

1-1-2011

Preface: Saint John Mary Vianney and the Search for an Authentic Model of Priestly Living and Ministry

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Published version. "Preface: Saint John Mary Vianney and the Search for an Authentic Model of Priestly Living and Ministry," in *Priestly Ministry in Africa: Reflections by Seminarians and Priests*. Eds. Ignatius Anoonekwa Tambudzai and Chikere Crescent Ugwuanyi. Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011: 7-9. [Publisher Link](#). © 2011 Paulines Publications Africa. Used with permission.

PREFACE

SAINT JOHN MARY VIANNEY AND THE SEARCH FOR AN AUTHENTIC MODEL OF PRIESTLY LIVING AND MINISTRY

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In the minds of many people for whom the priesthood carries a measure of significance what stands out as the defining feature of our time is the shocking and painful revelation of clergy sexual abuse. The wave of scandal that already threatened to engulf the Church in North America, swept over several countries in Europe, leaving in tatters the credibility of the Church and some of its leaders. This regrettable episode whose end is still not in sight has shaken the confidence of the faithful, dented the image of the Church and increased calls for the renewal and reform of ministerial priesthood in the Church. Whether or not the Year for Priests achieved any of its original intentions remains a matter to be determined in the course of time.

In light of the above, the meaning and practice of ordained ministry provide ample material for theological reflection, debate and analysis. This book responds to this need for a renewed understanding of ordained ministry. The choice of the life of St John Vianney as framework for this theological project is not accidental. His personal witness of prayer, service and sanctity in ministry continues to serve as a model for the Church today. Recapturing his inspiration for the growth of our understanding and practice of ordained ministry requires a sustained and critical study. For the Church in Africa, which has embraced the traditions of the Latin Church with regard to priesthood, this icon speaks to the continent's contemporary situation as well. The tradition represented by this humble and simple *Curé d'Ars* reminds us that the priesthood, in Africa or elsewhere, is a life of witness to the values of the Gospel and committed service of the people of God.

New models of priestly life and service are needed for today's Church and today's world; St John Vianney represents one such model. It is model that is not given to the pursuit of power, material gain and self-aggrandisement. In a certain sense, the model that he represents transcends the Old Testament model and practice of priesthood. Far from embracing this patriarchal template, it draws attention to the life and teaching of Jesus Christ as the most authentic rationale for and foundation of *priestly living and ministry*. Without being confined or reserved to a select group this Christological model prioritises service, justice and inclusiveness over the quest for power based on deceit, falsehood and marginalisation.

A question that must be asked in today's fast-changing world is whether or not ordained ministry as it is presently practiced responds to contemporary needs and context. Can contemporary developments and factors offer new insight for a more authentic and Gospel-based model of ordained ministry? Ultimately, the question at stake is the renewal of ordained ministry that includes the formation of candidates for the priesthood, self-care for priests and greater openness to the desire of many in the Church to have a more inclusive priestly ministry in the Church. Furthermore, from the perspective of the Church in Africa, there are aspects of the priesthood as it is practiced and understood that raise questions. Not least is the question of the discipline of celibacy as a necessary component of ministerial priesthood. Without intending to be contentious, this aspect of ordained ministry remains a puzzle to many and defies understanding despite copious official pronouncements. Another critical element is the popular perception of the priest as a leader. The office of priesthood appears to confer on priests an expectation that they will assume leadership roles not only in the Christian community but in certain circumstances in secular contexts, especially where there is failure of leadership. The resulting tension confronts the spiritual understanding of priesthood with popular expectations in society.

The value of this book is that it attempts to address these and many of the issues connected with the understanding and practice of ordained ministry in the Church. It offers a starting point for a critical consideration of pertinent issues. Yet some assumptions and presup-

positions raise questions. In the first place, this collection of articles addresses issues relating to the priesthood from particular biases. The authors are all male and members of the clerical class. If priesthood is about the service of the people of God, it would not be out of place to expect that this people would have a say on how it is understood and exercised in the community of God's people. But for one exception the articles do not address the contentious issues surrounding the (re)form and relevance of ordained ministry.

Besides the theological perspective, there are other dimensions of the priesthood; one can approach it from a sociological and anthropological perspectives. This allows for a certain healthy dose of inter-disciplinarity without which much of the text sounds like self-reporting. Glaring for its absence is any attempt to consider the ongoing clergy abuse scandals rocking the Church.

Notwithstanding, the value of this collection of articles lies primarily in the fact that it is an attempt to initiate a critical, honest and open debate that would in the long run challenge and enrich the understanding and practice of ordained ministry in the Church in Africa and the world. By all accounts, this book makes a valuable contribution to the growth of the community called Church. By surfacing and examining a variety of issues relative to ordained ministry in the Church and proposing new paradigms it underlines the role of theology as faith seeking understanding in service of the community called Church.

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