

FATHERHOOD IN PRIESTHOOD: BIBLICAL, ECCLESIASTICAL AND AFRICAN CULTURAL EVIDENCES

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Abstract

This write-up explores the role of priests as fathers and the unique effect they have on the people in the way male parent does. It gives biblical, ecclesiastical and African cultural excursus to this reality. These bring out the characteristics and qualities associated with priests as fathers, including their ability to provide spiritual guidance, serve as moral compasses, and act as positive role models. The emotional support and community involvement that priests can offer to the people as fathers are not neglected. Equally, it considers how priests as fathers can balance their roles and responsibilities, demonstrating the importance of prioritization and finding balance in life and in their vocations. Overall, this article sheds light on the significant impact that priests as fathers can have on nurturing the spiritual and moral development of the people. This way, strong sense of Christian faith, values, and service within the family, community and Church units are fostered.

Keywords: Fatherhood, Priesthood, Evidences, Biblical, Ecclesiastical, African culture

1. Introduction

The human person's anthropological construct is the fact of his religiosity. This is very evident in his/her dependence to a divine reality to whom he/she runs to for aid and consolation. Given the need for communication with this supernatural being, someone is charged with the task of seeking out the being and acting as a mediator between human beings and the supernatural being, hence the institution of the

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OCHA & JIAKPONNA: *Fatherhood in Priesthood: Biblical, Ecclesiastical and African Cultural Evidences*

priesthood, which is one of the oldest institutions of mankind. However, the question of the roles of a priest seems to have evoked divergent opinions historically. Prior to the Vatican II Council, the pyramidal structure of the Church placed the priest above and apparently far apart from the people of God, and so the roles of the priest revolved around his cultic functions – to perform religious rites and officiate in religious assemblies, which cannot be done by the people. However, as part of the consequence of the Vatican II, there became a shift towards understanding the priest, not just from the point of view of his cultic role, but also as someone who should be closer to the people to know their needs and take care of them. This also informs the idea of a priest as a father to the children of God.

This study tries to strike a satisfactory nexus between the personality of the priest and his role as a father, apart from being a man imbued with the requisite power, authority, privilege and skills to represent humans in things pertaining to God. While exploring the idea of priesthood in fatherhood, with biblical, ecclesiastical and African cultural evidence.

2. Who is a Priest and a Father?

Generally speaking, a priest is someone who has the task of communication with the sacred through sacred rites, as well as the maintenance of the sacred order. A priest is an authorized mediator who offers sacrifice to God on behalf of others.³ He is a religious clergyman who is trained to perform services or sacrifices at a church or temple. On the other hand, and in ordinary parlance, a father is a male parent in the family. However, the term is also used to respectfully address an elderly man, as well as to refer to a person who plays the role of a father in some way. The roles of a father in the family generally include providing the basic necessities of life for the family, to protect the family, to discipline the children, to teach the children, to advice and counsel, *et cetera*. However, celibacy is recommended for priests, particularly Catholic priests, as back as the council of Carthage (380)

³ Hahn, S. ed., 'Priest, Priesthood', in *Catholic Bible Dictionary*, New York, London, Toronto, Sydney, Auckland: Doubleday 2009, 725.

and reiterated in the Second Vatican Council, in which case priests do not marry nor beget any biological children.

3. The Notion of Fatherhood in Priesthood

Before 12th century, Latin refers to a priest or one authorized to perform the sacred rites of a religion especially as a mediatory agent between humans and God as *presbyter* (elder)⁴ which has a relationship with the Greek - *presbyteros*; a term used especially for elders of Jewish or Christian communities in late antiquity. A priest is therefore considered an elder. Closer to this notion is the notion of a priest as a father. A priest is meant to be a father to the people. In order to properly understand the notion of fatherhood in priesthood, we shall view it from three perspectives or traditions: the biblical or Scriptural tradition, the ecclesiastical tradition (the Church), and the African cultural system.

3.1. Fatherhood in Priesthood in the Biblical Tradition

The biblical history of the priests - *kohen*, *Presbyteros*, *Sacerdos* playing the roles of fathers can be traced to the Pentateuch, even before the official establishment of the Aaronic Priesthood in Exodus 28, with their duties fully outlined in the book of Leviticus. However, Scott Hahn alludes to the fact that the foundation for the religion of the patriarchs was the natural family order, which implied that authority passed from Father to son.⁵ In his description, the origins of the priestly office can be traced to the unique spiritual authority, representative function and religious service of the father in the family.⁶ At the same time, the office of kingship was the embodiment of the father's secular duties, most notably his role in leadership and governing. With this allusion, Hahn categorically asserts that the priesthood is inseparable from fatherhood.⁷ The first mention of a priest in the bible is in Gen. 14:18-20, where reference is made to Melchizedek, described as 'king of Salem' and 'the priest of the Highest God.' His role there was that

⁴Merriam-Webster, I., *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. (Eleventh ed.). Springfield, MA: Merriam-Webster, Inc., 2003.

⁵ Cf. Hahn, ed., 'Priest, Priesthood', 725.

⁶ Cf. Hahn, ed., 'Priest, Priesthood', 725.

⁷ Cf. 'Priest, Priesthood.' *Catholic Bible Dictionary*. Ed. Scott Hahn. 725.

OCHA & JIAKPONNA: *Fatherhood in Priesthood: Biblical, Ecclesiastical and African Cultural Evidences*

of feeding Abram and his companions with bread and wine, and then blessing Abram, who responded by giving him a tenth of everything he had acquired. In Gen. 41:45, 41:50 and 46:20, mention was also made of a certain Portiphera, a priest of On (an Egyptian priest) who was father to Asenath, Joseph's wife (This showed that in the ancient times, priests got married and bore children). Jethro, the father-in-law of Moses, was also referred to as the priest of Midian (Exod. 2:16; 3:1; 18:1).⁸

However, in ancient Israel, the priesthood was associated with the Tribe of Levi, and it is in Exodus 28 as well as Numbers 18:1-7 that we see what may be referred to as an official institution of the Aaronic Priesthood with Aaron and his four sons: Nadab, Abihu, Eleazar and Ithamar (Exod. 28:1). Subsequent priests in the ancient Israelite history were known to have come from the same tribe with Aaron – the Tribe of Levi (hence the name Levites). These priests had certain specific roles.

The Roles of the Priest in the Bible

To offer sacrifices: This was the major role of the priests among the ancient Israelites. The priests officiated at the offering of sacrifices to God. These offerings included burnt offering or holocaust (meal or gift offering, dough offering [Num. 15:17-21]), sin offering (Lev. 4:1-35), guilt offering (Lev. 5-7), release of the scapegoat (Lev. 16:7-22), peace offering (Lev. 3), heave offering (Num. 15:18-19), drink offering (Num. 28:7-8, 10), incense offering (Exod. 30:34-38; Lev. 16:12-13), thank offering (Lev. 7:12), *et cetera*.⁹ It was through these sacrifices that the priests carried out their roles of thanking God on behalf of the people, asking him for forgiveness for the people's sins, interceding on behalf of the people for their needs, appeasing God whenever he was

⁸[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priesthood_\(ancient_Israel\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priesthood_(ancient_Israel)) (Accessed on 20/09/2023 at 9.55pm.)

⁹[https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priesthood_\(ancient_Israel\)](https://en.m.wikipedia.org/wiki/Priesthood_(ancient_Israel)) (Accessed on 21/09/2023 at 11.14 am.)

angry with the people, seeking for God's favors or his words as regards certain issues, *et cetera*.

To bless the people: The priests had the role of blessing the people in the name of the Lord (Deut. 21:5). When they gave blessings to the people, it was God himself who blessed them (Num. 6:22-27). Their prayers of blessings upon the people were believed to reach the holy dwelling place of God in heaven (2 Chr. 30:27), and to call down the Lord's showers of blessings upon the people.

Redemption of the firstborn sons: Among the Israelites, the firstborn sons were given certain unique rights, responsibilities and privileges. After the Israelites settled in Canaan, the Lord ordered that all their firstborn sons were to be redeemed as a sign that they belonged to God (Num. 18:14-16). It was the priests that performed the rites of redemption.¹⁰

Biblical Evidences of the Priest as a Father

In considering the identity of the priest, it is important therefore to highlight the different pointers biblically outlined wherein the priest is seen as not only to perform the priestly role, but more attentively where there are indications of the fatherhood in priesthood.

The priest as a father: There are some implicit instance of the priest playing the role of a father. However, very explicit is the case where Micah from the region of Ephraim when after restoring his shrine and making idols of ephod and teraphim, he made a request a young man from Bethlehem of Judah, from the clan of Judah and a Levite residing there in these words: "Stay with me. Be father and priest to me, and I will give you ten silver pieces a year, a set of garments, and your living (Jgs 17:11).

¹⁰ <https://bibleresources.info/what-was-the-role-of-a-priest-in-the-bible/> (Accessed on 21/09/2023 at 1.44 pm.)

The priest as the head in religious gatherings: Whenever the Israelite community gathered for religious purposes such as offering of sacrifices, the gatherings are usually presided over by priests. Just like the father is the first to take the share of any meal in the family, so did the priests take their own share of the offerings brought before the Lord, after some portion had been offered to God (cf. Lev. 2:3). This presidential status is not only a patrimony signifying the cultic act of the priest, but also it signifies the paternal relationship the priest has with his congregation.

The priest as a leader: As the king was the political leader of the people, the priests were the religious leaders. The kings sought their counsel and blessing before going for wars and before embarking on projects. In most cases, we saw the priests accompanying the Israelites to wars, the match round the walls of Jericho readily calls to mind. As a father was the leader in the family, so also was the priest a leader among the people of Israel, thereby performing the leadership roles of a father.

The priest as a judge: The Bible gives records of some persons who functioned both as priests and as judge, such as Samuel. By acting as a judge, the priest also performs the role of a father who is like the chief judge in the family, handling cases and giving punishment to whomever, it is due.

The priest as a mediator: A father has the role of mediating for his children. The priest, by mediating for the people of Israel before God, was also performing the role of the father who only seeks the good of his children and prevents harm from coming their way.

The priest as a source of blessing: Part of the intercessory or the mediatory role of the priest is that of benediction, the spiritual benediction of which the priest serves as a channel is proportional to the paternal benediction one receives from his biological father. Just as a father has the role of blessing his children (as Jacob did; Cf: Gen. 49), so also was the priest a source of blessing to the people of God. By

blessing the people of God, the priest not only performed the role of a priest but also that of a father.

3.2 Ecclesiastical Allusions of the Priest as a Father

At the very beginning of the Church, Christians recognized that the spiritual paternity stems from ordination. Priests are very involved in concerns related to parish income and providing for the family of faith. Some models will further buttress more on the association of the priesthood and fatherhood.

Ecclesiastical Models of the Priesthood

Cultic model: This model presents the priest only as someone who performs certain functions such as worship, liturgy and the sacraments. His role revolves around leading people in worship and in liturgical celebrations, as well as administering the sacraments. This model characterized the Tridentine era, and lasted until about the mid-twentieth century.

Servant-leader model: This model presents the priest as one who is grounded in the service of the people of God. It projects the priesthood as not being limited to ritualistic or cultic functions, but as a ministry of service founded on pastoral charity, which is the foundation and purpose of servant leadership in the Church. This model developed with the Second Vatican Council.

The *Trimunera*: Triple Functions or Roles of the Priest in the Church

The roles of the priest in the Church are generally grouped into three: to teach, to sanctify and to govern (corresponding respectively to Christ's threefold role as prophet, priest and king).¹¹

¹¹ <https://vocationsboston.org/the-priesthood/what-does-a-priest-do/> (Accessed on 2/10/2023 at 11.21 am.)

OCHA & JIAKPONNA: *Fatherhood in Priesthood: Biblical, Ecclesiastical and African Cultural Evidences*

To teach: The priest has the role of teaching the people of God the truths of faith. The Code of Canon Law states, “It belongs to priests, as cooperators with the bishops, to proclaim the Gospel of God. For the people entrusted to their care, this task rests especially on parish priests, and on other priests entrusted with the care of souls.”¹² Thus, it is from the priests that the people seek the word of God through which they are united.¹³ This task of teaching is one of the principal duties of the priest.

To sanctify: The sanctifying office of the Church is carried out specially in the sacred liturgy, which is an exercise of the priestly office of Jesus Christ.¹⁴ In addition to the bishops who principally exercise the office, priests also exercise this office for they share in the priesthood of Christ and are so consecrated to celebrate divine worship and to sanctify the people, by virtue of being Christ’s ministers under the authority of the Bishop.¹⁵ In the exercise of this ministry, priests lead the people in the liturgy, in which the people receive sanctification. In other words, the priests officiate in public and divine worship, and the people follow through active participation. These liturgical celebrations or public forms of worship could be in the form of prayer, administration of the sacraments, the Eucharistic celebration, benediction, *et cetera*.

To govern: The priest does not just perform the role of a teacher and a sanctifier; he also performs the function of a leader to the people of God. He administers and takes proper care of the temporal goods of the Church where he is appointed to do so.¹⁶ By being in charge of the Church’s goods, the priest is not just a leader but also a father. This can be demonstrated with certain ecclesiastical images.

Ecclesiastical Evidence of the Priest as a Father

The titular reference to a priest as ‘Father’: In the Church, a priest is addressed as ‘Father’. This is not just a mere honorary title, but a clear

¹² *Code of Canon Law*, can. 757.

¹³ Can. 762.

¹⁴ Can. 834§1

¹⁵ Can. 835§2.

¹⁶ Can. 1282.

expression of what a priest should be: a father to the people. The mere fact of being addressed as a father should make a priest know that, aside performing the ritual acts and liturgical ceremonies, he should always be disposed to be a father to the people. He should be very close to the people to know how they are faring and to attend to their needs – physical as well as spiritual, emotional as well as social. His title as ‘father’ endears him to the people, and he acts as a father to them.

The fatherhood of Christ: A priest, as a representative of Christ on earth, is meant to be all that Christ is to the people of God. The same applies to the idea of fatherhood, for just as Christ is father to the people, the priest is also their father since he represents Christ. The argument can be presented deductively as follows:

- The people are children of Christ (in other words, Christ is their father).
- The priest is *alter Christus* (another Christ – for he represents Christ on earth).
- Therefore, the people are also children of the priest (in other words, the priest is their father)

A teacher as a father: In the family setting, a father has the role of teaching his children the right things to do and the wrong things to avoid. He has the role of guiding and directing his children by teaching them. In the same way, the teaching office of the priesthood projects the priest as a father to the people of God. He teaches the people how to do good and avoid evil. He teaches them how to go close to God. He teaches them the doctrines of the Church which are necessary for their salvation. This teaching can be done through homilies (in the form of preaching), catechetical instructions, through social communication media, exposition of doctrine in schools, *et cetera*.¹⁷ The priest has the proper and serious task of seeing to the catechesis of the people, through which the faith of the people may be living, manifest and active.¹⁸ By

¹⁷ Can. 761.

¹⁸ Can. 773.

so doing, he performs the role of a father who will never allow his children to go astray.

The analogy of the head and the body: In Christian ecclesiology, the Church is presented as the body of Christ. Christ is the head and the people are the members (Eph. 1:22-23). In other words, the Church is like a family where Christ is the head. With the priest as another Christ, as already presented above, he (the priest) acts in the place of Christ, and so he also stands at the head of this family (particularly in the region where he is in charge). By standing as the head, and since the head of a family is the father, the priest becomes a father to the people.

The priest as a father in the celebration of the sacraments: The priest also performs the role of a father in the celebration of the sacraments. Just like a father introduces the child into the world and incorporates him as a member of the family, so does a priest incorporate the people into the body of Christ through the Sacrament of Baptism. Just as a father guides, directs and strengthens the child as he grows, so does a priest strengthen the faith of the people through the Sacrament of Confirmation (where the priest is permitted in accordance with Can. 882 and Can. 883 nos. 2 & 3). Just as a father provides for the feeding and nourishment of the child, so does a priest nourish the people of God through the Sacrament of the Holy Eucharist. Just as a father corrects a child when he or she errs and yet bring him closer to himself, so does a priest correct an erring child of God through the Sacrament of Penance, while also drawing such child closer to God. Just like a father physically takes care of his sick child by taking him for treatment, so does a priest take care of the sick people of God both physically and spiritually through the Sacrament of Anointing of the Sick. Just like a father renders service to his children and directs them towards their choice of a vocation for their own good, so does a priest serve the people and direct them towards the vocation to holiness through the Sacraments of Vocation (also known as the Sacraments at the Service of Communion), namely Holy Orders and Matrimony. Thus, the priest, in the celebration of the seven sacraments of the Church, exercises his role as a father to the people of God.

Having explored the biblical and ecclesiastical dimensions of fatherhood in priesthood, we shall now examine the African cultural dimension.

3.3 Highlighting the Fatherhood in Priesthood from the African Cultural perspective

Priesthood in the African Traditional Religion

The priest in African Traditional Religion is a religious personality attached to a particular god or spirit whom he serves. He has the religious mandate to mediate for people and to reveal relevant information to the community. The priest has derived powers, and is known to have acquired the knowledge and skills necessary for discharging his duties. Priests foster security and wellbeing of the society by ensuring the social stability and harmony. Usually, the office of the chief priest is hereditary (just like the biblical tradition), unless the gods decide to choose someone else to become the chief priest. Also, an elder member of a lineage or clan may be the priest of the clan's ancestral cult.¹⁹ The priest in the African traditional religion has certain roles which distinguish him from the people.

The Roles of a Priest in the African Traditional Religions (ATR)

Custodian of the shrine/temple: The priest is in charge of the shrine or temple of the god or gods whom he serves. This is necessary because apart from the fact that the shrine is his major abode of function, he is the major person that understands the rules guiding the shrine and the usages since it is believed that he sees and communicates with the deities.

¹⁹<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/african-traditional-religions-functionaries> (Accessed on 4/10/2023 at 2:21 pm.)

OCHA & JIAKPONNA: *Fatherhood in Priesthood: Biblical, Ecclesiastical and African Cultural Evidences*

Offering of sacrifices: The priest in ATR offers sacrifices to the gods on behalf of the community, both in various festive occasions and whenever the need arises.²⁰

Purification rites: The priest carries out purification rites to cleanse the community, the land and placate the gods when an abomination is committed, when the society seems to be going through difficult moments, or when a spell seems to have been cast on the community.

Divination:²¹ The priest in ATR uncovers the unknown through divination. When a situation arises and the opinion of the gods is sought, it is the priest that consults the gods. When something or someone goes missing and the whereabouts or the culprits are unknown, it is the priest that is consulted for divination. In other words, it is the priest that seeks the mind of the gods in every given situation where humans are either limited or incapacitated. Thus, the priest has an edge over the people, and this substantiates his position as a father to the people, as can be demonstrated in various ways.

African Cultural Evidence of the Priest as a Father

Titular reference: In some places, the priest (especially the priest of the clan) is usually addressed with the title of ‘father’. For instance, in Igboland, he is addressed as ‘*Nna anyi*’ (that is, ‘our father’). Just like the ecclesiastical tradition, this is a symbol of the role of the priest as a father to the people.

Priests as intermediaries: In the ATR, priests are regarded as intermediaries between other humans and the deities.²² In line with this role, they intercede on behalf of the people and they prevent harm from

²⁰<https://support.centreforelites.com/en/priest-and-priesthood-in-african-society/> (Accessed on 4/10/2023 at 3:14 am.)

²¹<https://support.centreforelites.com/en/priest-and-priesthood-in-african-society/> (Accessed on 4/10/2023 at 11:50 am.)

²²<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/african-traditional-religions-functionaries> (Accessed on 10/10/2023 at 11:19 pm.)

coming to the community. If harm does come, he finds a means to appease the gods and end the disaster. Thus, as an intermediary, the priest is the protector of the people, thereby performing the role of a father who protects his children from harm and danger.

Priests as leaders: The priests in ATR are active functionaries in the theocratic governance of the community. The African traditional community is believed to be governed fundamentally by the Supreme Being and then a pantheon of lesser deities whose activities are closely associated and interwoven with the people's everyday life. However, the traditional ruler and the council of elders are physical representatives of the governing body, but they can only communicate with the gods through the chief priest. Thus, the chief priest himself is part of the ruling or governing body because whatever information he relays to the council of elders is what they will take, since the voice of the priest is the voice of the gods – he is the mouthpiece of the gods. In some communities (such as in Yoruba land), the political leader is also the religious leader. By serving as a leader, the priest acts as a father too, since it is the duty of the father, as the head of the family, to lead, guide and direct the family.

Priests as the watchdogs of morality:²³ In addition to mediating between human beings and gods, priests also watch over the behaviors of the adherents of the god whom he serves. They tell the people the right things to do and the bad things to avoid. They pronounce punishment on wrongdoers for the correction of error and as deterrent to others. In the family setting, the father has the role of correcting his children's wrongdoings, telling them the right things to do and the wrong things to avoid, as well as punishing them whenever they err. By doing the same for the community, the priest in the African religion performs the role of a father.

²³<https://support.centreforelites.com/en/priest-and-priesthood-in-african-society/>
(Accessed on 10/10/2023 at 11:33 pm.)

OCHA & JIAKPONNA: *Fatherhood in Priesthood: Biblical, Ecclesiastical and African Cultural Evidences*

Priests as problem-solvers: The priests also provide solutions to problems in the daily life of the people. They function as healers and employ magical techniques to find out the causes of certain misfortunes, illnesses or death.²⁴ This is also the role of a father in the family setting, for he seeks solutions to the problems of his family.

Priests as teachers and advisors: Priests in African Traditional Religion request for directives from the gods as regards particular situations or tasks. From what they have gathered from the gods, and from their personal stream of experience, they offer advice to the people and teach them the way of justice and the mind of the gods.²⁵ By so doing, the priest acts as a father, for the father has the ultimate role of giving advice to his children.

4. Conclusion

St. Josemaría Escrivá (a Catholic priest) was fond of describing himself as “the father of a large and poor family”. Pius XII in his 1950 Apostolic Exhortation to the Clergy of the Entire World on the Development of Holiness in Priestly Life expressed this tradition well, saying, “By his law of celibacy, the priest, so far from losing the gift and duties of fatherhood, rather increases them immeasurably, for, although he does not beget progeny for this passing life of earth, he begets children for that life which is heavenly and eternal.” The fatherhood associated with priests is one of nobility, benediction, defense, protection of his spiritual sons and daughters *et cetera*. In most religions and cultures, the very person who is saddled with the sublime task of performing the sacred rites on behalf of the family is usually the *paterfamilias* – the head of the family, the father. This also extends to the community, tribe or nation. Little wonder, many cultures and religions regard the priest as a leader and a father, because of his representative and mediatory role in carrying out the sacred rites on their behalf.

²⁴<https://www.encyclopedia.com/history/news-wires-white-papers-and-books/african-traditional-religions-functionaries> (Accessed on 12/10/2023 at 10:21 pm.)

²⁵<https://support.centreforelites.com/en/priest-and-priesthood-in-african-society/> (Accessed on 12/10/2023 at 10:32 pm.)

With the aid of the scriptures, ecclesiastical structures and African cultural context, this paper has tried to clearly show the presence of fatherhood in the priesthood with particular attention to the catholic priesthood. Thus, from the evidence and demonstrations offered here, fatherhood in priesthood is present and relevant. A priest performs the roles of a father – he is expected to lead the people in the right path; he is one in whom they can find recourse, to receive solution or advice in times of trouble, to receive consolation in times of distress, to receive encouragement in discouraging moments. Equally, in times of joy, his roles of leading in the thanksgiving and merriment as a father cannot be neglected. Having delved into all these areas to showcase and prove the reality of priests as fathers, it evidences the priests as worthy spiritual and temporal guides, good moral compasses, role models, strong and authentic supports. People are not supposed to entertain fears in utilizing the opportunity of relating to them as fathers and the docility to be guided as sons and daughters of God. In like manner, priests seeing themselves as fathers sounds the caveat to them to live up to expectations and never scandalize their children who look up to them as fathers. This way, priests could adequately discharge their duties as fathers and the people will rightly be mentored. As children of God.