

HOMILY ON THE RELEVANCE OF THE MORAL AUTHORITY OF A PRIEST

The Spirit of Moses

Priests carry within them the spirit of the Old Testament priest Melchizedech. They also carry the spirit of Moses whose mission it was to free the people of Israel. Finally, priests have an “abundant share of Christ’s plenty”. The present cohort of priests share in the rich priestly tradition of both the Old and New Testaments. Priests have the singular privilege and obligation to carry out the mission of being shepherds to the people of God.

Ordination Prayer

In the prayer of the ordination of a priest, two things are asked for. First, that the Rite of Ordination confer on the candidate the *grace* and *dignity* of the office of the priesthood. Secondly, the prayer asks for a deep renewal of the spirit of *holiness* within the candidate. (innova in visceribus eorum spiritum sanctitatis. This calls to mind Ps 50: innova spiritum rectum in visceribus meis). Renew in “the inward parts” of the candidate, “in the depths of his being”.

This prayer is asking for the *holiness* of the priest. This deep spiritual renewal ought to make the priest stand out or be visible as an *example*, a *model*, a *pattern* of *good conduct* to the people he serves. People should be able to say in their hearts: that priest is, without doubt, a saintly person.

Holiness. A Necessary Condition for Ministry

A priest’s holiness is important in order for the priest’s pastoral work to bear fruit. Personal holiness supports, enhances and strengthens a priest’s resolve to carry out his role as pastor among the people of God. Holiness adds value and gives spiritual quality to his stewardship. It lends weight and endows dignity and respect to the messenger of the Good News. Personal holiness protects the priesthood from being trivialised, mocked, rendered meaningless or turned into a laughing stock.

The *moral authority* of a priest derives from his ordination. Remember the appeals of the ordination prayer. The *quality of a priest’s holiness* makes him a *model* of Christian

living. By his tangible, visible holiness, he *influences* the faithful to live a *life of virtue*.

Holiness. A Positive Influence on the Faithful

Exemplary life of a priest supports his *spiritual leadership*. This also gives a priest a *moral authority* that helps the *faithful* in their pursuit of *Christian living*.

A *good priest* is a *valuable asset* in his parish community. His *good behaviour* reminds people that it is not hopeless to keep on trying to be *good, honest and kind*.

The role of a priest as a spiritual leader is “to incite in others a response to the love of Christ” and to incite in us the love of the stranger (168 D. Power. The Minister of Christ”). St. Paul, in speaking about his *moral authority*, says that it is given to him “for *building up* the community and not for pulling it down”. He says someone once said “that he writes strongly worded letters but when he is with you, you see only a man and no preacher at all” (2 Cor. 10.8). The message is that the priest ought to embrace his full *moral stature*. He should carry his full *moral weight* that will produce a *positive* influence on the faithful. A priest should be a *worthy, humble and valuable model* in the community. The *holiness*, the *sanctification* of a priest, should set him apart as one dedicated to imitating Christ his master and as one who lives according to the Gospel. “(Imitamini quod tractatis”).

“Imitate what you celebrate”. Although unworthy, the priest touches and handles the Eucharist, the Body and Blood of Christ Himself. This is reason enough to strive to be holy; to be morally clean in performing such a sacred task. The task itself calls for self-abasement, for a sincere humbling of self in the face of such a tremendous mystery of faith.

Anointing of Hands

The hands of the priest are *anointed* with oil so that they may be *sanctified*, made *holy* and made clean in order for the priest to *consecrate* the hosts to be “offered for the sins and negligences of the people, his flock” (p. 90 D. Power). Secondly, through the anointing of his hands, the priest is given the *grace of healing*. The prayer says:

**“Whatsoever they shall bless may it be blessed
Whatsoever they shall sanctify may they be sanctified”.**

(To the sangoma-priest, ordination gives you the authority to heal and make holy, why then do you seek to invoke authority from another tradition and culture. Have you not understood your own Catholic ordination?).

Consecrated hands add to our moral cleanliness. We must therefore keep our hands clean, scrubbed and holy. We shall avoid doing crime, stealing or touching inappropriately with our hands. Some priests have been severely accused of doing so. A few can easily ruin the reputation of many. A priest's hands are for blessing, for healing and for consecrating bread and wine into the Body and Blood of Christ.

Moral Conduct. An Intrinsic Part of Stewardship

A priest has been ordained to offer sacrifice, to preach the Word of God, to offer the Eucharist and the forgiveness of sins. The authority or power to offer sacrifice goes hand in glove with a priest's moral authority. A priest's moral conduct is always an integral part of his calling to serve, of exercising his pastoral ministry. The performance of liturgical services without any reference to the moral integrity of the priest makes mockery of the priesthood.

Demonstrating good moral behaviour on the part of the priest is a basic intuition of the ministry of the priest. And so, apart from offering Holy Mass, the essential work or office or duty of a priest is to make people holy.

This is the expectation of the church as expressed in the ordination prayers. This is also the expectation of every single parishioner. The moral authority, or moral behaviour of the priest will always be under the spotlight because his *leadership* is exercised through an *exemplary lifestyle*. That pleasant but difficult invitation, is always before us as priests:

**“You must therefore be perfect just as your heavenly Father is perfect”
(Mt. 5.48).**

To the priests and the religious and the people of God: Happy Feast Day.

+Buti Thagale omi
Maundy Thursday
Christ the King Cathedral
6 April 2023