

**THE FAMILY IN THE MESSAGES OF THE CONFERENCE OF THE MAJOR
SUPERIORS OF NIGERIA (CMSN)
TO CONSECRATED PERSONS AND THE SOCIETY**

Oseni J. Osilama Ogunu, OMV

Abstract

Since 1998 the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria (CMSN), men and women, regularly issued Communiqués after its annual General Assembly on a selected theme. These Communiqués frequently refer, here and there, to the subject of family. This article briefly exposes the idea of family, exploring some identified issues relating to it as indicated in the Communiqués published till date. These issues are in some way of major interest to Consecrated Life and its mission in Nigeria today and solicit the collaboration of everyone in the Church, including religious institutes, and in the society. This reflection, hopefully, will contribute towards an adequate, balanced appreciation - at least from historical, theological and socio-pastoral viewpoints - of the meaning, the importance, scope and the rights of the family in life of the Church and society according to the discourse of the CMSN.

Introduction

The Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria (CMSN)¹ frequently refers to the *family* in her messages, the *Communiqués*, issued annually since 1998. Apparently, the CMSN is yet to formally examine the question of family life in her General Assemblies. The *Communiqués* refer to *family* on several occasions in the context of its treatment of diverse topics (e.g., Formation, Church as Family of God) in the course of several years. The messages are addressed mainly to all consecrated persons, the Church and the society in Nigeria. Altogether, the word "family" is, in general, used in varying senses throughout the *Communiqués*. In this sense, it is only partially, that is, to a limited extent, do the materials available permit us to explore the stand or attitude of the CMSN concerning the family. However, its many references - found here and there - use this word, family, pointing to a clear understanding of the status, the value and centrality of the family in society and Church. It seems appropriate, therefore, that we attempt to identify and reflect, albeit summarily, on the main issues that are related to marriage and family, as manifested in the *Communiqués* of the CMSN issued till the present

moment.² Therefore, this article will dwell on the following topics: vocations and formation, the vow of poverty, commitment to Christian Faith (vis-à-vis inter-religious marriage, or money), the Church-as-Family of God, Reconciliation-Justice- peace, health and human life, and identified obstacles to family life, and to these will be added a consideration on the barriers to the family life, followed by a concluding remark.

1. *Vocations and Formation in religious institutes*

The CMSN speaks about the place and importance of the family in the discernment of candidates for consecrated life. She suggests that “candidates can only be fully known in their family contexts, so the family visitation/contact is important during initial formation. These family contacts can also be used to help educate our families about the true meaning of vocation and discernment.”³ She also acknowledges there are some lights and shadows in matter of formation, in so far as the family is concerned. Parents eagerly release their children to pursue religious vocations. Parents support aspirants to religious life financially and morally. However, she recommends, it is also important to make some efforts to understand the types of the aspirants that desire to join the seminary and institutes’ Houses of Formation, along with the family background of the aspirants, though this demands much time.⁴ Some families of aspirants do not understand the true meaning of religious vocation and mission.⁵ Consequently, we must not undermine them but rather take into account the important place and role of the family (and indeed of the laity) in the process of vocational discernment of candidates not only at the phase of the first admission but also during the years of his/her initial formation.

2. *Vow of poverty and the Family*

The vow of poverty has been identified as “an area of much misunderstanding and even conflict.”⁶ It should not be seen nor can it be lived in abstract, but must be understood and lived in clear and real context, indeed in an inculturated way.⁷ For this reason, the CMSN specifically recommends, the necessity of founding at local level a community of leaders and religious communities to reflect on the vow of poverty together in the context of the Gospel, with particular reference to some current elements - including the demands of the family experiences, namely:

- (a) Actual and practical difficulties that people experience with poverty;
- (b) the demands made by the family and cultural experiences;
- (c) What compels some individuals to go begging for their needs outside their community, and whose responsibility is this.⁸

The understanding and the way of practice of the vow of poverty in the Church has evolved throughout the centuries, while the constant, essential elements of this value remain. In an African milieu like the Nigerian society, a realistic and inculturated understanding of the evangelical counsel of poverty, which takes into account the family and cultural values, will contribute to making the interpretation, the acceptance and the practice of the religious poverty less problematic and hypocritical as well as cause less anxiety. It will accelerate its opportunity for a greater serenity, transparency, faithfulness and service to the people on the one hand and deepen its interiorized acceptance and practice by the consecrated persons on the other. It will lead to a more harmonious and peaceful relation between the local community and the religious community, The more often than not heightened and continual pressure and tension between the consecrated person and his/her family members will be whittled down to lowest ebb. It will definitely advance a clearer understanding of both the nature and limits as well as the boundaries of respective vocations, and thus, encourage a more realistic and honest expectations and a better appreciation of religious vow of poverty vis-a-vis the family's needs.

3. *Christian Marriage, or Money? Know, Deepen and be committed to Your Faith*

The CMSN recognises the need to educate the Christian community on the pastoral implications of Sharia law in Nigeria. Unfortunately, there is a widespread lack of information; as a result, there is palpable ignorance among most Christians concerning the Sharia legal system in the country. Positively, the CMSN not only summons Nigerian Catholics to "become more creative in its attitude towards meeting the various challenges from states, political parties and other religions." As a rallying call, the CMSN also strongly appeals to all Christians "to wake up from our slumber and begin to catch up with the lost time." The Christian community in Nigeria envisages and hopes that more families and the young people - not only among girls and women -

will deepen their faith and demonstrate personal commitment in matters of Christian marriage, employment for job, and in politics.

In this context it is easy to understand the disappointment and lament expressed by many people, including the CMSN, regarding a rather frequent phenomenon observed also in the area of marriage. It was noted that some Moslems in Nigeria take advantage of both the lack of information and a certain indifference among many Christians and the inability of the legal system to offer prompt and efficient justice needed to offer an alternative way to perpetrate their untoward deeds. Hence, it appears frequently that “from a purely financial interest, we see a young Christian woman taking an offer of a marriage from a Muslim man. Similarly, a young Christian job seeker quickly gives up his faith in exchange for promising job (...);” and “Christian families unwittingly support these moves because of financial interest accruing from them.”⁹

However, having enumerated the several negative influences of Sharia legal system on citizenship,¹⁰ the CMSN tried to look at positive side effects of the Sharia situation in Nigeria and admits that:

“Sharia has challenged Christians to work in cooperation with one another, it enables us to re-examine our value system and the needs of the society. Also it makes us to be a little more aware of our responsibilities to one another in the family community and the nation as a whole, as well as challenge good and honest Christians to move into politics in order to sanitize it.”¹¹

Therefore, even in the area of the challenges posed by to the citizenship and to Christians in Nigeria by some aspects of the Sharia legal system, Christian families have a vital role to play. They can and should discourage “moves” that undermine the Christian faith and ethics; Christian families should protect and promote the rights of the child and therefore discourage early or child marriage; they should be more aware that the values and stability of marriage and happiness of family life cannot be based on mere financial gains. The risk of being entangled in a polygamous union cannot be ruled out. Finally, Christian families should actively help and encourage their members - especially children and youth -, through education and information, to know, deepen and be more committed to the Christian Faith and moral values. To achieve this, consecrated persons have a decisive prophetic role to play in the church and in society in the areas of counselling, sourcing and provision of payable jobs and facilitation of courtship among Christians.

4. *Giftedness of the family: The Church as the Family of God*

It is equally necessary and useful to explore more deeply the “giftedness of the family.” The CMSN acknowledges it. Following the footsteps of the first African Synod, she recognises that the family, African family, is one of the basis and model for understanding the Church as the *Family of God*. In fact, the CMSN says, as Africans we hardly define ourselves apart from family. The family occupies a pre-eminent position in how we conceive life and how we envisage and experience our position in the universe. The Church as the family of God does not mimic family; it creates a new kind of family. It draws on our indigenous knowledge, traditional practices, local resources and understanding of family life, but it also challenges, enriches and transforms them.¹² Furthermore,

“Family in the African understanding is the foundation of life in community and society. Against this background, the Church as the family of God can only mean one thing: as ecclesial principle of reconstruction and rescue of the family. Conscious promotion of diversity is the hallmark of the Church-as-Family. Formation in the context of the Church as family is diametrically opposed to the divisive tendencies of tribe and clan. Hence, the idea of the Church as family suggests an inclusiveness which accommodates a diversity of orientations.”¹³

Ultimately, the Trinity is the foundation, the model of the family which is called to life in unity. The Triune God “invites every person to a life of communion within a larger human family. A fuller expression of this is experienced within the model and framework of the Church as ‘the family of God’. Every individual brings into this family his or her own uniqueness, giftedness and inner beauty which we must welcome with openness and gratitude. This fact has its implications for the concept and practice of vocational discernment and formation of candidates:

“We recognise that vocations are special gifts from God to His Family, the Church. To accept these gifts with gratitude from God is to welcome, nurture, accommodate, patiently accompany the candidate on a journey of self-discovery. We need to enhance a greater openness to the Spirit, awareness of the contemporary society, acquisition of basic navigational tools to function and live within the prevalent society with a view to helping it conform to the will of Author of creation. We strongly hold and believe that the task of genuine, Gospel-based formation in the context of the Church as Family

of God cannot be overemphasized. God is the origin of vocation, he makes vocation work. We hold that the Father calls, the Son is the Way, and the Spirit moulds and nourishes vocations.

Another implication and demand is that we must recognise and promote in practice the dignity and the value of women in the society, the Church and in Institutes of consecrated life, and within the families themselves. This is because:

“A family without a woman is like a hut without supporting post. The wider society is not kind to women. Some structures of the Church have been unkind to women. In the Church-as-Family, our Religious Institutes ought to take the side of the Gospel and resist the temptation to further traumatize our already brutalized and subdued women.”¹⁴

And to the families themselves the CMSN turns its appeal for the creation of a favourable environment: “We appeal to families to create conducive environments for proper upbringing in genuine love. This will in turn enable children accept their uniqueness and offer their gifts to the family and society at large.”¹⁵

5. *Promoting Reconciliation, Justice and Peace in the family*

Sometimes relationships are broken, injustice reigns, peace and harmony are shattered. People are hurt, wounded, divided at various levels of their lives (spiritually, psychologically, materially....). This happens in society, in the Church, in the families, and within religious communities of consecrated life too. Therefore, the persons concerned need and seek reconciliation, justice and peace. Everyone has a duty to promote and bring about the attainment of these values. The Church-as-Family is called into a mission of witnessing in reconciliation, justice and peace in all the spheres of social and ecclesial life, especially in the family life. Today, “the Church must continue to deploy all her facilities and forces, with every member of the Family of God playing his or proper role in the service of reconciliation, justice and peace.”¹⁶ In particular, Consecrated persons must be engaged and committed in carrying out this service: “Consecrated women and men, being at the heart of the Church-Family of God, have their special part to play in the service of the Church for reconciliation, justice and peace.”¹⁷ To fulfil this service, one of vital ways recommended is that everyone - clergy, consecrated persons, laity - “should advance and spread the

knowledge of and personal encounter with the Word of God as well as make concrete and specific efforts to implement the directives and orientations of the second African Synod.”¹⁸

6. *Protecting Health and human Life*

God in his love created the human person, set him at the centre of creation and gave him the gift of health, the intelligence to develop the science of medicine and healthcare. Sometimes, human persons are negligent and less attentive to matters concerning their health and the health of other persons. The CMSN identifies some causes of the numerous sicknesses and ill-health that people suffer in Nigeria today. For example, the dirty environment and mismanagement of the eco-system, and the insecurity in the country.¹⁹

Concerning the family, the CMSN encourages the protection of the life and health, good relationships among its members, and she shows compassion for bereaved families. She recommends that “human life and health be treasured and protected in every sphere of life by individuals, groups and government.” Being a part of a holistic health care, it is necessary to ensure mental and emotional health and sanity; this, however, can deteriorate sometimes by broken human relationship and stress. Consequently, almost as a preventive measure, the CMSN also proposes that “we foster good relationships in our families as a way of reducing the situations that induce stress.”²⁰

At the same time, we are aware of the fact that there have been deaths and much agony in many families in Nigeria. Many persons have died or wounded, lost properties and impoverished as a result of continuous terrorist attacks and bombardments and other ethnic conflicts in many parts of Nigeria, caused by Boko Haram and other groups. These leave countless families in untold pains and sufferings. To the bereaved families, the CMSN proffers a word of compassion and sympathy, and for them offers prayers: “We also commiserate with their family members, friends and relatives and ask God to give them the courage and fortitude to bear the loss.”²¹

Therefore, the Consecrated persons, as indicated in the CMSN’s interventions, are aware of the responsibilities and the mutual relation between consecrated life and family life. They endeavour to be present in some way and as much as possible in various aspects of life of the family, and to have a positive impact on the family. Solidarity of the consecrated persons with Nigerian families in good times and in bad

times, in joy and hope, is an evangelical way of witnessing Christ's love. Recognising the vital place, the value and mission of the family in society and church, they appreciate that "the concept of the Family as domestic church should be upheld as this is a fertile ground for the transmission of faith from one generation to the next";²² and it is a foundation for the service of human life.

7. Combating Obstacles against the Family

The obstacles militating against authentic growth and advancement of families are a source of concern to the Consecrated persons in Nigeria:

"We condemn modern trends mitigating against genuine growth in human families such as gay marriages, lack of due commitment and action against HIV-AIDS, marital breakdowns, women and child trafficking, prostitution, etc."

Everyone has a responsibility towards combating these barriers. Particularly, the families and the Formation houses of Religious institutes have roles to play in order to overcome the obstacles against the family. Their contribution in the areas of, for example, education and the formation of consciences is invaluable and can be lasting. To overcome the obstacles to family, the CMSN appeals to all sectors of society: "The family is at the heart of God and also at the heart of society. We call on segments of society to work towards a fuller realization of the human race as the people of God."²³ As regard the Formation of consecrated persons, and the Church in general, it is recommended that:

"Our formation should acknowledge and encourage indigenous models of holiness and commitment to God in the Religious Life. It is the task of formation in the Church-as-Family to empower women and men to begin to construct and tell their own stories - stories of their models, heroines and saints."²⁴

Final Remarks

This brief reflection highlights some major themes around which the CMSN spoke about the family: Vocations and formation, the vow of poverty, Christian Faith (vis-a-vis inter-religious marriage), the Church-as-Family, Reconciliation-Justice- peace, health and human life, and identified obstacles to family life. The range of the

different issues reaffirms the conviction about the centrality of the family in society, and that the health of society depends on the health of the family. The family is closely connected with almost all facets of life. The CMSN demonstrates to be in touch with the real life situation and the pastoral happenings affecting the family in the church and society in Nigeria.

The CMSN's interventions contribute, even if in an unassuming way, toward the protection and defence of rights of marriage and family in Nigeria. The Year of Consecrated Life is a propitious occasion for consecrated persons, at different levels, to embark on deeper, courageous reflections on the challenges and pastoral care of family in Nigeria today, keeping in mind the spirit of their respective Institutes and the needs and pastoral concerns of our local churches.

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14. Combating Obstacles against the Family

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“Our formation should acknowledge and encourage indigenous models of holiness and commitment to God in the Religious Life. It is the task of formation in the Church-as-Family to empower women and men to begin to construct and tell their own stories - stories of their models, heroines and saints.”⁴⁸

Final Remarks

This brief reflection highlights some major themes around which the CMSN spoke about the family: Vocations and formation, the vow of poverty, Christian Faith (vis-a-vis inter-religious marriage), the Church-as-Family, Reconciliation-Justice- peace, health and human life, and identified obstacles to family life. The range of the different issues reaffirms the conviction about the centrality of the family in society, and that the health of society depends on the health of the family. The family is closely connected with almost all facets of life. The CMSN demonstrates to be in touch with the real life situation and the pastoral happenings affecting the family in the church and society in Nigeria.

The CMSN’s interventions contribute, even if in an unassuming way, toward the protection and defence of rights of marriage and family in Nigeria. The Year of Consecrated Life is a propitious occasion for consecrated persons, at different levels, to embark on deeper, courageous reflections on the challenges and pastoral care of family in Nigeria today, keeping in mind the spirit of their respective Institutes and the needs and pastoral concerns of our local churches.

¹ The CMSN, as used here, refers to the two conferences of representing all male and female Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in Nigeria, namely, *Nigeria Conference of Women Religious* (NCWR) and the *Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria*(Men); normally, both Conferences hold a General Assemblies annually, in January, to deliberate on issues of common interest. At the end of the Assembly the joint Conference (CMSN) issue a pondered *Communique* - addressed to all consecrated persons, to members of the Church and to the society especially in Nigeria - concerning the theme chosen for the given year’s Assembly.

² *Echoes of Hope: The Stand of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria on Issues of Faith and Life*, Edited by Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, OSA. This important and beautiful collection includes all the *Communiques* of the CMSN from 1998 to 2014.

³ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.5

⁴ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.2.

⁵ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.3

⁶ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.11

⁷ For reflections on this point (religious poverty) by some scholars, see: Vicente Carlos Kiaziku, *Consecrated Life in Bantu Africa* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2007), especially chapter 5; Aylward Shorter, *Religious Poverty in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 1999); Otene Matungulu: *Pour*

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Inculturer accueil et pauvreté en Afrique (Kinshasa: Éditions St. Paul Afrique, 1988); Otene Matungulu, *Estar com Cristo Casto, Pobre e Obediente: ensaio de uman espiriualidade banto dos votos* (Maputo: Paulinas, 1996); Ketele-Matondo-Tshibola Kalembo, "Pauvreté religieuse in Afrique", in: *Vie Concreate* XL/2(1977) 108-112.

⁸ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.11

⁹ *Echoes of Hope*, pp.21-22

¹⁰ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.22

¹¹ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.22

¹² *Echoes of Hope*, pg.27

¹³ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.27

¹⁴ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.27

¹⁵ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.28

¹⁶ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.52

¹⁷ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.50

¹⁸ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.53

¹⁹ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.59

²⁰ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.60

²¹ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.61-62

²² *Echoes of Hope*, pg.66

²³ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.29

²⁴ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.29

²⁵ The CMSN, as used here, refers to the two conferences of representing all male and female Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in Nigeria, namely, *Nigeria Conference of Women Religious* (NCWR) and the *Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria(Men)*; normally, both Conferences hold a General Assemblies annually, in January, to deliberate on issues of common interest. At the end of the Assembly the joint Conference (CMSN) issue a pondered *Communique* - addressed to all consecrated persons, to members of the Church and to the society especially in Nigeria - concerning the theme chosen for the given year's Assembly.

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²⁷ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.5

²⁸ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.2.

²⁹ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.3

³⁰ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.11

³¹ For reflections on this point (religious poverty) by some scholars, see: Vicente Carlos Kiaziku, *Consecrated Life in Bantu Africa* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications Africa, 2007), especially chapter 5; Aylward Shorter, *Religious Poverty in Africa* (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa 1999); Otene Matungulu: *Pour Inculturer accueil et pauvreté en Afrique* (Kinshasa: Éditions St. Paul Afrique, 1988); Otene Matungulu, *Estar com Cristo Casto, Pobre e Obediente: ensaio de uman espiriualidade banto dos votos* (Maputo: Paulinas, 1996); Ketele-Matondo-Tshibola Kalembo, "Pauvreté religieuse in Afrique", in: *Vie Concreate* XL/2(1977) 108-112.

³² *Echoes of Hope*, pg.11

³³ *Echoes of Hope*, pp.21-22

³⁴ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.22

³⁵ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.22

³⁶ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.27

³⁷ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.27

³⁸ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.27

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- ³⁹ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.28
- ⁴⁰ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.52
- ⁴¹ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.50
- ⁴² *Echoes of Hope*, pg.53
- ⁴³ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.59
- ⁴⁴ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.60
- ⁴⁵ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.61-62
- ⁴⁶ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.66
- ⁴⁷ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.29
- ⁴⁸ *Echoes of Hope*, pg.29