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James Chapuli: Ordained into chastity

Fr. James Munoz Chapuli came to Nigeria in 1969 to help begin the apostolic work of Opus Dei in the African country. God called him to Himself in the morning of September 25, 2007 in Lagos.

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Nwagwu reflects on his friendship with this holy priest.

The greatest impact anyone can have on another is on their soul. There are those who look into you, peer into your soul, see something they like, and want to take you, hand in hand, into heavenly places, there to be wrapped in the mystery of God's love. My faith teaches me that when I die, I shall be asked by my God to give an account of my stewardship; that is, to give an account of what I have been able to do with the gifts I have abundantly but undeservedly received from my Creator.

This thought frightens me for I have a lot of accounting to give. Reverend Father James Chapuli, who departed this mortal life in the morning of Tuesday, September 25, 2007, has already given an account of his stewardship before his Maker. And I believe he mercifully scored him

highly and has called him into his presence. I most strongly believe that on his thoroughly researched resume, which he submitted in explanation of his activities, there is a chapter, "contributions to matrimonial sanctity".

In this chapter, you will find me, not because my marriage is any more sacred than any other's but because Fr. James relentlessly got me to write on matters related to human sexuality and chastity. He has made it through and is now in paradise. My own judgment awaits me when that final day of reckoning comes. I pray Fr. James will be there to plead on my behalf.

In 1958, young James became a faithful of Opus Dei and responding to the promptings of God, was ordained a priest in 1966. Heeding the invitation of St. Josemaria Escriva, the Founder of Opus Dei, he

came to Nigeria in 1969, where he was to spend the rest of his life becoming a Nigerian citizen in the process. He completely gave his life to souls helping them to seek sanctity in the ordinary everyday circumstances of their lives. Some time in late 2000, a dear friend of mine asked me to write a booklet on human sexuality and sex education based on the teachings of the Roman Catholic Church. I wonder why he picked me! By then I had been married to my dear wife, Helen, for thirty-eight years, I had written a number of articles in The Guardian, and my marriage was reasonably okay.

But my strengths on the subject of human sexuality were more biological than theological, having received my Ph.D. on how embryos develop. Of course, being a Catholic, I knew adultery was a mortal sin, that the marriage bond was indissoluble

and that a second marriage while one's partner was still alive, unless the marriage had been annulled, was immoral. Living with another man or another woman under such a condition was living in mortal sin. I knew all this, like any other practising Roman Catholic person in union with the teachings of the Church. Well, I could not say no to my dear friend and so I started writing. It was all dry and soulless, lacking a tasteful moral flavour.

In September 2001, exactly two weeks after 9-11, my wife and I traveled to the United States. For the first time in my life, I was able to look on her in totally different light and came to understand much more clearly what was meant by the term, "chastity in marriage". There is the tendency for us to assign chastity only to single men and women who are called upon to keep their sexual appetites in check until marriage and

that once one is married, then all sexual control can break lose and one can then indulge one's passions fully without the dark figure of immorality lurking in the corner.

Nothing could be further from the truth. To be married does not mean one now has unbridled licence for sexual gratification on demand. All this came from my closely watching my wife and seeing her with new eyes. I finished writing the book and Fr. James went through it with a fine tooth-comb. This was to be the beginning of our life together on issues of human sexuality. From then on, he would not let me rest, always pointing one article or the other and asking me to make a quick response. And always, I accommodated his wish and in the process learnt more and more about the morals of a healthy sexual life in marriage.

The sexual act is an expression of self, not selfishly but in total giving of all that one is to the other (and it is never "to others"). You lose yourself in this dance of two souls in which the act itself merely provides the music, with huge African drums beating. The act is like unto a Sacrament, a visible manifestation of inward merging of two minds seeking each other. As such, it can never ever be fully realised: we seek more, and more, and it becomes an act of self renewal. This is what makes marriage a Sacrament, a true in-dwelling of the Holy Spirit in our body-and-soul. Two bodies cannot become one physically. Two souls cannot become one spiritually. Only in marriage can they become one, through sanctifying grace poured into our souls that enables married couples to come to possess the divine presence of Our Lord in their heavenly bodies. Marriage now

becomes an allegory for the heavenly dwelling place.

You could then look at your spouse and see God living in her eyes. Both of you now live in a transcendence ordained by God for his own glory, in the image of the human person, in marriage. Spouses look at each other and tremble in the presence of something greater caused by God with their active participation in his will. When love whispers, as Ekwensi has it, spouses hear the voice of God.

I was led to all this knowledge by Fr. James. You should watch him at Mass when he raises the host in Consecration. You look at his eyes and you know he is actually looking into Our Lord raised high. He gazes at an image of the Blessed Virgin and you see a man madly in love with the Love of his life. For those who did not see him at Mass, and therefore have no chance of seeing what I, and

many others, have seen, I most urgently implore you to get a CD of the movie, Meet Joe Black, a satire on death, starring Brad Pitt as Joe Black, as Death himself, Anthony Hopkins as William Parrish, whom Death has come to take away, and sultry star, Claire Forlani, who does not know the true identity of Death, as Susan Parrish, Bill's daughter totally taken with Joe, with whom she had fallen irredeemably in love against her father's wish.

The father, of course knows Joe's true identity but cannot disclose this to her. Anyway, there is this scene where Joe is shown with Susan, and Susan is looking at him. In all my years of watching the movies, I have never seen a woman look into the eyes of her loved one so intently, so lovingly, with her eyes, as it were, searing him, as if she wanted to melt into him. This would give you some idea, regrettably a feeble one, of how

Fr. James looks at an image of the most Blessed Virgin Mary.

Amongst the Igbo, we say to someone we love, a huru mu gi na anya, meaning literally, I see you in my eyes, but which I translate to: you live in my eyes; my eyes see only you; you live in my eyes; I see everything else and everyone else with my eyes, but when it comes to you, you are my eyes because that is where you are.

Fr. James passionately loved Our Mother: she lived in his eyes. Of course, how could we ever forget Our Lord meeting his loving Mother at the Fourth station of The Stations of the Cross "and their eyes meet, and one heart pours into the other all the sorrow and pain that lies in there." You cannot beat that.

In 2003, I promised my granddaughter, Akunne Daniels, that I would write her a novel in loving appreciation of her penchant for

reading novels, at least one every two days. I finished it in 2005, a 376-page manuscript. On June 24, 2006, I sent it to Fr. James for his comments and five weeks later, on July 31, he wrote extensively, guiding my hands with a firm hold of life in Opus Dei, a little bit of the Catholic Church. I made the corrections and returned the manuscript to him on December 16, 2006. On February 9, 2007, he wrote to say he was then satisfied on all counts. My novel, *Forever Chimes*, was presented to the public on the occasion of my seventieth birthday celebration, on August 18, 2007.

Two weeks later on August 31, 2007, Fr. James sent me a review he had written on the novel requesting that I correct any errors since, he said, English was a second language, one he had learned here in Nigeria. On September 15, 2007, I belatedly replied that the only error was that he had referred to me as a professor

of Chemistry, not of Zoology, and that I was not an emeritus professor following my retirement. At the Requiem Mass for the repose of his soul on September 27, 2007, I had in my inside coat pocket, this review and the e-mail he had sent me on this review. There, in my hands, were the words of a Saint, certainly one of his last works on earth. A man ordained into chastity in holy priesthood has left us. I miss him immensely. We need to make huge leaps in chastity in this dance of life. I pray Fr. James continues to guide us on this.

Mark Nwagwu, The Guardian
(Nigeria)

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