





DONATUS OKEKE EZE

**THE IDENTITY AND MISSION OF  
THE CATHOLIC PRIEST  
IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIAN  
SOCIO-CULTURAL CONTEXT**

*Preface by*

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*Affectionately dedicated to all members  
of the Nsukka Diocesan Presbyterium and to all persons  
with whom I am united in the profound and true  
universal priestly fraternity.*



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# ABBREVIATIONS

AA – Apostolicam Actuositatem  
AAS – Acta Apostolicae Sedis  
AG – Ad Gentes  
AM – Africae Munus  
ATR – African Traditional Religion  
CBCN – Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria  
CCC – Catechism of the Catholic Church  
CCFN – Catholic Caritas Foundation of Nigeria  
CCRN – Catholic Charismatic Renewal of Nigeria  
CDF – Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith  
CD – Christus Dominus  
CIC – Codex Iuris Canonici  
CSN – Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria  
CWO – Catholic Women Organization  
CYMO – Catholic Young Men Organization  
CYWO – Catholic Young Women Organization  
CYON – Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria  
DC – Dominicae Cenae  
DMLP – Directory on the Ministry and Life of Priests  
DV – Dei Verbum  
EA – Ecclesia in Africa  
EG – Evangelii Gaudium  
FCT – Federal Capital Territory  
GS – Gaudium et Spes  
ICL – Institutes of Consecrated Life

JDPC – Justice, Development and Peace Commission

LG – Lumen Gentium

MOD – Man of Order and Discipline

MR – Mutuae Relationis

NCDPA – Nigerian Catholic Diocesan Priests Association

PDV – Pastores Dabo Vobis

PO – Prebyterorum Ordinis

RM – Redemptoris Missio

RVM – Rosarium Virginis Mariae

SAL – Societies of Apostolic Life

SC – Sacrosanctum Concilium

SECAM – Symposium of Episcopal Conferences of Africa and Madagascar

SIST – Spiritan International School of Theology (Nigeria)

## PREFACE

Each generation of Christians is called to understand God's revelation in the context of their current experiences and historical events. The Second Vatican Council rightly proposed to develop a living theology that is concrete, existential, and takes into account the modern "signs of the times". A theology that gives no answers to the crucial questions raised by real human beings immersed in the intricacies of their daily lives and responsibilities easily becomes a fruitless language game or even a kind of empty ideology. In today's situation, when many social structures lose their credibility as a result of numerous spiritual and moral crises, there is an urgent need for deep theological reflection on the identity and the mission of Catholic priests in a world wherein, as Pope Francis has rightly pointed out, the culture of the ephemeral and superficiality begins to dominate.

The book written by Fr. Dr. Donatus Eze is a valuable achievement in the field of sacramental theology. The topic belongs to up-to-date research area of Theology of the Priesthood. The author presents the identity and mission of the Catholic priest within a broader perspective of multicultural situation in Nigeria today. By examining traditional theological concepts through the prism of dynamic cultural and religious Nigerian experiences, he opens up new ways of thinking about the prophetic role of the Catholic priest in the local Church of Nigeria. The theologizing on the priesthood presented in this book can be described in terms of tradition and openness. The author remains faithful to the great Christian Tradition and is at the same time creatively open to the new challenges. His ideas are root-

ed in the theology of priesthood elaborated by John Paul II's personalistic vision of priestly identity that reveals its relational and dynamic character. The priestly identity and universal mission to the world has been in its constitutive elements shaped by Jesus Christ for all ages. This clearly determined identity, however, is still being renewed by the Holy Spirit who makes the priestly identity an open one and actualizes the priestly mission in very speedy and changeable postmodern world which sometimes is called a "liquid reality".

Fr. Donatus Eze has studied the contemporary Church documents and other important theological sources in a detailed and competent way. He is very solid in presenting the history and the culture of Nigeria which is shaped by multiple ethnic groups and indigenous religious practices. He is deeply aware of challenges and threats facing the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church in Nigeria. His knowledge about the cultural and religious diversity in Nigeria is really impressive. It must be emphasized that the book, which bears the title of his doctoral thesis in Systematic Theology in the John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin, Poland, is an important contribution to the promotion of contextual theology that helps to build bridges between the Catholic Church and the modern world. The deep insights he gives on the role of priests in making the Gospel message take root in the culture and tradition of a people serves as a template on the necessity of delineating and preserving the identity and mission of the indigenous clergy who form a class of people on whose shoulder rests the task of keeping the Church alive and credible when foreign missionaries leave any territory.

The book is immensely readable and inspiring. Its structure is logical, consistent and original. The research methods used by the author are appropriate to the interdisciplinary and contextual type of the dissertation. With wisdom and passion, Fr. Eze highlights remarkable connections between theological insights into the identity and mission of the Catholic Priest and the contemporary Nigerian socio-cultural situation.

Taking into account all the advantages of the book of Fr. Donatus Eze, I am deeply convinced that it deserves particular attention



and a warm reception. Therefore, I highly recommend this book to both professional theologians and all readers who feel a deep sense of responsibility for the Church and are in solidarity with her mission which is carried on especially through the ministerial priesthood in these times of global uncertainty.

Rev. Prof. Antoni Nadbrzeźny  
The John Paul II Catholic University of Lublin (Poland)



# INTRODUCTION

## Motivation

The Catholic Church in Nigeria is a relatively young Church. In the eastern part of the country where the Christian population is predominantly Catholic, its advent dates to 1885 – a hundred and thirty-five years (135yrs) ago. Church attendance is heavy, with the congregation comprising of people of all ages and social strata. In the Northern and Middle-Belt regions of the country, the Church is much younger, if not in terms of the first contacts by European missionaries, then certainly in terms of settlement and stabilization.<sup>(1)</sup>

From as far back as 1965, the Church in Nigeria has been experiencing vocation boom to the priesthood and the religious life. And ordinations to the priesthood and religious professions are celebrated with great enthusiasm. The Church is still looked upon as a credible moral authority, and her clergy treated with reverence and honor.

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(1) The Portuguese missionaries had attempted to plant the Catholic Christian faith in Sub-Saharan Africa in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries without lasting success (cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation *Ecclesia in Africa*, Vatican 1995, no. 32). And during the pre-settler days of returnee slaves, some Portuguese Jesuits tried without success to establish Catholicism in countries of the West African Coast, including Nigeria (cf. C.A. Obi, *A Hundred Years of the Catholic Church in Eastern Nigeria 1885–1985*, Onitsha: Africana-FEP Publishers Limited, 1985, p. 4).

But already, there are serious signs of decay, arising specifically from the lifestyle of some of the clergy. People are beginning to identify the ordained ministers with the wealthy aristocratic class. The Church as an institution is accused by critics of giving too much prominence to rich persons in the society.

The way and manner in which some priests go about their exercise of the triple ministry of Jesus Christ, the priest, prophet, and king demonstrate a far cry from the example of Christ, who came to serve and not to be served. Materialism is making a conspicuous inroad into the lives of some members of the clergy to the disappointment of the lay faithful who are beginning to voice out their misgivings. Even in the specific area of preaching the word of God, “Prosperity Gospel” in the style of Pentecostal Churches is creeping into the ministrations of some Catholic priests.

The youth which constitute over 75% of church goers are developing cold feet in their response to Church activities. This is despite the fact that priests engaged in school apostolate at all levels of educational institutions are doing their utmost in standing as edifying figures to the youth, and as sources of inspiration to other faculty and administrative staff members on the campuses.

In the ongoing fight against endemic corruption in Nigeria, priests are hard put to it to positively influence the policy makers and the public to choose the path of transparency in discharging themselves creditably. In fact, some Catholic priests have been caught on the web of giving and/or accepting bribes while seeking or offering employment, or admission into institutions of learning on behalf of themselves or others. The number of priest-offenders may be minimal, but the negative attention they attract is very loud.

In the political arena, some priests have been known for overtly dabbling into partisan politics by campaigning, even from the pulpit, for candidates in an election. And very often politicians pay deaf ear to the persistent outcry on the part of Church’s hierarchy in condemning the excesses of government.