ill luck would follow their removal, and, since nobody in the locality would undertake the work, a firm of “outside” contractors was hired to clear the Church insects. Within a year of this “sacrilege”, as the older villagers regarded it, the rector had a stroke in the vestry one morning, just before a service, and died. Everyone knew why!⁵

Such stories attest to that fact that superstition and prayer co-exist in the lives of some Christians. In the books *Freedom in Exile* the Dalai Lama of Tibet, a well-known religious leader in the world talks about the importance of oracles and in Buddhist’s worship. He says “I must stress that the purpose of the oracle is not...” the Dalai Lama talks of his own consultations of the oracle Nechung, who is also consulted by the Tibetan Government and explains the whole mysterious process through which the Oracle gets into a trance and make utterances—which are often true. The Dalai Lama says his response to Westerners who are often skeptical about such as well as some progressive Tibetans who question the veracity of such experiences is that “I do so for the simple reason that as I look back over the many occasions when I have asked questions of the oracle, on each one of them has proved that his answer was correct. This is not to say I rely solely on the oracle’s advice. I do not. I seek the opinion of my Cabinet and just as I seek the opinion of my own

⁵ Christine Chaundler, *The Book of Superstitions*, 115.

conscience.”⁶ What is here attested is the idea that for some worshippers around the world, prayer is accompanied by magical utterances which is not absent in the Christian religion—though not very typical. Christians typically “watch and pray” and discern the Good Shepherd’s voice in their hearts with the help of the Magisterium.

Superstition, Witch- Hunting and Idolatry

G.K Chesterton wrote:

I am absolutely certain that there is such a thing as witchcraft. I impute a belief in it to common sense, to experience and the records of experience, and to a broad view of humanity as a whole. I impute disbelief in it to inexperience, to provincial ignorance, to local limitations, and all the vices that balance the virtues of Tooting. Common sense will show that the habit of invoking evil spirits, often because they were evil, has existed in far too vast a variety of different cultures, classes and social conditions to be a chance piece of childish credulity. Experience will show that it is *not* true it disappears everywhere before the advance of education; on the contrary, some of its most evil ministers have been the highly educated. Record will show that it is *not* true that it marks barbarism rather than civilization; there was more devil-worship in the cities of Hannibal and Montezuma than among the Equimaux or the

⁶ Dalai Lama, *Freedom in Exile: The Autobiography of the Dalai Lala of Tibet*, (Great Britain, Abacus, 2012), 233.

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Australian bushmen. Any real knowledge of modern cities will show that it is going on in London and Paris today.⁷

Chesterton quoting Huxley who wondered if a human person can really make a fundamental option for evil, whether someone could say “Evil, be thou my good.” Chesterton mentions particular people “highly lucid, cultivated, and deliberate men” who have said “Evil, be thou my good.” Name like Gilles, de Rais, and the Marquis de Sade.⁸ He adds that although these people repented at the end, at one point “these people pursued evil, not pleasure, or excess of pleasure, or sex sensuality, but evil.” He is convinced that some people pursued it beyond the bounds of this of world; and called forces from evil.

Where Christians do not live authentic lives and do not pray as they should, prayer degenerates. we may find ourselves in a situation of witch-hunting which is linked to superstition.⁹ For Charles Swindoll witch-hunting is “not just blaming Satan for every action, but finding him in every nook and cranny...thinking that he is the subtle force behind all wicked events and encounters.” Communities have often shown a lack of discernment between witches and praying persons. St Joan of Arc is one of the Christian victims of an attitude of excessive witch-hunting. Scriptures to the existence of such

⁷ G.K Chesterton, *The Common Man*, 94.

⁸ G.K Chesterton, *The Common Man*, 95.

⁹ Charles R. Swindoll, *Come Before the Winter...And Share my Hope*, (Portland, Multnomah Press, 1985), 191.

attitudes. For Swindoll, witch—hunting finds its roots in insincerity in the worship of God or a worship of a false God. For him, idolatry is prayer to false gods and idolatry could simply be excessive attachment to good things. He writes:

The aged apostle deliberately refrained from classifying idols or giving us a comprehensive list to follow. Any Idol, regardless of its beauty or usefulness or original purpose, is to be set aside so that Christ might reign supreme, without a single competitor... It's an unconditional command. I don't have the temptation many temptations to worship evil things, it's the good things that plague me. It isn't difficult for me to reject something that is innately bad or wrong as it is to keep those good and wholesome things off the throne. That, I believe is where the battle line begins.... It happens today that. You can make an idol out of anything or anyone in life. A church building can become an idol to us, when all the while it is simply a place to meet and worship our Lord—nothing more. Your child can become your idol...in subtle ways you can adore that little one that your whole life revolves around the child. Your mate or date can be given first place in your life and literally idolized. Your work can easily become your God...as can some pursuits in life. A house, a lawn, an antique, a car, a letter in sports, an education, a trip abroad, an achievement, and even that "goal of retirement" can so grip your heart that it becomes your *Nashushtan*.¹⁰

The human capacity to be false in the object of worship is attested in religion. While superstition may be closer to true religion, Idolatry

¹⁰ Charles Swindoll, *Come Before the Winter....And Share my Hope*, 80-81.

is worship offered to a false god. Christian scripture is full of denunciation of the worship of false gods.

On Magic: Esoteric Knowledge and the Occult

Magic is equally linked to the desire for esoteric knowledge and the occult. It is well documented in our times that men and women are still dabbling into these kinds of practices even in the big cities such as Paris, Rome. Chaundler writes that “scholars tell us that many of the superstitions which to some extents are still in vogue to-day can be traced back to the worship of deities in whom men believed even before they bowed down to gods of Olympus and Asgard, Babylon and Asyria.”¹¹ Astrology which is something still very current is said to be “a very ancient philosophy”¹² while the idea of “necromancy” is still very popular in literature in our time e.g *Harry Potter*. Some Africans traditional religion attests to the presence of: oracles, shrines, libations, diviners and talismans and consolations of the dead. deities. Chaundler adds:

In spite of all that modern science and modern thought can do to banish them. Indeed, of recent years there seems to have been a revival here in Britain of some of the superstitious beliefs of the Middle Ages which, it might have been hoped, had quite disappeared. The rites of witchcraft are increasingly practiced by some who think, that they can acquire magical powers through getting in touch with the unseen means of spells and incantations.

¹¹ Christine Chaundler, *The Book of Superstitions*, 19.

¹² Christine Chaundler, *The Book of Superstitions*, 11.

One hears of covens of witches meeting on Walpurgis night, on Midsummer's Eve, and Hallow'en, and rumours of dark, mysterious doings on more and lonely places. And the ancient cult of astrology has increased enormously, as can be seen by the fortune-telling columns of many of today's magazines and newspapers.¹³

Even though there is an increasing distinction between “black magic and white Magic,” the idea remains. In a study carried out in the book, *Sects, Cults and Spiritual Communities: A Sociological Analysis*, an analysis of nine cultic organizations was made: Heaven's Gate, Jesus People USA, The Farm, The Love Family, Scientology and others. This study revealed that one of the features of many cults is that—they often have an “inner cycle” which possess a certain kind of knowledge which other members do not possess. This is because some “hidden wisdom is prized in some New Age circles.”¹⁴ One of the leaders of these cults Clarence Klug taught that:

In reading sacred literature, it is well to keep in mind that all truly esoteric works have four layers of meaning. The surface or literal meaning is evident to the general reader who accepts the words at face value. The allegorical meaning becomes evident to those acquainted with the Mysteries. The hieroglyphic or symbolic meaning contributes its special keys and purpose. The mystical meaning is not communicated even in symbols, depends entirely on

¹³ Christine Chaundler, *The Book of Superstitions*, 10.

¹⁴ *Cults and Spiritual Communities: A Sociological Analysis* Eds. William W. Lellner, and Marc Petrowsky, (London: Praeger Publishers, 1998), 12.

the type of inspiration synonymous with the phrase “in the spirit” which is used throughout the Bible.

The Church encourages her members to be familiar with the teachings of the church—scriptures, doctrines, and practices, but members are cautioned against mere “intellectual curiosity” which is opposed to the “loving search of the truth.” James V. Shall intimates us that “the devil was the most intelligent of the creatures,” yet he fell.¹⁵ The desire for esoteric knowledge is not compatible with Christian way of knowing and worshipping. In the Life of Anthony of Egypt as written by St. Athanasius, we are told that the holiness of life of Anthony was for him a source of gifted wisdom and a means of shutting up mere curious visitors and of expelling the devil. The Church renounces organizations such as the Free Masons,¹⁶ Rosicrucian’s and other groups interested in esoteric ways of praying and knowing.

Esoteric Knowledge in the Christian Communities

The truth is that the devil exists and that devil-worshippers exist.¹⁷ The occult has always associated themselves with a certain kind of knowledge—knowledge not accessible to all. John Henry Newman associates the Gnostics sects which were very prevalent in the early

¹⁵ James V. Schall, *The Unseriousness of Human Affairs*...

¹⁶ Philip Gibbs, “the Catholic Church’s view on Sorcery and how it is addressing sorcery. Stopsorceryviolence.org. (accessed, 16th Jan. 2026).

¹⁷ G. K Chesterton, *The Common Man*, 95.

Church with the excise of magic and astrology. “The amulets of the Basilidians’ which are still extant, inscribed with symbols of which some are Christian while some with figures of Isis, Serapis, and Anubis, representing according to their indecencies of Egyptian Mythologies. Tertullian is said to have described their priests as “they mystical priests live in lewdness, and practice magic, according to the ability of each. They use exorcisms and incantations, love-potions too, and seductive spells; by virtue of the Spirits, and dreams, and other curious arts, they diligently observe.”¹⁸

Newman identifies the Gnostic sects in the early Church with Magic:

The Gnostic family suitably traces its origin to a mixed race, which had commenced its national history by associating Orientalism with Revelation. After the captivity of the ten tribes, Samaria was colonized by “men from Babylon and Cushan, and from Ava, and from Hamath, and from Sepharvaim, who were instructed at their own instance in “the manner of the God of the land’ by one priest of the Church Jeroboam. The Consequence was that “they feared the Lord and served their own gods” of this Country was Simon, the reputed Patriarch of the Gnostics, and he is introduced in the Acts of the Apostles professing those magical powers which were so principal a characteristic of the oriental mysteries. His heresy, though broken into multitude of sects, was poured all over the world with a Catholicity not inferior in its day to Catholicism.¹⁹

¹⁸ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrines*, 222.

¹⁹ John Henry Newman, *An Essay on the Development of Doctrine*, 219.

Magic Tricks as an Art Form

Magicians form a considerable branch of artists. Magicians are connected to the world of “make believe” G.K Chesterton makes the distinction between “fact” “fable” and “falsehood.”²⁰ He states that children never confuse fiction with reality. He writes that “a child knows that a doll is not a baby; just as clearly as a real believer knows that the statue of an angel is not an angel. But both know that in both cases, the image has the power of both opening and concentrating the imagination.” In the same vein, he goes further to state that “the child is perfectly clear about the difference not only between truth and falsehood but between fiction and falsehood.”²¹ Relating this to the world of magic, many children story books or fables relate stories that are set in a world of make-believe. Christian writers too have shown their genius in such writings. C.S Lewis wrote the *Chronicles Narnia*, and the T.V program “Mr Roger’s Neighborhood” used puppets and animated cartoons which appeal to children and adults. Yet some of these entrainment movies such as *Harry Porter* have not failed to draw criticism from some Christians due to the heavy-laden witchcraft and magical tendencies portrayed in them. Joseph Ratzinger is said to have said of the *Harry Potter* series that—it contains “subtle seductions capable of corrupting young

²⁰ G.K Chesterton, *The Common Man*, 57.

²¹ G.K Chesterton, *The Common Man*, 58.

Christians.”²² But the Vatican City Reuters says “the film reaches a balance thanks to a clear demarcation between those who work for good and those who carry out evil.”²³ The human person is moved by the credulous—but Christians must keep watch.

Natural Religion’s Healthy Paganism as Opposed to Unhealthy Paganism

While we associate superstition, magic, idolatry to paganism, Newman tells us that there is such a thing as healthy paganism. Not all pagan practices slip into magic or the dark world. People of different cultures have had experiences that can be seen as magical which was a result of just “following the intuitions of nature.” These often bore elements of superstition and, but never something out of the normal. He writes:

When, then religion of some sort is said to be natural, it is not here meant that any religious system has been actually traced out by unaided reason. We know of no such system, because we know of no country in which Reason was unaided. Scripture informs us that revelations were granted to the first Fathers of our race, concerning the nature of God and man’s duty to Him; and scarcely a people can

²² Joseph Ratzinger in a letter sent to Gabriele Kuby in 2003, A German Catholic Author of the book *Harry Potter—Good or Evil*. It is said that this was his personal opinion and that the Church has never made any definitive statement on the movie.

²³ Athanasius, *Nicene and Post Nicene Fathers*, Ed. Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, (Massachusetts: Hendrickson Publication, 1995),

On the Difference between Prayer and Magic

be named, among whom there are not traditions, not only of the existence of powers exterior to this visible world, but also of their actual interference with the course of nature, followed up by religious communication to mankind from them. The Creator never left Himself without such witness as might anticipate the conclusions of Reason, and support a wavering conscience and perplexed faith. No People (to speak in general terms) has been denied a revelation from God, though but a portion of the world has enjoyed...

The idea of a healthy paganism cautious us against believing that all pagan practices are evil. Newman's sees in some of these practices, God's intuitions in nature given to a people to sustain them.

When Prayer Confronts Magic: On Prayer and Exorcism

Aquinas's describes the Lord's prayers as the most perfect prayers and its uniqueness is that the Lord's Prayer comes from the fact that it is not a composition of man. It is a prayer taught to man by God. In his Lectures on St. Mathew, Aquinas says of our Lord's prayer that God does not say, you shall pray 'this' but that 'you shall pray like this.' It is said the Lord's Prayer has three qualities: brevity, completeness, effectiveness. As earlier mentioned with the case of Anthony of Egypt, when Christians take holiness of life seriously and acquire a good understanding of the Church's teachings, the devil is defeated. The existence of the office of the exorcist in the Church is a clear indication that the Church attests the Church's belief that malignant evil powers exist and they do possess people and cause havoc in the lives of people. The book of Acts talks of Simon the Magician's willingness to buy the gifts of the Holy Spirit.

The Church teaches that genuine prayer stemming from holiness is itself exorcism. But exorcists are gifted with a ministry in the Church.

Chesterton is clear when he says one is either a praying person or a magician knowing himself to pertain to the devil. What we are experiencing in our time is a generation of what Chesterton calls “frivolous men”—people who bring in magic into the Church in God’s name thereby violating the Commandment “Thou Shall not Call the Lord’s name in Vain.” G.K Chesterton believes anyone *who dares to use the Lord’s name in vain is a frivolous person*. For him, “the frivolous person is the person who cannot fully appreciate the weight and value of anything.” Chesterton accuses preachers of being frivolous with God’s name by saying:

The Name is taken in vain many times more often by preachers than it is by secularists. The blasphemer is, indeed, fundamentally natural and prosaic, for he speaks in a commonplace manner about that which he believes to be common place. But the ordinary preacher and religious orator speaks in common place manner about that which he believes to be divine. This is the breach of one of the Commandments; it is the sin against the name.

Love as the Safeguard of Religion Against Superstition and Inauthentic Prayer

Newman is of the opinion that Christian lands are not free of magic. Talking of the “credulousness and superstition”, he says, “to listen to tales of apparitions, charms, omens and the like are found among Christians.” Within the Catholic tradition, the way some worshippers

approach sacramentals give the impression of idol worship. Newman disagrees with those thinkers who teach that the safeguard of Religion against superstition is Reason. He disagrees with those who think:

Faith is built on Reason, and Reason is its safeguard, Cultivate the Reason, and in the same degree you lead men both to the acknowledgement, also to the suber use of the Gospel. Their religion will be rational, inasmuch as they know why they believe, and what. The young, the poor, the ignorant, those whose reason is underdeveloped, are the victims of excessive faith. Give them, then, education; open their minds, enlighten them; enable them reflect, compare, investigate and infer, draw their attention to the Evidence of Christianity. While, in this way, you bring them into the right path, you also obviate the chance of their wandering from t; you tend to prevent enthusiasm and superstition, while you are erecting a bulwark against infidelity²⁴

Newman's disagreement with those who think Reason is the safeguard against superstition is simply because he thinks love is the safeguard against superstition. He adds:

What, then, is the safeguard, if Reason is Not. I schall give an answer, which may seem at once common-place and paradoxical, yet I believe if the true one. The safeguard of Faith is a right state of heart. This it is that gives it birth; it also disciplines it. This is what protects it from bigotry, credulity, and fanaticism. It is Love which forms it out of the rude chaos into an image of Christ; or, in scholastic

²⁴ Newman, J. Henry *Fifteen Sermons Preached Before: The University of Oxford Between A.D. 1826 and 1843*, (New York, Oxford University Press, 2006), 162.

language, justifying Faith. Whether in Pagan, Jew, or Christian, is *fides formata charitate*. ‘Verily, verily, I say unto you’ says the Divine Speaker, ‘I am the Door to the Sheep... ‘I am the Good Shepherd, and knows my sheep, and am known of mine.’²⁵

In conclusion, Newman asks the question “does a child trust his parents because he has proved to himself that they are such, and that they are able and desirous to do him good, or from the instinct of affection? We believe, because we love.”²⁶

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The Priest, the Pulpit, and Politics: Galvanising a Nation for Responsible Leadership

(What must Catholic priests working in Nigeria do towards the coming 2027 Election?)

A Paper presented at the Annual Gathering of the Alumni Association of Ss. Peter & Paul Major Seminary, Bodija, Ibadan, in the Seminary Auditorium, June 24, 2026

Michael Nsikak Umoh¹

padremikeumoh@gmail.com

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¹ Very Rev. Fr. Dr. Michael Nsikak Umoh serves as the revolutionary National Director of Social Communications at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria in Abuja. Ordained for the Lagos Archdiocese in 1992, his distinguished ministry includes serving as Holy Cross Cathedral Administrator and Director/Chaplain of the Laity in Lagos Archdiocese. Professionally, he holds a Ph.D. from CESACC, specialising in teenage social media mediation. A US IVLP alumnus and NISMA Fellow, Fr. Umoh has lectured extensively across Nigeria's major seminaries, convents and dioceses. He is the pioneer General Secretary of SIGNIS Nigeria, founder of the Centre for Media Development, initiator of COMWEEK, a published author, and a gifted fine artist, graphic designer, and guitarist.

Abstract

*As Nigeria faces severe existential and institutional crises ahead of the 2027 General Election, this paper critically evaluates the systemic tensions defining contemporary Catholic priestly life. Framed around Canons 285 §3, 287 §2, and 747, which prohibit clerics from active partisan engagement, the study explores the delicate balance between mandatory ecclesiastical neutrality and the prophetic mandate to denounce structural sin. Grounded in *Gaudium et Spes* and Catholic Social Teaching, we argue that canonical boundaries must not be misconstrued as social indifference or pastoral cowardice. Rather, this analysis exposes the acute psychological, spiritual, and systemic pressures experienced by local pastors whose rectories have become primary social welfare hubs amidst hyperinflation and widespread insecurity. Operating in this volatile environment, the clergy face dual occupational hazards: pastoral burnout and cynicism on one hand, and partisan ideological entanglement on the other. To navigate this minefield, the paper proposes a framework of "political charity" rooted in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. It outlines how the priest can licitly exercise his *munus docendi* (teaching office) to form the laity's conscience, counter vote-buying, and revitalise the Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC) as an organ for civic transformation without violating canonical discipline.*

Keywords: Canon Law (Can. 287), Priestly Burnout, Prophetic Witness, Political Charity, *Munus Docendi*, Ecclesiastical Discipline, CBCN.

1. Preamble

Your Excellencies, Monsignori, Very and dear Fathers, deacons, distinguished alumni of our great Ss. Peter and Paul Major Seminary, Bodija, and eminent guests here present: I greet you all in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ. Great Bodija.... Great!!!

I thank the indefatigable executives of our Bodija Alumni Association, ably led by our esteemed mentor and former Rector, Rt. Rev. Msgr. Ben Etafo, for considering me for this special task of giving the Paper to this august assembly. It is indeed heartwarming to return to Bodija and once again feel the serene and welcoming ambience of this sacred academic environment. Please permit me to salute our past Rectors and our current Rector, Very Rev. Fr. Anthony Igbekele, for constantly improving upon the tradition of this great institution. May God bless you all. Amen.

2. Introduction: The Occasion and Prophetic Mandate

For decades, this great seminary has stood as a beacon of light, guiding us with the Gospel through the complex and often turbulent history of our nation. Today, while we gather with the joy of seeing old friends again, we stand at a critical historical crossroads to reflect on the implications and challenges of the 2027 General Election for us as priests working in Nigeria. This upcoming political milestone comes at a time when our dear country is facing severe existential trouble, marked by deep systemic failures, crushing economic hardships, and a widespread loss of hope among our people. As

Catholic priests, we do not live behind walls that alienate us from reality. Irrespective of our political interests and affiliations, it is a fact that the cries of the poor, the displaced, the hungry, and the terrorised pour directly into our rectories and stare us in the face every day. The Second Vatican Council reminds us in *Gaudium et Spes*, that “the joys, hopes, griefs, and anxieties of the people of this age, especially those who are poor or suffering, are the joys, hopes, griefs, and anxieties of the followers of Christ” (*Gaudium et Spes*, n. 1). This gathering is a providential moment for us to critically and sincerely discuss our role as priests in the current socio-political dispensation with deep spiritual honesty: What is the Spirit saying to the priest working in Nigeria at this critical period?

This question must be answered against the background that a Catholic priest, by virtue of his sacred ordination and the clear rules of the Church, is strictly barred from taking an active part in partisan politics. As specified in Canon 287 §2 of the *Code of Canon Law*, “a priest must not run for public office, carry a political party card, or ever turn the sacred sanctuary into a political campaign ground (Can. 287 §2). Yet, when we remember our prophetic mission to bring good news to the poor and bind up the broken-hearted (cf. Is 61:1), this canonical boundary is not to be understood as an excuse for pastoral cowardice, social indifference, or political neutrality when faced with structural injustice. The pulpit is not an ivory tower cut off from the harsh realities of human life; instead, it is a prophetic space meant for building a strong conscience, fiercely defending human dignity, and systematically educating the laity. While the

priest must remain strictly non-partisan, he has an absolute moral, prophetic, and pastoral duty to use his teaching office to break down political apathy, expose systemic deceit, and inspire the Catholic laity to actively reclaim their civic space. The Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) repeatedly reminds us that even though the Church does not support any political party, she can never be indifferent to the political process itself (CBCN Plenary Communiqué, 2024). The priest is not a secular politician; he is the architect of the moral conscience that must guide politics.

3. The Contemporary Nigerian Reality: A Complex and Volatile Landscape

To speak of Nigeria as we fast approach the 2027 General Election is to diagnose a nation highly fragmented, deeply hurting, and bleeding. We cannot stand at the pulpit and preach an abstract, watered-down gospel that ignores the raw, grinding pain of our people. As pastors, we must realise that if our theology does not speak directly to the pains and physical starvation of our flock, it ceases to be the true, liberating Gospel of Jesus Christ (cf. Is 61:1). The economic reality in our country has become a devastating structural wound. While official economic data sometimes claims a technical drop in inflation (National Bureau of Statistics, 2026), the reality in our parish markets tells a completely different story. Food inflation continues to vastly outpace what most Nigerians earn, leaving an estimated 140 million citizens, that is nearly 62% of our population, trapped below the poverty line (World Bank, 2025). This

economic hardship is tied directly to a systemic collapse of national security (Amnesty International, 2025), as banditry, terrorism, and kidnapping for ransom have turned into a highly organised, lucrative, interstate industry in our country.

Recent terrifying kidnappings of school children in Oyo State show a dark truth: no one is safe, and nowhere is safe. From the systematic massacres in the Middle Belt to the daily horrors along our highways, our people are being displaced, and our farmers are being driven off their ancestral lands at gunpoint (Famine Early Warning Systems Network, 2026). This severe decay harms our democracy directly because a hungry population is not a free population, and an insecure community is easily manipulated. When voters are entirely consumed by basic survival, it opens the door for fear-driven choices, rampant vote-buying, and deep voter apathy.

Beyond the broken economy and widespread bloodshed lies an even deeper sickness: the total collapse of our national moral fabric. The approaching 2027 election has fuelled a culture of desperation among the political class, who, lacking political ideology, hop from one party to another, revealing a desperation to grab power devoid of the sacred duty of service. Deceit has been systematically institutionalised as an acceptable tool of governance. State-sponsored disinformation campaigns, deliberate media manipulation, and deepfakes are employed to alter public perception and manufacture consent (Centre for Democracy and Development, 2025). Furthermore, the stark lack of accountability among the ruling elite has created a deep, toxic cynicism within our youth. The

widespread *Japa* syndrome, the desperate mass migration of our youngest and brightest minds, is a profound moral protest against a compromised system (Kukah, 2011).

This grim scenario is the exact reality that the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria has consistently laid bare. For years, the official communiqués of our Bishops have served as the true gauge of the collective agony of the Nigerian people. During the Second Plenary Meeting in Ikot Ekpene, in a communiqué titled *Hope Does Not Disappoint*, the Bishops stated with prophetic finality that our nation faces imminent collapse if things continue this way (CBCN, 2025). They warned that corruption, understood in its truest sense as moral rottenness, has spread unhindered like a deadly cancer into every vital organ of our national life. A year earlier, at the Plenary in Abuja, the Bishops lamented that insecurity had reached an unprecedented scale, subjecting citizens to a life of constant hunger and untold hardship (CBCN, 2024). Consequently, the CBCN directly challenged the moral ideology of the state, calling for a radical change of heart away from a political framework that uses power for self-enrichment, toward a politics of authentic service and solidarity with the people.

We must seize this opportunity to address a recurrent, troubling issue within our own presbyterium. At times, when a courageous CBCN communiqué or a press statement is released, some of our brother priests make dismissive comments on social media or in private circles, saying, "It's just talk, talk, talk... what else can they do?" It is as if these priests expect the Bishops to physically carry weapons

or lead an army into battle. It is imperative to firmly correct this fundamental misunderstanding of church power among men under sacred obedience (cf. *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, n. 896). The primary weapon of the Church has always been the prophetic word; the word that cuts sharper than a two-edged sword directly into the heart of the human conscience (cf. Heb 4:12). Through their pronouncements, the CBCN constantly gives us the theological, moral, and socio-political vocabulary we need to confront this turbulent moment. Our task is not to protest or complain about their words, but to amplify, internalise, and deliver this official, courageous witness directly to the grassroots.

4. Electoral Vulnerabilities: Institutional Integrity and the Reform Framework

As the 2027 Election season approaches, the lack of structural integrity in the Independent National Electoral Commission (INEC) remains a critical weakness in our democracy. This is because, a credible election relies entirely on an unwritten, sacred social contract: the firm belief of citizens that the electoral umpire is neutral, competent, and honest. In Nigeria, that vital trust has been severely broken (European Union Election Observation Mission, 2023). Public perception of INEC has largely shifted from an impartial referee to an institutional arm of the ruling elite.

In a situation where the transmission of results from polling units to the INEC Result Viewing (IReV) portal becomes compromised, delayed, or selectively unavailable, public trust is instantly destroyed

(Yiaga Africa, 2025). Furthermore, long-standing warnings from civil society regarding the vulnerability of our electronic infrastructure have been validated by recent events. The danger of administrative interference by high-level actors became undeniable following media investigations into unauthorised access to sensitive voter registration data by a top government aide (*News Central Africa*, 2026). This breach exposed critical insider vulnerabilities, proving that tech-driven transparency remains exposed to compromised access.

For the ordinary citizen, this institutional failure breeds a destructive sense of hopelessness, convincing them that their votes do not count because the final results are written in dark rooms. This psychological alienation leads directly to a massive drop in voter turnout. When our flock believes the democratic process is merely an elaborate piece of political drama, they abandon the ballot box completely, leaving the nation's fate to be determined by bought crowds and political thugs.

To understand the depth of this crisis, we can look at established ideas in political science. In *Why Nations Fail*, Daron Acemoglu and James A. Robinson distinguish between "inclusive institutions," which share political power widely and ensure total transparency, and "extractive institutions," which are intentionally structured by a ruling elite to monopolize power, shield themselves from accountability, and strip choices away from the majority (Acemoglu & Robinson, 2012). In its current state, INEC represents classic features of an extractive tool. When an umpire lacks financial and

administrative independence, and when its leadership appointments are heavily influenced by participating politicians, the institution naturally bends toward protecting the status quo.

This aligns with Rational Choice Theory: when our electoral system is set up such that the penalty for fraud is practically non-existent or delayed, while the reward is total control of the state, politicians will naturally choose desperation and rigging. The massive benefit of manipulation completely outweighs the tiny cost of running a clean campaign.

Consequently, deep structural electoral reform is an existential emergency for Nigeria. Civil society has long established three non-negotiable pillars for true reform. First, drawing from the historic Uwais Committee Report, we must shift the appointment process for INEC leadership entirely away from executive control to independent, non-partisan judicial and civic bodies to eliminate political patronage (Uwais Electoral Reform Committee, 2008). Second, there must be an uncompromising, legally binding rule for the electronic transmission of results, making the real-time upload of polling unit scores to the IReV portal the absolute legal baseline for counting votes (National Assembly Joint Committee on Electoral Matters, 2025). Third, the nation needs an independent Electoral Offences Tribunal to rapidly prosecute and jail ballot thieves, compromised umpires, and the wealthy sponsors of political violence.

We must also remember the powerful logic argued by John Cardinal Onaiyekan, who noted that it makes no sense to swear in elected officials while their victories are still being aggressively challenged in court. All legal battles must be resolved before anyone takes the oath of office. Without these structural overhauls, some people are of the opinion that any election conducted in 2027 may turn out to be a multi-billion Naira exercise in futility. As pastors of souls, we must be intellectually equipped to explain these systemic realities to our people.

5. The Church's Prophetic Actions: Symbolism and the 2026 Mandate

When the secular state fractures under its own internal failures, the Church cannot take refuge in the quiet comfort of its rectories. Beyond verbal declarations, we must permanently keep in our pastoral memories the historic witness of March 2020. In that unforgettable moment, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria, leading thousands of the lay faithful, defied a torrential downpour to stage a massive, solemn prayer procession through the streets of Abuja dressed in black cassocks. This was not a political rally, but a radical public liturgy of grief and righteous anger. The black cassocks made a vivid theological statement: the Church was actively bleeding and mourning alongside thousands of innocent citizens slaughtered by terrorist cartels and violent herdsmen.

Speaking prophetically on this event, the then-CBCN President, Archbishop Augustine Akubeze, maintained that protest is an

integral part of our religious duty to speak out against whatever violates God's commandments (Statement by Archbishop Augustine Akubeze, 2020). He boldly added that the Church had grown entirely tired of official reports claiming terrorists had been "defeated" while those same actors continued to butcher citizens with impunity. This historic march serves as our modern pastoral baseline. It proved that when the state becomes numb to mass burials, the shepherd must step out of the sanctuary to visibly march, weep, and bleed alongside the flock.

This tradition of strong institutional witness continues into our current electoral dispensation. During their First Plenary Meeting of 2026, held under the urgent theme *Leadership for the Common Good*, the Bishops issued a definitive guide addressing four critical fronts (CBCN, 2026).

- a. First, it condemns totalitarian politics, warning the ruling class against "winning at all costs" and manipulating state structures, including security agencies, a pressured judiciary, and INEC, to subvert the authentic will of the voters.
- b. Second, it exposes the mechanics of malpractice, explicitly listing voter register manipulation, vote-buying, artificial material scarcity, thuggery, and result falsification.
- c. Third, it confronts voter apathy, noting the historic low 23% turnout in 2023 and an abysmal 7% in recent local territory polls, while demanding that the National Assembly legally

mandate real-time result transmission from BVAS machines directly to the IReV portal.

- d. Finally, it rejects exploitative economic strategies, criticising the government's superficial reliance on massive food importation which destroys local production. Instead, the CBCN demanded that the state aggressively secure agricultural regions and grant direct subsidies to local Nigerian farmers to stem the tide of national famine.

As we prepare for 2027, our Sunday preaching on justice, accountability, and civic responsibility must be explicitly anchored in these ongoing teachings. It is our absolute duty to ensure that the structural truths spoken through the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria resonate in every parish, village, and polling unit across the nation.

6. The Dilemma of the Nigerian Pastor: Challenges in the Trenches

While our Bishops speak with moral authority at the national level, priests in the parishes must absorb and translate these systemic crises at the grassroots. Today, our rectories are routinely transformed into primary social welfare centres, clinics, and employment bureaus. Day after day, we are confronted by parents unable to pay school fees, families facing starvation, and parishioners begging for medical assistance.

As the 2027 election approaches, this widespread existential desperation turns into a severe democratic vulnerability because a starved citizenry is uniquely exposed to vote-buying. It is a

heartbreaking pastoral challenge to preach the long-term virtue of civic responsibility to a mother whose child is crying from hunger. Shepherds face the agonising task of convincing their flock that trading their votes for a temporary ten-thousand Naira handout or a pan of rice is a form of generational self-sabotage.

Beyond economic strain, the toxic weaponisation of ethnicity poses an immediate threat to the internal unity of the Church. Parishes are complex reflections of the wider state, containing deep-seated regional grievances and voting patterns. During election cycles, political actors intentionally exploit these tribal fault lines to maximise their fortunes. Tragically, this polarisation filters into our communities and even into our own clerical discussions, such as the heated, unedifying debates occasionally witnessed on our Nigeria Catholic Diocesan Priests' Association (NCDPA) platform. This challenge demands that we rise above regional arguments to remind our flock of their primary baptismal identity: that in Christ, there is neither Jew nor Greek (cf. Gal 3:28). The shepherd must firmly rebuke ethnic bigotry within Church structures, ensuring that the sanctuary remains an uncorrupted space of universal truth.

Living under these constant pressures, the priest is highly vulnerable to severe psychological and spiritual exhaustion. Contemporary empirical data confirms that Catholic clergy face significant risks of burnout, emotional exhaustion, and depersonalisation due to professional isolation and relentless pastoral demands (Picornell-Gallar & González-Fraile, 2024). Pope Francis has similarly warned that shepherding amidst structural decay can induce a crippling sense

of helplessness and secondary traumatic stress (*Evangelii Gaudium*, nn. 78-86).

This feeling of exhaustion leads directly to two possible pastoral temptations:

- a. The Temptation of Cynicism: Overwhelmed by institutional corruption and systemic stagnation, a priest may conclude that nothing will ever change. This breeds pastoral withdrawal, where the minister stops teaching civic education, abandons parish Justice, Development and Peace Commission (JDPC) structures, and reduces homilies to otherworldly topics that fail to challenge injustice.
- b. The Temptation of Partisan Anger: Fuelled by righteous fury over the suffering of his people, a priest may mistakenly pick up a partisan mantle, dropping thinly veiled endorsements or letting personal political alignments compromise his universal pastoral identity.

As alumni of Bodija, we must recognise that both passive withdrawal and partisan entanglement represent a failure in our priestly calling. Rather than slide into becoming escapists or partisans, contemporary Nigerian priests must carry the tension of the peripheries, anchoring our souls in a deep prayer life that allows us to remain prophetically vocal, fiercely compassionate, and strictly non-partisan.

7. Canonical and Theological Boundaries: Managing the Political Landscape

Sailing through these turbulent waters requires us to stay firmly anchored in the Church's clear canonical boundaries. The restriction against clerical involvement in partisan politics is a protective safeguard rooted in the very nature of our vocation. As already noted, Canon 285 §3 explicitly forbids clerics from assuming public offices involving civil power, while Canon 287 §2 commands that priests take no active part in political parties or labour unions unless the Bishop deems it necessary to protect ecclesial rights or promote the common good (*Code of Canon Law*, can. 285, 287). This binding rule protects the priest's role as a visible instrument of unity. The moment a priest aligns with a political faction, he ceases to be a father to all his parishioners. We must recognise that the direct transformation of the socio-political order belongs properly to the vocation of the laity, who are called to shape secular realities as a leaven from within (*Apostolicam Actuositatem*, n. 7).

However, this necessary restriction from partisan politics must never be confused with an endorsement of social neutrality. The same Church that forbids the priest from holding political office strictly mandates him to use his teaching office (*munus docendi*) to illuminate the social order with the light of the Gospel (Can. 747, §2). To refuse to preach on social justice, human rights, or civic responsibility under the guise of avoiding politics is a severe failure of pastoral duty. Our prophetic mission to denounce structural sin and announce God's design for human society is not partisan; it is

scriptural and doctrinal. When a priest denounces corruption, he is defending the Seventh Commandment (cf. CCC, n. 2401). When he condemns political violence, he is defending the Fifth Commandment (cf. CCC, n. 2258). The teaching office must remain completely free from political alignment precisely so it can judge all political platforms with absolute, objective truth.

Towards this end, we need to master and teach the vital distinction between "partisan politics" and "political charity," as beautifully explained in the *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Partisan politics represents the direct struggle for state power and individual endorsements; an arena unique to the laity and strictly forbidden to the clergy (n. 513). Conversely, political charity and justice represent the persistent pursuit of the common good, the defense of human rights, and the execution of voter education. This field is strictly mandated for the priest, knowing that silence in the face of oppression is a pastoral sin (n. 506).

As Pope Benedict XVI clearly wrote, the Church cannot and must not replace the State in the political battle for a just society, yet she cannot remain on the sidelines in the fight for justice (*Deus Caritas Est*, n. 28). She plays her part through rational argument and by reawakening the spiritual energy without which justice cannot prosper. These words directly answer those who mistakenly think our Bishops are not doing enough beyond issuing statements. The priest's true identity in the political equation is to be an educator of conscience. When we teach our people to reject vote-buying, we are practising political charity. When we demand that INEC protects the

integrity of the ballot, we are standing on the platform of structural justice. Priests do not need a party card to change Nigeria; rather, we need an uncompromised Gospel, a well-formed laity, and an unyielding commitment to the common good.

8. The Positive Role of the Priest: Galvanising the Lay Faithful

The canonical prohibition against partisan politics is not to be taken as a convenient shield for pastoral laziness or social indifference. While barred from political campaigning, the priest is fully commissioned as an agent for deep social transformation, primarily through the potent instrument of the pulpit.

First, this requires us to deliberately use our homilies to build a mature, critically reflective Christian conscience among the faithful. We must relentlessly dismantle democratic fallacies by attacking the moral rot of vote-buying, presenting it to our congregations not merely as a secular illegality, but as a grave structural sin against the common good. We must show our people that taking a temporary financial handout or a bag of provisions in exchange for a vote is a form of generational self-sabotage, a trap where they trade away the ultimate security and future of their children for a single meal. Second, our preaching must find its prophetic anchor in the heavy responsibility which positions the priest as a watchman over the house of Israel (cf. Ezekiel 33:7–9). If the watchman sees the political sword coming and refuses to blow the warning trumpet,

God will hold that silent shepherd strictly accountable for the blood of the flock (cf. Amos 5:24).

To achieve this structural deployment, we must stop treating the Justice, Development, and Peace Commission (JDPC) as an optional parish organ or a low-priority group reserved for retired civil servants. This organ must be consciously elevated to the absolute forefront of parish life, especially during this critical pre-election season. Parish priests must empower the JDPC to lead mass civic literacy drives, organising seminars on how to evaluate political platforms using Catholic Social Teaching criteria and the critical importance of monitoring legislative promises. This can be seamlessly supplemented by creating a few targeted messages for civic awareness announcements toward the end of Sunday Masses. Furthermore, this empowerment must extend to direct voter mobilisation. Parishes can organise special Civic Sundays, systematically encouraging eligible Catholics to register and collect their Permanent Voter Cards (PVCs). On special occasions like weddings and funerals, a well-packaged, short script read toward the end of Mass can effectively remind worshippers of their civic duties to vote wisely for the common good.

The parish network must also serve as an independent watchdog during the entire electoral process. By collaborating closely with diocesan Directorates of JDPC and Social Communications, priests should actively encourage qualified, high-integrity lay parishioners to volunteer as accredited election observers. Their physical

presence at polling units may be a critical moral deterrent against ballot-box snatching, voter intimidation, and result manipulation.

Finally, we need to build a collaborative, synodal network across the country. The synodal spirit reminds us that no local parish priest should work in an isolated vacuum; his grassroots efforts must align directly with diocesan directives connected to the national plan at the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria (*Lumen Gentium*, n. 28). By using unified communication channels, the Church can rapidly document and broadcast real-time structural challenges on election day, holding the umpire accountable before the international community. Through the formation of minds at the altar and the mobilisation of bodies through the JDPC, the priest fulfills his authentic mandate. He does not tell his people who to vote for; rather, he forms them so deeply that they simply cannot bring themselves to vote for tyrants, people of questionable character, or structural exploiters.

9. Prudence in Ministry: What the Priest Must Avoid

Because the pulpit is a sacred sanctuary for forming consciences, it can easily be desecrated if pastoral prudence is lacking. The desperation of the political class ahead of the 2027 elections means that actors are actively seeking religious validation to co-opt the social capital and massive audiences sitting in our pews.

The priest must maintain an absolute boundary between the sacred liturgy and political actors. First, this demands a strict ban on partisan endorsements. Under no circumstance may a cleric

announce, suggest, or drop thinly veiled hints endorsing a specific party or candidate from the altar. Using language that mimics party symbols or declaring a particular candidate as a secular saviour is entirely inappropriate; it instantly splits the parish, turning the family of God into an arena of political warfare.

Second, there should be an unyielding prohibition against campaigning within the liturgy. Politicians should never be given a microphone to greet the congregation or speak during Mass. Experience shows that once given the floor, they immediately pivot to campaign speeches. The CBCN regulation remains explicit: if a political figure attends Mass, they are to be welcomed and acknowledged merely as a child of God, seated among the faithful, and subjected to the same spiritual docility expected of every worshipper. Furthermore, we must ensure the complete rejection of exploitative prophecies, keeping the Catholic priesthood entirely distant from the transactional, sensationalist predictions regarding election outcomes that plague the wider religious space.

One of the craftiest ways the political class silences the prophetic voice of the Church is through financial co-option and strategic patronage. In an environment of grinding economic hardship where parish projects are stalled and rectories are under financial strain, the temptation to accept massive financial gifts is incredibly high. Yet, we need to take counsel in the old adages: "he who pays the piper calls the tune," and "you don't bite the finger that feeds you."

This describes the trap of the "Greek gift." A politician approaches a parish with sudden, overwhelming generosity, offering to build a grotto, purchase a large generator, or make a mouth-watering donation at a harvest and bazaar. These are rarely acts of pure piety; they could be structural investments designed to buy the priest's silence. Once a pastor accepts these funds, his moral authority is instantly diminished, and his tongue becomes tied by the silver pieces he accepted. As Bodija alumni, we must be weary and watchful in order to remain independent of political influence. Instead of relying on wealthy donors with conflicting interests, it is advisable to focus on cultivating the authentic, everyday stewardship of the laity to support our mission.

Additionally, the priest must actively guard his own speech and digital footprint, ensuring he never becomes a conduit for divisive, inflammatory, or regional rhetoric. He must never allow his personal ethnic background to colour his preaching or administrative decisions. To imply that a candidate from another region is inherently malicious based on tribe is an offense against the universal nature of the Church.

Furthermore, priests must carefully manage their social media presence. In our hyper-connected digital era, a cleric's personal accounts are public extensions of his priesthood. He should avoid sharing unverified political reports, partisan memes, or participating in toxic online political warfare. A single imprudent post can go viral, bringing immense embarrassment to his diocese and the entire institutional weight of the Church. By avoiding partisan alignment,

financial compromise, and divisive rhetoric, the priest keeps his prophetic armour clean.

10. Conclusion: A Clarion Call to Pastoral Resiliency

Esteemed alumni of Ss. Peter and Paul, Bodija, from the foregoing discourse, it is obvious that we cannot afford to be passive bystanders as Nigeria approaches the 2027 General Election. We have diagnosed a nation bleeding from severe socio-political fractures, hyperinflation, and deep structural insecurity. We have exposed a political class driven by a culture of desperation and institutionalised deceit, and we have highlighted the vulnerabilities of an electoral umpire that has severely fractured public trust.

Yet, the Church remains an uncompromised beacon of hope. When the state explicitly validates the CBCN as a critical stabilising anchor and moral voice, it recognises that our moral capital cannot be bought, intimidated, or suppressed. This recognition was clearly demonstrated when political leadership formally commended the Bishops' bold and critical interventions, noting that their social consciousness serves to caution, admonish, and ultimately steady the nation (Osinbajo, 2015).

The boundaries given to us by Canon Law are clear: we are strictly barred from partisan offices and party alignments, but this is never a mandate for silence. Our true political identity is rooted in political charity and structural justice. Our task is to use the pulpit to form the consciences of our people so deeply that they reject vote-buying,

dismantle tribal polarisation, and nurture a new era of responsible leadership.

When we look at the vast expanse of Church history, we find that the most potent transformations occurred when priests refused to let the flame of truth be extinguished by secular tyrannies. The courageous witness of the Church in Poland during the dark decades of Soviet oppression should inspire us. As historians have noted, it was the Catholic priesthood, heavily inspired by the Church's social teachings, that provided the "moral oxygen" and safe organisational spaces for the Solidarity movement (Perrone, 2013; Sochaczewski, 2015). This deeply rooted partnership between the clergy and the labour movement ultimately helped sustain the public's resistance against the regime (Siła-Nowicki, 1989). It is very instructive to note that priests did not run for parliament; instead, they formed the consciences of the populace. Similarly, in this regard, we must also remember Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador, who refused to abandon his flock in the face of brutal state violence, famously proclaiming that if the secular authorities silenced the radio of the Church, the local pastors and laypeople would have to become the microphones of God (Colón-Emeric, 2018; Romero, 1980).

We are the modern descendants of this prophetic lineage. Back in our respective parishes across the length and breadth of Nigeria, let us carry the unyielding charge issued by our spiritual fathers in their Plenary Communiqué, which declared that a better Nigeria is still possible, calling for a change of attitude across the board and a

selfless disposition to serve the common good (CBCN, 2024). They urged us to collectively work for social transformation and ensure that those who occupy positions of leadership are people with track records of probity, competence, and commitment.

Brothers, the 2027 election is a profound moral test for our nation and a pastoral crucible for the Catholic priesthood. We cannot succumb to the paralysis of cynicism. Do not let the grinding poverty of our people tempt us into accepting the compromised financial gifts of desperate politicians. We must decisively stand tall in our white cassocks, not just as ministers of the sanctuary, but as unyielding watchmen over the destiny of our people. May the words of Paul to Timothy echo in our hearts: preach the word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage, with great patience and careful instruction; endure hardship, and discharge all the duties of your ministry (cf. 2 Tim 4:2–5).

Let us therefore go forth from Great Bodija as heralds of hope. Let us together dismantle the empire of deceit in our dear nation with the weapon of truth; educate the consciences of our flock, guard the sanctuary from partisan defilement, and let us collectively steer this great nation through the impending storm toward the dawn of a just, secure, and truly accountable Nigeria. We can, with the help of God!

God bless the Federal Republic of Nigeria! God bless the Catholic Church in Nigeria!! God Bless Great Bodija and All her Alumni!!!

Thank you for your kind attention

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A full-page background image featuring a bright, glowing sun in the center, partially obscured by soft, white, wispy clouds. The sky is a clear, vibrant blue. The sun's light creates a strong lens flare effect, radiating outwards across the entire frame.

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