

AT THE CROSSROADS

Dilemma of the Man of God

At the Crossroads - Dilemma of the Man of God is my life story describing the various stages of my journey to the priesthood. As an inventory of my life, it takes a close look at important events in my life in the past 25 years. To end up a priest is not an easy decision. To live up to expectations is even a more difficult task. The challenges are overwhelming. The glorious days of lavished favors from friends and superiors seem to be over. The faith is greatly shaken and only hope lingers. At the crossroads - which way forward?

PREFACE

I sounded funny and looked like a fool among some of my past students and seminarians, most of whom are now parish priests when I ridiculed the idea of celebrating the silver jubilee of my priestly ordination. "What is this crazy celebration of 25 years as a priest? What is the purpose? What is it I have achieved during my 25 years as a Catholic priest? What am I to celebrate?" And many other questions I put to the young priests, who like Jesus' disciples, wanted to know from their master where and when they would begin laying the table for the great meal. These young fellows who came to discuss the celebration of the silver jubilee, two years in advance were disappointed by my reactions. They actually thought I was out of my senses.

In Nigeria particularly it is "proper" and "usual" to celebrate at various occasions - big and small. It doesn't need to be necessarily a "Silver" "Golden" or "Diamond" Jubilee. As my young friends made me to understand, I was not reasoning properly and must be out of tune with the times. Everyone does it and why should I be an exception? Don't most Nigerian priests celebrate "First, Second, Third, Fourth, Fifth Year of ordination ... ad infinitum? Don't people, including traditional rulers, chiefs, knights of the Church, catechists, and even altar servers celebrate the anniversaries of their enthronement, initiation or date of their reception into the special category of special people or members of a group?

Each anniversary of the enthronement of an Eze or Bishop is a familiar festival in Nigeria. These feasts or anniversaries are of course celebrated with pomp and pageantry. It looked foolish therefore for any "right-thinking fellow" to try to depart from this "unique tradition." They pointed out that such celebrations have little or nothing to do with great achievements or one's past records. I was in fact telling them that I had no reason to celebrate since I could not lay hands on any great achievement I had accomplished in the past 25 years. But when I suggested that I could celebrate my 25 years as a priest in a low-keyed environment, it was hard not to believe that my idea attracted a lot of laughter from the boys. So whether their master wanted it or not they could go on with whatever arrangements they thought necessary for the great celebration!

It is a futile attempt to try to look different in Nigeria and particularly unobtrusive, modest, and small. Very few people may take interest in your unassuming posture. Since it has become almost a "rule" and an important celebration, wouldn't it be ridiculous and foolhardy to close one's ears to reason and disappoint your friends and family who in most part carry the entire burden involved in this celebration? Ndi Igbo would warn you: "There na eme nwanne onye ara!" It is the members of one's family and closest friends who pick up the shame of the nakedness of their deranged relative. If you can't beat them, join them! It mightn't pay to try to look different.

So I joined the mob, but had other ideas. I thought this "documentation" of my experiences of the priesthood might serve a purpose. I see the event as a period of ecclesiastical stock taking, taking the inventory of our lives. There could be no other better way of celebrating the silver jubilee. At the Crossroads - Dilemma of the Man of God is part of this celebration.

It is divided into three parts. The first part outlines the purpose of a celebration such as the silver jubilee. The second part examines my childhood reminiscences and some important events and issues that have influenced my life. The third part tells the story of my missionary enterprise outside my fatherland, namely the United States.

My gratitude goes to Father Finnian Nwaozor and Debbie Burke whose immense contribution to this work can never be estimated. Ken Bartlett and Jean Beil took care of the Cover Design and the pictures. May God bless them.

Nathaniel Ikechukwu Ndiokwere

This work is dedicated to all my students - priests and laypersons - minor and senior seminarians - teachers, and superiors, whose friendship and care helped to enrich my life and ministry.

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