

THE PRIEST AND HIS PROPHETIC ROLE AMIDST THE POLITICAL AND MORAL CHALLENGES OF THE PRESENT DAY SOCIETY

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Abstract

This article is an examination of the prophetic role of priests amidst the political and moral challenges of the present day. Nigeria as a country has been plagued by so many social ills, most of which are bordering on wrong political and moral choices. These choices affect every member of the society, including the faithful. From the scriptures, we see the role prophets played in the political contexts of their times. Given that the priest is a prophet ipso facto, this work journeys through the scriptures to discuss the role of prophets. It discusses also the role of priests in the scriptures and in the Church today and then creates a nexus between the office of priest-prophet by elaborating the prophetic role of priests in the current Nigerian political and moral context. Finally it makes recommendations and concludes.

Keywords: Priest, Prophet, Politics, Morality, Nigeria.

Introduction

The office of the priesthood has existed for as long as human history. Under different names, every world religion has always had people, men and women, dedicated to the divine, who carried out sacred duties on behalf of the community. From Old Testament times, as seen in the book of Leviticus, God chose men to serve him in the priestly office, in order to offer sacrifices on behalf of His people (cf. Lev. 1:5,11,17; 2:8-9; 3:5,12-16; 5:6-10). These men were seen to be answering a sacred and exclusive call to service in the Lord's vineyard. This office of the priesthood spans throughout the New Testament with the Letter to the Hebrews giving special place to it. The role of a priest in New Testament is not different from that of the Old Testament: to offer sacrifices (cf. Heb. 5:1). However, the office of the priesthood is not limited to the ritual of offering sacrifices alone, as that would reduce the office to a mere practice of temple ritualism. Sometimes, the priest is seen to play prophetic roles, speaking on behalf of God to His people. Samuel, the prophet and priest is one example of the two-fold role of priest-prophet in the Old Testament. The office of Prophet was

another important office in Old Testament times which served as a gadfly for the people in matters of religion and morals. In this literary journey, we shall examine the prophetic role of the modern priest in contemporary society. To set a veritable background for this, we shall examine the offices of both priest and prophet as presented to us in the Scriptures, Old and New Testaments. In this discourse, too, we shall be examining the role of prophets in biblical tradition. To do this, we shall also examine the etymology of the word 'prophet'. However, in our study of the etymology of the term, we must take into consideration the elasticity with which it is applied to different personalities. We shall also take some insight from the role of priests in traditional African societies. After which we shall apply these templates towards addressing the political and moral challenges of our world today.

Who is a Prophet?

According to Ndiokwere, no serious immediate attempt has been made to define the terminology called 'prophet'. Also there is no clear cut distinction between such persons as the ecstatic from the prophet; the prophet-healer from the traditional diviner; the seer from the man of God, or even other similar roles commonly classified together under the concept 'prophet' (Nmah and Nwadiolor, 2012:291). For Akpunonu (2004:49), on the other hand, "A prophet is one who is called, receives a message from a deity, and passes it on to the intended audience as a message coming not from him but from the deity. The prophet is aware of this, so is his audience. His audience is aware that he is speaking in the name of the deity." There has always been the tendency to speak or think only of the prophets of Israel whose work and utterances are narrated to us in the scriptures. However, more recent studies in the psychology and the history of world religions have shown that the idea of prophecy is not a phenomenon limited to the people of Israel alone. In fact, most world religions have exhibited, at some point in their historical development, the prophetic phenomenon. The result is that there are prophets found in different world of religions, both in ancient and modern times. There is also the phenomenology of modern prophets, or what Lindblom refers to as '*homines religiosi*', that is, prophet types. These prophets, according to him, are persons for whom religious experiences are the essence of their religious life. Their religious lifestyle consists of interpersonal communication with God, prayer and devotion as well as a total moral submission to the divine will (Nmah and Nwadiolor, 2012:291).

According to Vos, etymologically, three proposals for the origin of the term exist. The first is the Hebrew word for prophet which is '*nabhi*'. While various

suggestions have been made by exegetes regarding the root of the word prophet, they revolve around the concepts 'to spring', 'to gush forth', or passively 'to be sputtered, bubbled or gush against' (Nmah and Nwadiolor, 2012:292). Thus, the *nabhi* might be 'the one gush upon by the spirit' (*so keil*). A second recourse is made to the Arabic *naba'a* which means 'to announce'. The difficulty arising here in connection with 'to announce' is that *nabhi* is restricted to the announcer for the Deity, whereas *naba'a*, more like signifies 'to announce' in the general sense. The third possible derivation is from the Assyrian *nabu* which signifies 'to call', 'to proclaim', or 'to announce'. However, the term 'prophet' was not always used in the strictly technical which we are accustomed to. Over time, the idea of 'vision' came to stand for revelation in general, and the concept 'prophet' could be equally be an 'instrument of revelation' (292). On the other hand, the translation 'prophet', according to the Septuagint, is a matter of expediency (292). Thus, it is difficult to decide whether *nabi* was 'habitus', or the description of a function, or a sign of vocation. The expression "Is Saul also among the prophets' (1 Sam. 10:11) affirms this. Similarly, Moses is called a prophet who is set over other prophets due to his unique communication with God (cf. Num. 12: 6ff). Abraham is likewise called a prophet, that is, one who is privileged with a special acquaintanceship with God, putting him in the position to intercede for others (cf. Genesis 20:7).

Prophecy in the Old Testament

Over the years, the roles of prophets have metamorphosed. As explained by Napier, during the early centuries following the installation of Israel in the land of Canaan, the political power rested in the hands of the prophets. Even the Judges were, in actuality, prophets. So many kinds of men were all classified as prophets or prophet types. Some of these were enthusiasts, proselytes, patriots, ecstasies, warlords and heroes, savior - kings, and other men of the Spirit or even the classic 'man of God' (*ish ha-Elohim*) among others. The Hebrew word '*nabi*' has been applied to a vast range of characters spanning the entire Old Testament from Genesis (20:7) to Malachi (4:5), and even to some remarkably dissimilar characters from Aaron to Elijah and in expressions such as 'true' and 'false' prophets. This serves to show us the wide range of the application of the term 'prophet' as used in the Old Testament (Nmah and Nwadiolor, 2012:291). Abraham is called a prophet (cf. Gen. 20:7); a 'God-sent' envoy and an intercessor for others before God. In fact, the expression '*Avi*', connoting 'my father' has not only a patriarchal significance, but in a more technical sense designates a prophet as well (Nether in Nmah and Nwadiolor, 2012:291)). Prophecy has a rich variety

of applications. The Old Testament introduces us to a great variety of prophets who appear to have prophesied in many different ways.

Prophecy in the New Testament

With this enquiry into the meaning of *nabhi* we may combine a brief discussion of its Greek equivalent, *prophetess*, from which our word prophet has come. The term is mostly associated with the idea of a 'foreteller' or a 'forthteller'. The Greek term '*prophetes*', however, has as much religious connotations as the Hebrew one. *Prophetes* is the one who speaks for the oracle. Thus, the Hebrew *nabhi*' and the Greek *prophetes* were practically synonyms (Nmah and Nwadiolor, 293). Discussing prophecy in St Paul, Udoette points out that, for Paul, prophecy is a charism. It is important to note that, for Paul, charisms are basically God's call which is addressed to each Christian for the service of the Church with the grace to exercise these gifts. For him, a Christian community without these charisms operative in its members would no longer be like a living body. Such a community can no longer be said to be a body of Christ (Nmah and Nwadiolor, 2012:293). It is within his reflection on the charisms (1Cor. 14: 12-14) that Paul discusses prophecy and its functions. For Paul, unlike tongues which are utterances of mysteries in the spirit (*mysteria en pneumatic*) meant for the unbelievers, Paul contends that specially for believers. Therefore, those who prophesy, speak to human beings for their moral edification and consolation. In general terms, the prophet is the man who expresses the mind of God and interprets God's message to his people applying it to the particular context (Nmah and Nwadiolor, 2012:291). The New Testament had one major prophetic figure, John the Baptist, who came to herald the coming of Christ (cf. Matt. 3:11-12; Mark 1:6-8; Luke 3:3-17; John 1:19-27). However, even John the Baptist was known to condemn the evils of his time which led to his martyrdom (cf. Matt. 14: 1-12; Mark 6:14-29).

One major quality for which the biblical prophets were known is that "Their main preoccupation was to bring the people back to God's ways and in a good relationship with God. They spoke primarily in defense of the true worship of God and in favour of the poor, the oppressed, the orphans and widows, the aged, and the strangers, to save them from extortion" (Bala, 2022:19). However, prophecies could be conditional or unconditional. A conditional prophecy is dependence on compliance or non-compliance with certain conditions, which is mostly predicated by 'if' (cf. Lev. 26:3-4; 2 Chron. 7:14; Jer. 8:7-10). On the contrary, an unconditional prophecy is not predicated on any condition and is inevitable (cf. Gen. 3:25; Ez. 25-32). Such a prophecy must come to pass (20). New

Testament redefined the concept of prophecy and the office of the prophet gradually took a back seat. With the age of prophecy coming to an end, the emphasis shifted to discipleship and apostleship. However, the priesthood still remained relevant.

Who is a Priest?

The Wikipedia defines a priest as “a religious leader authorized to perform the sacred ritual of a religion, especially as a mediatory agent between humans and one or more deities. They also have the power to administer religious rites; in particular, rites of sacrifice to, and propitiation of, a deity of deities” (retrieved 30.08.2022). One common factor of the priesthood, across all religions, is the relationship of priests to the divine. Discussing the word ‘*Kohen*’, which is the Hebrew word for priest, Ihenacho (2012:70) points out that is derived from the Semitic *Kahan*, which means “to stand”, which, according to him, implies that it was the duty of the priest to stand before the divinity all the time and to mediate between him and the people. He points out that from this Hebrew word *kohen*, that the verb *kihen*, which means “to function as a priest” and the noun *kehunna*, meaning “priesthood”, were derived. Other pre-Christian religions had similar impressions of the priesthood. Most priesthoods before the Christian era were about offering sacrifices. Even the Greek verb *hiereuo*, which meant “to be a priest” also meant “to kill”, that is, sacrificially (72). It was typically, therefore, to identify the priesthood with ritual killings.

The Role of the Priest in the New Testament

The function of priests in the New Testament is not much different from that of the Old Testament. The Letter to the Hebrews dedicates the entire fifth chapter to its discourse on the priesthood. “Every high priest is taken from among the people and is appointed to act on their behalf in relations with God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins.” (Heb. 5:1). Thus, this scriptural book begins by pointing out the same divine relations priests are identified with in other pre-Christian religions. Secondly, it highlights the sacrificial element that has pervaded the concept of the in other world religions. However, it goes further to out the empathic element of the priesthood when it says “He can sympathize with those who are ignorant or who have gone astray, because he too is subject to the limitations of weaknesses” (Heb. 5:2). The human element in the priesthood is fundamental to our discussion in this work. Priests are not to be seen as superhuman beings, who are incapable of understanding with the weaknesses and shortcomings of others, but as fellow sinful pilgrims who are journeying in effort towards the kingdom of God, with the aid of divine grace.

The Role of the Priest in African Traditional Societies

Africans are religious by nature and this affects everything they do. Discussing the value of religious leaders, Mbiti (1986:150) pointed out the fact that religion has deep roots in the lives of people. Therefore, in order for religion to function properly in the society, there are men and women gifted with religious knowledge, who lead everybody else in religious activities. These people serve as a go-between fellow human beings and God, spirits and other invisible realities. These religious leaders are the guardians of religious treasures and knowledge. They are usually wise and gifted individuals with outstanding personalities. Some of them include medicine men, diviners, mediums, seers, priests, ritual elders, rain-makers, and rulers. (150). Priests in traditional African societies can be men or women. They take care of the temples, shrines and other religious places. They lead in public worship, offer sacrifices and receive offerings on behalf of God or other spiritual beings. They are well grounded in the religious heritage of the people: myths, beliefs, traditions, legends, proverbs, and other religious practices. Traditional priests are commonly found in countries like Ghana, Nigeria, Tanzania, Uganda and other parts of West Africa or wherever people have traditional places of worship such as shrines and temples, or where they have and ritual cults associated with spirits or deities. In some societies where there are no priests, ritual elders perform the priestly functions, while in some societies the traditional ruler is the chief priest of his people and handles the priestly functions (159).

In traditional Igboland, the title *Dibia* is often given to priests. Obilor, discussing traditional medicine in Igboland, points out that God is the giver of traditional medicine and this is recognized by all traditional healers. Inculturation, for him, will only function when the clear distinction between the three classes of *Dibia* in Igboland is clearly made. The first class: *Dibia Afa - afa* means divination and this refers to diviners and fortune tellers. The second class is *Dibia Aja - aja* means sacrifice and designates the traditional priest. The third is *Dibia Ogwu/mgborogwu - ogwu* means medicine and this class therefore refers to medicine men. Obilor says it is this *mgborogwu* that is seen as a gift from God a ministry of healing and cites scriptural texts such as Ezek. 47:12, Sir. 38:4-8, Ex. 15:23-25 and Rev. 22:2 as backups. For him, any good Christian can be *Dibia Ogwu* and a Christian does not sin by visiting *Dibia Ogwu*. However, both *Dibia Afa* and *Dibia Aja* are contrary to the Gospel and he cites Deut. 18:9-13, Lev. 10:31, 1 Sam. 28:3 and Is. 8:19-20 as scriptural backups. Because the Mass is Supreme Sacrifice and divination through necromancy, magic, witchcraft or alchemy are all forbidden

by the Bible, then one cannot participate in any of these without committing sin (2012:288).

The Role of the Priest in the Life of the Church

The Second Vatican Council describes the call of priests as follows: “The same Lord, however, has established ministers among his faithful to unite them together in one body in which, ‘not all the members have the same function’ (Rom 12:4). These ministers in the society of the faithful are able by the sacred power of orders to offer sacrifice and to forgive sins, and they perform their priestly office publicly for men in the name of Christ” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 2). Thus, we see in the life of the Church, the priest as one called to offer sacrifice, which in this case is the sacrifice of the Holy Mass. The functions of presbyters in the Catholic Church are however not limited to the celebration of the Mass alone. Let us highlight some of the functions of the priest in the Church today.

Liturgical: The priest is, first and foremost, a minister of the Word and sacraments. This makes him a minister of the liturgy. Liturgy is the public worship of the Church and the celebration of liturgy is fundamental in the life of a priest. The Church’s liturgical celebrations involve the celebration of the sacraments, the celebration of the divine office as well as other public celebrations approved by the Church’s authority. In the celebration of the sacraments, the priest brings life, light and healing into the hearts of men. In the proclamation of the Word (*kerygma*), he speaks on behalf of God and is therefore, in every sense of the word, a prophet.

Administrative: It is the duty of the priest to administer the temporal goods of the Church. Since the Church has both physical and spiritual structures, it is important that they are catered for. Thus, the priest by virtue of his office or appointment by the local ordinary or any competent authority is charged with governing the affairs of the Church within his ecclesial jurisdiction. This entails coordinating all the affairs of the faithful, as well as seeing to the proper ordering of the temporal goods of the Church under his care. This demands responsibility and accountability on his part.

Pastoral: The priest is a pastoral agent. Every priest is called to be a pastor. The Latin word *pastor*, which means “shepherd” best describes the role the priest plays in relation to the flock of Christ. Christ’s last words to Peter in the Gospel of John capture this succinctly: “Look after my sheep” (John 21:16). The priest is a shepherd of souls. This makes it his duty to feed the sheep (cf. John 21:17); to lead the sheep (cf. John 10:3); to seek out the lost sheep (cf. Matt. 18:12); and even to lay down his life for the sheep (cf. John 10:11).

Moral: The priest is a formator of conscience. Like the prophets of old, he is to call the people to order in matters of faith and morals. He is to lead by word and example and, therefore, serve as a role model for society. To achieve this successfully, he must be guided by the scriptures, tradition and magisterial teachings. The priest should not appear alienated from the rest of society and therefore he must be enlightened about the modern trends and attitudes of people, especially the young, who are more often, the most easily influenced by modern trends. However, in keeping abreast with these modern trends, he must take special caution in order not to be influenced negatively by these fads and fashions since he is to be a lighthouse for pilgrims on the journey to salvation.

Social: Since the priest is a member of society and concerned about the wellbeing of other members of society, he feels the pains of others and, where necessary, tries to alleviate the pains of the people. The priest is above all, the harbinger of hope to the poor and marginalized in society. He is the voice of the voiceless and the defender of the defenseless. At no time should the priest ostracize himself from the people. He must live with the people and experience their everyday realities. Only then will his ministry be relevant to the people and to the society as a whole. While it has never been the wish of the Church that her priests should participate in partisan politics, she is however, concerned with the government policies that determine the survival and welfare of the people. If the Church is to show genuine concern for the people, then she cannot shy away from politics.

The Priest and his Prophetic Role in the Political and Moral Challenges of the Present Day Society

At this point, it is important to note that, while the Church recognizes the special call of priests that sets them apart from the rest of the world, she does not in any way expect priests to be alienated from society. On the contrary, she realizes the living conditions of men and women in society are the living conditions of Christ's faithful: "The joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men and women of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of followers of Christ as well" (*Gaudium et Spes* 1). As a result of this, the Church has always been concerned about the living conditions of men and women in the society. This is the basis of the Social Doctrine of the Church. From Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* of 1891 till date, the Church has released many social encyclicals aimed at drawing the attention of the people of God, and the world as a whole, to issues bothering on the

defense of the dignity of the human person. This is because the Church is aware that any problems that affect the very survival of the human person – hunger, poverty, homelessness, illiteracy, corruption, wars, insecurity and environmental degradation, have direct consequences for the dignity of the human person.

Describing the relationship of priests with the world, the Council Fathers state: “Priests of the New Testament, by their vocation and ordination, are in a certain sense set apart in the bosom of the People of God. However, they are not to be separated from the People of God or from any person; but they are to be totally dedicated to the work for which the Lord has chosen them” (*Presbyterorum Ordinis* 3). Explaining further, they state: “They cannot be ministers of Christ unless they be witnesses and dispensers of a life other than earthly life. But they cannot be of service to men if they remain strangers to the life and conditions of men. Their ministry itself, by a special title, forbids that they be conformed to this world; yet at the same time it requires that they live in this world among men” (*PO* 3). These excerpts from the Second Vatican Council show that the Church does not expect her priests to live and work in the world as alienated beings, but to identify with the world in its affairs, while remaining unstained and undistracted by its affairs. Thus, priests as human beings living in a human society have a role to play in all secular affairs. Our focus, hereafter, will be the role of priests in matters of politics and morality. These we shall discuss under two separate sub-headings. Where possible, we shall be using the Nigerian context as a paradigm.

The Priest and Politics

In its Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World, the Second Vatican Council says “The political community, then, exists for the common good: this is its full justification and meaning and the source of its specific and basic right to exist. The common good embraces the sum total of all those conditions of social life which enable individuals, families, and organizations to achieve complete and efficacious fulfillment.” (*Gaudium et Spes* 74). The Church seeks, at all times, the common good in order that human beings may obtain fulfillment. It is important to note, at this point, that the relationship between the Church and the political community entails two fundamental principles: autonomy and cooperation. Writing on these two elements, the Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, in its Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church, states: “Although the Church and the political community both manifest themselves in visible organizational structures, they are by nature different because of their configuration and because of the ends they pursue.” (424). Going

forward, the Council states: "The mutual autonomy of the Church and the political community does not entail a separation that excludes cooperation." (425). Thus, while the Church recognizes her autonomy from the political structures of society, she realizes that for people to attain true happiness and fulfillment there must be cooperation between the Church and the State.

It is the duty of pastors (bishops and priests) to ensure this mutual cooperation between Church and State for the common good. This mutual cooperation requires that the Church should often serve as a gadfly for the political community, calling her to order when the common good is threatened. This is because anything that threatens the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of human life is a matter of utmost concern to the Church. Priests must speak truth to power especially when certain government policies prove inimical to the public. The principle of the common good must always guide government in policy-making decisions. Here in Nigeria, the problem is not so much the inability of government to make good policies as it is the inability of government to implement the policies they have made. The result is a society full of policies but devoid of implementation; a society full of laws and yet consumed by lawlessness. This unfortunate situation has given rise to so many social ills that have made the Nigerian society a very unhealthy environment to live in. Life in Nigeria has, therefore, become one of primitive survival. Some of the social ills that ravage the Nigerian society today are bad governance, corruption, insecurity, poverty, illiteracy and economic hardship.

For many years, Nigeria has been plagued by bad governance. Since her independence in 1960, Nigeria has suffered a series of bad leaders from the military regimes to the democratic era. Having undergone decades of military dictatorship characterized by corruption and gross violation of human rights, there was a return to democracy in 1999 through a democratic process of elections. However, the corruption and violation of human rights are far from over as on a regular basis Nigerians are confronted with outrageous cases of embezzlement and mismanagement of public funds by public office holders and, most unfortunately, these cases end up without any consequences for the perpetrators. Despite this, many government officials retire with humongous and outrageous benefits, while common pensioners wallow in abject penury and dejection. Thus, we have a society where the wealth of the nation is channeled towards serving a very few individuals. Added to this is the glaring case of tribalism, nepotism, religion bigotry and cronyism that dictate and direct

government appointments, the result of which competence is sacrificed on the altar of favoritism.

The direct result of this endemic corruption is the rise of other social ills. Some of these are poverty and hunger. In 2018, Nigeria overtook India as the poverty capital of the world, with over 87 million people living in extreme poverty (The Vanguard, 10.04.2022). While in 2022 India reclaimed its position as the poverty capital of the world, Nigeria still maintains second place with over 70 million people living in abject poverty (The Cable, 09.04.2022). Given that hunger and poverty are two faces of the same coin, one can imagine the number of people living in extreme hunger in Nigeria. Hunger cannot be solved without the alleviation of poverty (Ibe, 2022:7). Millions of Nigerians live below the poverty line and are faced with grave hunger and deprivation in a land blessed with so much human and natural resources. The rising cost of food items is only making the situation direr. Illiteracy is also on the rise. The latest global data from UNESCO on out-of-school children says Nigeria has 20 million children and youths who are out of school (The Africa Report 02.09.2022). This is even more saddening given that Nigerian universities have been on strike since 14th February, 2022, meaning that university students have been out of school for almost 7 months.

Another major challenge is the problem of insecurity. Currently, Nigeria occupies the sixth position in the Global Terrorism Index (GTI), having dropped from fourth position which she occupied since 2017 (Channels TV, 04.04.2022). The activities of the dreaded *Boko Haram* sect as well as bandits, mainly in the northern part of the country, have affected the daily and economic life of the nation. This is because agricultural activities have been greatly stalled due to the harassment of farmers by armed bandits. The nation is yet to recover from the shock of the Abuja-Kaduna train attack on 28th March, 2022, which claimed many lives and some of those abducted in that attack by these murderous bandits are yet to regain freedom. In December 2021, security agents confirmed the death of 38 people at the hands of gunmen in Giwa Local Area of Kaduna State (Vanguard, 19.12.2021). In more attacks on 24th and 25th March, 2022, gunmen killed no fewer than 50 people in 9 villages in Giwa Local Government Area, kidnapping scores of people and burning houses and vehicles (The Tribune, 26.04.2022). In Northern Nigeria, priest have common under constant attack with some being killed and others kidnapped for ransom (Ibe, 2022:8). The result of these heinous crimes is that the average Nigerian lives in perpetual fear and anxiety.

In the midst of all these challenges, the priest is first and foremost, a bringer of hope. He must encourage the people not to lose hope in God, even if they have lost hope in the system. He must always present a message of hope to the people for “in hope we are saved – *Spe salvi facti sumus*” (Rom. 8:24). He must also show the way by leading the people in the right direction in matters of voting. The priest is in a good position to teach the people the importance of getting involved in politics by getting registered in political office, running for office and voting for their choice of candidates at the polls. When the situation calls for it, the clergy should be able to lead the people in peaceful, unarmed protests against policies and happenings that are a cause of concern to them. This is especially in matters of gross violation of the dignity of the human person and the sanctity of the human life.

However, in a bid to proffer a solution to these grave, politically induced social ills, the priest must take care not to assume a deified figure. It is unfortunate that some Christian ministers have chosen to interpret prophecy as the ability “to foretell” alone. The result is many men of God making electoral prophecies that many times backfire when they do not turn out as predicted. Exploiting the psyche of their followers, many priests and pastors prophesy in favour of particular candidates winning elections and in the event that this does not play out, a lot of people lose faith in the Church. A popular case has been that of the 2015 elections in which some popular pastors and even priests prophesied that the incumbent president, Goodluck Jonathan, would win the elections. Unfortunately, that did not happen. Sometimes too, the frequency of political figures in churches and adoration grounds during election periods has become a source of worry and concern to the faithful. They have even been forced to interpret some electoral predictions as pecuniary-induced prophecies. While it is important that priests should motivate their people to be politically conscious, they must be careful to avoid making electoral predictions. That is not part of their prophetic role. Instead, they are to encourage the people to know their candidates and to vote “in accordance with the highest human values without allowing themselves to be pressured or influenced by anyone through bribes, threats, self-interest, etc” (*Vademecum for Electors*, 2018:60).

The Priest and Morality

The human person, by his very nature, is a moral being. Discussing the dignity of moral conscience, the Second Vatican Council has this to say: “Deep within his conscience man discovers a law which he has not laid upon himself but which he must obey. Its voice, ever calling him to love and to do what is good and to avoid

evil, tells him inwardly at the right moment: do this, shun that. For man has in his heart a law inscribed by God. His dignity lies in observing this law, and by it he will be judged." (*Gaudium et Spes* 16). For this and other reasons, the formation of man's conscience is of paramount importance to the Church. Today's society has witnessed a surge in issues of immorality. This has been heightened by the availability of the social and electronic media. While the social and electronic media are gifts to humanity, their abuse and misuse is a major cause of concern for anyone with a sense of morality. Young people, who are the major beneficiaries of the social and electronic media, are now connected across the world and within seconds information can be disseminated and accessed from across the globe. There is also the benefit of e-commerce that has made it possible to do business with people with the tap of a few keys. In the midst of all these benefits, there are some glaring disadvantages.

The major rise in immorality and indecency is evident in the media. With the growing desire to 'trend' you people are adopting indecent exposure as way to get clicks, likes and retweets on the web, since it is the easiest way to gain fame. There is also the outrageous celebration of questionable wealth which has pushed many young people into a life of fraud or prostitution in a bid to complete with their peers. This get-rich-quick syndrome is prevalent among young people today. The internet is therefore rife with all manners of frauds sold in attractive packages just to scam unwitting victims and this ill-gotten wealth is ostentatiously displayed on social media, after all, nobody cares how the money was made. There is an abundance of immoral content as seen in pornography and other forms of sexual deviations such as homosexuality and bestiality which used to be things of shame, but are now displayed with reckless abandon. The sad thing about this reality is that the few voices that condemn these public displays of amorality are tagged as being judgmental and blackmailed into silence.

Of the media, there is a great surge in immorality giving rise to sexually transmitted diseases. There is a concomitant rise in unwanted pregnancies leading to abortions and also a sudden fashion for single motherhood. Many young girls are proud to give birth out of wedlock and have no qualms being single mothers popularly called 'baby mamas'. Another major social ill is the rising problem of drug abuse among the youths. In August 2021, the National Drug Law Enforcement Agency (NDLEA) revealed the 40% of Nigerian youths, between 18 and 35 years, are deeply involved in drug abuse (Premium Times 19.08.2021). In close relation to this is the prevalence of cultism among the

youths. This is another very scary situation as many young children are recruited into these cults even from secondary schools. Street cults have also become a plague. Many of these young cultists, in a bid to show their prowess, have been involved in all manner of vices: murder, robbery, kidnapping, rape and drug abuse.

In the face of these moral challenges, the priest is, first and foremost, a role model of morality for the young. He should remember his call to live as a light in the darkness for those who seek to do what is right. Priests must dedicate time and effort towards the moral education of young people. Making use of such youth organizations as the Catholic Youths Organization of Nigeria (CYON), the Young Catholic Students (YCS) and others, he should harness the talents of the youths towards their personal development as well as the development of the Church and society. The Church should also, when possible, empower the youths towards legitimate financial independence. This is because, in the face of glaring hunger, poverty and deprivation, people will do anything to survive. The Church should help to alleviate the sufferings of the people.

Recommendations

From our discourse, we hereby make the following recommendations:

- a. Priests should always remember their prophetic role of speaking on behalf of God. They must be mindful of their words, especially when they act in their capacity as priests, remembering that whatever they say is often seen as the message of the divine.
- b. Given the significance prophetic voice of prophetic voice of priests, they should avoid letting their personal sentiments or agenda make them mislead the people. As modern day prophets, priests should not be afraid of speaking truth to power. They should always speak the truth no matter whose ox is gored.
- c. Priests in Nigeria, while avoiding partisan politics, should be politically enlightened in order to enlighten their flock. *Nemo dat quod non habet* - nobody gives what he does not have. The faithful are in need of direction and they look up to their priests to provide it.
- d. The priest is a model to all people, Catholics, Christians and even non-Christians. As a result, they should, as much as possible, live above reproach. This means priests must be watchful of their words and actions in order not to scandalize the people.

- e. While it is necessary that priests should keep abreast with all the modern trends especially on social media, they should be wary not to get carried away with these trends and thereby constitute a public nuisance.
- f. Priests should use the vehicle of social media to create enlightenment and to teach the public, especially the youths, in matters of faith, morality, responsibility and hard work.

Conclusion

In this discourse, we began by establishing the template for our literary journey. We examined the meaning of a prophet and the role of prophets in scriptures. We then proceeded to discuss the meaning and role of priests in the scriptures, as well as in the life of the Church today. Then we discussed the role of priest amidst the political and moral challenges of our times using the Nigerian context as a paradigm. Given the extinction of prophecy in the Catholic Church, and seeing the role prophets played in the scriptures, we can be bold to say priests act in the capacity of prophets, speaking on behalf of God and bringing His message to the people in the midst of vicissitudes of life. Also, just as prophets served as moral gadflies, priests must constantly call the erring to order whenever they go astray. Above all, as priest-prophets they must bring hope to the people, no matter how despondent their circumstances may appear. They should make them see hope in their sufferings. In the words of St Paul: "We shall exult in our sufferings knowing that suffering yields perseverance and perseverance yields character and character yields hope and our hope will not disappoint us, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts through the Holy Spirit which has been given to us." (Rom. 5:3-5).

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