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NWA OZOAKU¹ NA NKITAKU AGULU: A CATHOLIC PRIEST TO THE CORE

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Abstract

Human life is not algebra or a mathematical problem to be solved, but a mystery to be entered into and lived. Sharing in the mystery of life, the Catholic priest should necessarily become intimate with Jesus Christ to Whom he is consecrated. It is in the context of his observation and experience that the researcher analyses and shows how Fr. B.A.C Obiefuna has in modern times made conscious and manifest positive efforts to make sense of the tension between his life and his vocation as a Catholic priest for the past forty years. This essay shares the view that Fr. Obiefuna knows his identity as a Catholic priest. And still involved in the mysterious journey of life, he is graciously committed to living out the Christocentric elements in his identity as a ministerial priest within the Church in the world for the salvation of many. The research work, therefore, concludes that Fr. B.A.C Obiefuna is Catholic Priest to the core because he is a ministerial priest after the mind of Christ.

Keywords: Obiefuna, Catholic priesthood, Catholic Church, identity

Introduction

“Go, therefore, and make disciples from all nations. Baptize them in the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and teach them to fulfill all that I have commanded you”.²

From the outset, I recall that while writing the “Profile of Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna” in honour of the Silver Jubilee Anniversary of his priestly ordination, I acknowledged that Fr. Obiefuna is a sound academic and a man of faith, who is a Catholic priest after the mind of Jesus Christ. It is a thing of beauty and a joy forever that, since his priestly ordination, he has made himself available to the triune God in so many respects so much so that in spite of the challenges of his priestly life over the years, he would ever say: “I have every reason to thank God for His grace”.³ It is within the context of my observation that Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna is Catholic priest after the mind of Jesus Christ that I arrived at the conclusion that he is a priest to the core. And I realised three models of living the Catholic priesthood: the priesthood according to the way of the world, the priesthood according to one’s own mind and the priesthood according to the mind of Jesus Christ.

Authentic living is not a bed of roses, for nothing good comes easy. The road to meaningful living is filled with thorns and thistles. In consequence, personal desires, tastes, needs and inclinations make their demands on everyone including the Catholic priest. This is such that in the face of widespread values of modern world informed by secular ideologies, the Catholic priest should either conform to the world or make sense of the tension between his life and his vocation. Aware that a priest infested with the virus of modernity is out of place in the priesthood of Jesus Christ, Fr. Obiefuna chooses to rise above self-indulgence⁴ of the modern world in order to live according to the mind of Jesus Christ, revealing that he is committed to the correct concept of the Catholic priesthood.



Understanding the Catholic Priesthood

The priesthood of the Old Testament prefigures the ordained ministry of the New Covenant. And everything that the priesthood of the Old Covenant prefigured finds its fulfillment in Jesus Christ, the “one mediator between God and man”⁵. The Christian tradition considers Melchizedek, “priest of God Most High” as a prefiguration of the priesthood of Jesus Christ, the unique “High Priest after the order of Melchizedek”⁶; “holy, undefiled, set apart from sinners and exalted above the heavens,” that is, by the one and only sacrifice on the cross at Calvary. In the New Covenant, Jesus Christ, being the High Priest and sole mediator, has made of the Church “a kingdom and priest for His God and Father.”⁸ Thus, the whole community of believers is priestly. Through the sacrament of baptism and confirmation the faithful are “consecrated to be ... a holy priesthood.”⁹ And the faithful exercise their general lay-priesthood through their active participation, each according to his or her own vocation, in Christ’s mission as priest, prophet and king.

While the common priesthood and the ministerial priesthood are “ordered one to another”, they differ essentially.¹⁰ Unlike the common priesthood, the Council of Trent declared that there is in the Catholic Church a visible and external priesthood, a hierarchy instituted by divine ordinance.¹¹ Such is the ministerial priesthood transmitted by the sacrament of Holy Orders, which has the task of not only representing Jesus Christ - the Head of the Church - before the assembly of the faithful, but also of acting in the name of the whole Church when presenting to God the prayer of the Church, and above all when offering the Eucharistic sacrifice. Since the ministerial priesthood represents Jesus Christ, it graciously represents the Church as the mystical body of Christ as well. In other words, the ministerial priesthood is at the service of the common priesthood, for it is by means of the ministerial priesthood that Jesus Christ unceasingly builds up and leads His church in the way of salvation within the world.¹²

Nwa Ozoaku as a Catholic Priest

In the present life, we humans are always involved with the future; the ideal is in tension with the fact; what we ought to be is connected with what we are; the eternal is tied up with the temporal; the “not yet” determines the “now”, human conduct derives from man’s last end, and life must come from Life.¹³ As a Christian, who is configured to Jesus Christ, Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna reasons into the meaning of life in a manner that shows that “faith is the way, and all is given by grace”.¹⁴ His attitude to life aligns with the purpose of Jesus Christ for becoming man: “I have come that they may have life in its fullness”.¹⁵ Contrary to the natural religions of the world such as Buddhism, Hinduism, Confucianism, Taoism, African Traditional Religion, and so on, in Christianity God moves to man as a human being and invites him or her to respond to His initial impulse. Hence, it is by God’s invitation to Fr. Obiefuna that he started yearning for and choosing a regenerated and transformed life in Christ Jesus and eventually became a minister of the New Covenant according to the order of Melchizedek as a Catholic Priest.

As a staunch follower of Jesus Christ and an ardent minister of the New Covenant, Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna is a man of faith working through love of God and neighbour. Since his priestly ordination on 2nd July, 1983, he has endeavoured to make himself available to the triune God. His commitment in the vineyard of the Lord has brought him immense fulfillment. No wonder he remembers the following events with joy: he led the squad that freed the premises of Madonna Assumpta Parish, Agulu of the Igbo Traditional Shrine in



1984. The then Diocesan Bishop, the Most Rev. Dr. A. K. Obiefuna, had warned that he would not pay pastoral visit to the town, if the shrine was not removed; he was the first young priest (2 years ordained) posted to his home town (1985) as parish priest that came out, according to the people of God, with very high ovation; he was one of the four (the late Fr. Matthew Attensey, Madonna Assumpta Parish; the late Fr. Samuel Onalu, St. Theresa's Parish; Fr. Mike Anozie, St. Patrick's Parish; Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna, St. John the Evangelist Parish), who served as test-dose in Agulu (1985) for multi-parish towns. If the four priests had failed, it would have been the end of that proposal; he laid the foundation for the spiritual and structural developmental processes of St. John the Evangelist Parish, Agulu; he masterminded the process that led to the demystification and detotemisation of crocodile in Agulu lake, declared it fit for human consumption, killed it, and actually ate it; he led a prayer squad to Nawgu in the hey days of the late Eddy Okeke (Eddy Nawgu); he laid the foundation, and not without bloody sweat, for the relative stability of the Charismatic Renewal in Awka Diocese; he led in prayer of reconciliation after about twelve years of crises in Agulu, he organised the launching in which twelve cars were donated for newly ordained priests in Agulu,¹⁶ and so on.

It goes without saying that Fr. B.A.C Obiefuna's knowledge of Christ, apostolic zeal, positive attitude to work, spirit of good counsel, courage amidst challenges, patience in the face of sufferings, enduring dedication to prayer, and disciplined charismatic disposition to preaching and living the Gospel are well-known to me from the cradle till date. Among innumerable instances, I remember with deep nostalgia my personal experience of him during the earliest years of my life. I was to attend Boys' Grammar School, Agulu, as I passed the Common Entrance Examination. Nevertheless, I did not gain admission into the school due to exigencies of those times. My parents, late Mr. Samuel and Mrs. Annastesia Ezeka, withdrew me from Boys' Grammar School, Agulu and sent me to a nearby newly constructed Union Secondary School, Agulu because they wanted me to be a day-student and help in menial works at home then. I respected their goodwill for me and obeyed them. Our J.S.S 1 class followed the J.S.S 2 pioneer set in the school. Our school principal, late Mr. I.N.J Okpala, as well as other members of the teaching staff diligently worked to give us sound education in the school. We were performing excellently in academics and competed keenly with other secondary schools within the vicinity during inter school quiz, debate and sports competitions. Within the third term of 19th 84/85 academic session, we were just through with J.S.S 2 promotional examination whereas the best students of the pioneer class, who had finished their examination before us, were preparing for written examination in Christian Religious Knowledge, which was organised for secondary schools within the old Awka zone. Surprisingly, our school principal summoned me to his office and asked me to join the selected J.S.S 3 pioneer students preparing for the competition.

When I went for the preparatory class with those pioneer students at the stipulated time in the St. John the Evangelist Church premises, we met Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna as our teacher. He was the first parish priest of our new parish, and our principal has requested him to prepare us for the competition. We were required to study the book of Exodus, from chapters 1 - 40 for the competition. And he left no stone unturned, as he taught us with effervescent dedication and in so many ways charged us to excel in the competition, not minding that we had barely two weeks to prepare. Unknown to him then, his impact on me particularly was enormous. It boosted my determination and strengthened the confidence our principal had already reposed in me which challenged me to study more and more. I was

selected among the best three students that represented our school after our mock-examination in the staff room. When we reached the venue of the competition on that memorable Saturday morning at Comprehensive Secondary School, Nawfia, I realised that we were the only new junior secondary school that came for the competition; the rest were senior boys and girls from older secondary schools. We were over 80 students who partook in the written examination on that day. Three weeks after the examination, the result was released. I scored 92%, which placed our new school on the 3rd position above several older senior secondary schools in the old Awka zone. Our principal, the members of the teaching staff and the students were happy that I made them proud. All thanks to Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna's enthusiastic mentorship.

Nwa Ozoaku as a Great Friend of Jesus Christ

It was Jesus Himself who said: "I shall not call you servants anymore, because servants do not know what their master is about. Instead I have called you friends, since I have made known to you everything I learned from my Father".¹⁷ It is, therefore, not out of place for me to understand that Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna is a true friend of Jesus Christ because he sees his relationship with Him in this light. In his characteristic sense of humour, he would even personalise Him as his bosom friend by saying that Jesus Christ comes from his own village (Nkitaku) in Agulu: "Jesus Onye Nkitaku o." Such reveals the profundity of his positive efforts to seek Christ, to find Christ, to love Christ, and to stay with Christ.¹⁸ The "Jesus question"¹⁹ inescapably rings bell in Fr. Obiefuna's proclamation of the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He shares the understanding that Jesus Christ, his brother and friend, is the Eternal Word,²⁰ the Incarnate Word²¹ and the Life-giving Spirit.²² He, thus, sees the solution of the major problem of the world as the restoration of the image of man in Christ, showing that he holds the Son of God, Jesus Christ, as the ultimate pattern of the new humanity.²³

Anyone who knows Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna identifies him with being an outstanding preacher of the Gospel. In his attempt to transform the secular society marked by structural injustice in the light of the Gospel, he effectively uses his pen and the pulpit in thought, word and action. As an apostle of the pen, he has published mind-agitating books such as *Endure to the End: Charismatics and the Hard Times* (1997); *A Choice in the Bread of Life* (1999); *Saints in the Market Place* (2000); *You are the Light* (2000); *Towards Unity in the Church* (2004); *Mary: The Living Ark of Covenant* (2004); *Attention Corps Members* (2004); *The Youth on Fire* (2004); *The Joys and Pains of the Bishop* (2008); *Issues in Religion and Society* (2018), and a lot more. Using the pulpit, he has consistently proclaimed the Word with immense conviction and sincerity of purpose, and he derived energy from a strong intimate life he shares with Jesus Christ, which is wrapped in an extraordinary naturalness set on fire of love by a fresh infusion of the Holy Spirit. As a way of proclaiming and living the Gospel in various places he has served, he chose "In God's divine providence is our strength" (*Ihe Chukwu amaghii anaghi eme*) as his motto. Such contextually reveals that God is always present to wipe tears off the eyes of His chosen people because faith cannot be strong without trials, and salvation comes from the Lord.²⁴

Sealed with the permanent spiritual power and indelible character received at ordination²⁵, Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna graciously exercised the function of teaching, guiding and sanctifying the people of God. Being the parish priest of his new parish, he was the architect of unity in building the faith-community through prayer and pastoral service. He often worked himself to the marrow when he was the parish priest of St. John the Evangelist

Parish, Agulu. He understood and still understands that the Catholic priesthood as a challenge, for the cross is its constitutive element.²⁶ He was ever at home with the fact that the Catholic priest is not his own.²⁷ Hence, as a pastor in mould of the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ,²⁸ he employed his priesthood in the service of the people of God in the newly created parish, drawing the parishioners to “a life of faith, hope and charity, a life according to the Spirit.”²⁹ He built the Christian communities in the parish; and from the parish, he created five zones: St. James’ zone (Umunnowu). St. Paul’s zone (Ifiteani), St Matthias’ zone (Umuowe), St. Augustine’s zone (Umuifite) and Holy Family zone (Nneogidi). Today, to the glory of God, two new parishes have been created out of these zones: St. Matthias Parish and Holy Family Parish respectively. Moreover, throughout his parochial activities in our parish, he wholeheartedly immersed himself in evangelising the faith-community, in winning souls for Christ, in getting innumerable converts, and in living the faith.

Conclusion

Reality will always remain an open-ended question, since it comprises of many sides difficult to be grasped in one moment.³⁰ Fr. B.A.C Obiefuna is still involved in the journey of life as a Catholic priest, and he is open to the Spirit of grace. The only clear and visible truth I am telling all and sundry with genuine love is that he is indeed a man of faith, a seasoned scholar, a real pastor, a great ambassador of Jesus Christ, an honest lover of the Church and humankind, a radical preacher of the Word who lives more than the words, a devout minister of the sacraments, and a Catholic priest to the core: Lord Jesus Christ, thank you sincerely for the gift of Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna to the Church in the world. In your merciful love, grant him renewed grace for fulfilled life in time and in eternity. Amen.

References

1. Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna is very fond of his mother, and he calls himself “Nwa Ozoaku”, a designation that does not go down well with male chauvinists in a patriarchal society like ours. By this rare designation, therefore, Fr. Obiefuna shares a message of life with us: that women should not be relegated to the background in our society, bringing to the limelight the value and significance of motherhood in our lives as human beings in the world, a vale of tears. See Ezeka, C. (2009, January 4), “Profile of Rev. Fr. B.A.C. Obiefuna”, in *Silver Jubilee Anniversary of Priestly Ordinations*, 9.
2. Matthew 28:19-20
3. Ezeka, C., *Op, cit*, 13.
4. See Galatians 5:19-21: St. Paul summarises the spirit of the modern times marked by license, cult of pleasure, comfort, indolence, materialism and laissez-faire attitude with one word: self-indulgence. He shows the effect of self-indulgence: “sexual vice, impurity and shamelessness, idol worship and sorcery, hatred, jealousy and violence, bad temper and quarrels, division, factions and malice, drunkenness, orgies and the like.”
5. 1 Timothy 2:5
6. Hebrews 5:10; cf. 6:20; Genesis 14:18
7. Hebrew 7:26
8. Revelation 1:6; cf. 5:9-10; 1 Peter 2:5,9

9. *Lumen gentium*, 10 § 1, See Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nos. 1544-1546.
10. *Lumen gentium*, 10 § 2.
11. Acts of the Apostles 14:22; See Denziger-ShÖnmetzer, Nos 961 and 966.
12. See Catechism of the Catholic Church, Nos 1547 and 1552.
13. Sheen, F. J. (2008), *Thoughts for Daily Living*. New York, U.S.A: St. Paul Press.
14. Romans 4:16
15. John 10:10
16. Ezeka, C., *Op.cit.*, 12
17. John 15:15
18. Canals, S. (1981), *Jesus as Friend*. Lagos, Nigeria: Criterion Press
19. See Matthew 16:13-20. At Caesarea Philippi, Jesus asked His disciples, "Who do people say the Son of Man is?" While some said that He is John the Baptist, for others He is Elijah, Jeremiah or one of the prophets. But among the Apostles, only Peter following the revelation of the Spirit of the Father and the Son could rightly say, "You are the Messiah, the Son of the Living God". When we explore this "Jesus question", it becomes discernibly certain for us to affirm that Jesus Christ as long-awaited Messiah spoken of throughout the Old Testament is God (Daniel 7: 13-14; Mark 14: 61-62; Revelation 21: 1-6).
20. John 1:1-3
21. John 1:14
22. 1 Corinthians 15:45
23. Sheen, F. J. (2006), *Those Mysterious Priests*. New York, U.S.A: St. Paul Press
24. Ezeka, C., *Op. cit.*
25. Ott, L. (1960), *Fundamentals of Catholic Dogma*. Fourth Edition. Illinois, U. S.A: TAN Books and Publishers, Inc.
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27. Sheen F. J. (2005), *The Priest is Not His Own*. Bangalore, India: Asian Trading Corporation.
28. See Psalm 23:1-6; John 10:1-21
29. Eboh, B.O. (1994), *Living Beyond Materialism*. Enugu, Nigeria: SNAAP Press
30. See Catechism of the Catholic Church, No. 1547.