

**RELIGIOUS LIFE AND THE FAMILY(THE REALITY, EXPECTATION AND CHALLENGES):
WATER OF BAPTISM AND BLOOD TIES**

Sr. Rita Akin-Otiko, SSL¹

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ABSTRACT

Religious life is a response to the love of God in both a personal and communal way. The personal and communal ways reflect the understanding and commitment of an individual to the three vows of poverty, obedience and chastity. As Africans, we are not individuals without family ties: the family bond is a strong value we uphold. This fact sometimes impinges on how well one is able to live and be committed to the freely chosen and embraced religious life. This paper tries to examine the gray areas of living the religious life within the context and demands of the natural family.

“But the one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how he may please his wife, and his interests are divided. The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband. This I say for your own benefit; not to put a restraint upon you, but to promote what is appropriate and to secure undistracted devotion to the Lord.” (1 Corinthians 7: 33-35).

The above exhortation of St. Paul is very apt as we reflect on ‘Religious Life and Family’ during this year of consecrated life. Religious life is a response to the love of God in both a personal and communal way. The "Yes" to the invitation of love is personal while its expression is inherently communal. This "yes" is lived and shared with others of presumed like minds and intent. Each Religious, like the disciples of our Lord, accepted the invitation freely. Even though the invitation sounds compelling, the response is always given in absolute freedom. *“For there are eunuchs who were born that way, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by others, and there are those who choose to live like eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. The one who can accept this should accept it”* (Matthew 19: 12).

The communal essence of the consecrated life is synonymous with that of the biological family. The main difference is the fact that biological families are not

¹ Rev. Sr. Rita Akin-Otiko is a member of the Congregation of St. Louis, and lives and works in the Catholic Archdiocese of Ibadan as a teacher.

chosen, whereas a free, calculated and well informed choice is fundamental to belonging to a religious community. Biological ties fall within the natural bonds between persons, while the union of consecrated persons is profoundly spiritual. Since the former is outside one's scope of choice, its attendant consequences are usually less challenging than the latter, which interestingly enough has, during initial formation, had its predicted expectations rehearsed umpteen times before its actualization.

Religious persons strengthen this noble and eternally rewarding course by taking the three vows of poverty, obedience and chastity. The vow of poverty is based on mutual sustainability, whereby all the members of a community ensure that no member lacks and no member hoards; balance is mutually maintained regarding temporal goods. The vow of obedience instructs and directs mutual collaboration whereby power is for empowerment and not domination; mutual growth in freedom and not 'they' versus us'. Finally, the vow of chastity is about relatedness, whereby all things are in healthy and respectful relationship with an expected understanding that all are one regardless of their different affiliations. In this situation, it is understood that Christ is the Leader.

With members of one's biological family, the religious is invited to a life of Christian consecration through baptism, but different from members of their biological family they are invited to a more perfect way of life. Jesus taught this in Matthew 19:16-22 when the rich young man went to Him and asked Him, "*Teacher, what good thing must I do to receive eternal life?*" (v.16). In response, Jesus said, "*Keep the commandments if you want to enter life*", a demand expected of both religious persons and members of their biological family. The rich young man was not satisfied with the basic demand and said to Jesus, "*I have obeyed all these commandments, what else do I need to do?*" (v.20). Then Jesus introduced that distinguishing element that separates the family bond from religious bond, he said "*If you want to be perfect (religious life), go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have riches in heaven; then come and follow me*" (v. 21). This defines the relationship we have with members of our biological families and religious communities.

With the sacrament of Baptism we become members of the body of Christ, children of God. With religious life, we enter into a perfect way of life which is a deeper sign of the reality of baptism. The mission of baptised persons, is essentially to bring God's love to the world by inviting people into the salvation wrought by Christ, either directly by our words or indirectly and often more effectively by actions. Consecrated persons are therefore called to be witnesses to Christ in an intimate way, leaving all that can distract and follow Jesus in a more intimate way. The Lord wants His followers to be completely focused on Him and His mission. He would not even have families distract His chosen ones, more so, consecrated persons. "*If anyone comes to me and does not hate father and mother, wife and children, brothers and sisters--yes, even their own life--such a person cannot be my disciple.*" - Luke 14: 26. Pope John Paul the II in the Jubilee year (2000) had this to say to consecrated persons, "*Invited to leave everything to follow Christ, you, consecrated men and women, no*

longer define your life by family, by profession or by earthly interests, and you choose the Lord as your only identifying mark. Thus you acquire a new family identity. The divine Teacher's words apply particularly to you: "Here are my mother and my brethren" (cf. Mk 3: 35). The invitation to renunciation, as you know well, is not meant to leave you "without a family" but to make you the first and distinctive members of the "new family", a witness and prophetic example for all whom God wishes to call and bring into his house."

Unfortunately, among a significant number of consecrated persons, the expressed desire of Christ and Saint John Paul II are fast becoming a mirage. There is a difficulty in selling all that is possessed, in order to follow Jesus. Like the rich young man, many become sad at the reality of the demands of religious life. The rich young man knew that he was not called to a perfect way of life and so the Bible says, *"he went away sad, because he was very rich"* (v. 22). Today there are religious who have not left their possessions to follow Jesus Christ and some others have in fact acquired possessions while following Jesus Christ. This is weighing heavily on the relationship that exists between the religious' families and their communities.

There are some families that cannot plan activities that will require spending money without their religious sibling at the helm of affairs and most discomfoting still, as the major financier. This we often witness at family celebrations such as weddings and funerals. One is not unaware of the fact that families are different and economy wise, fingers are not equal. The religious must be able to stay focused and true to the fact that He who has called will take care of his/her biological family. This does not entirely exclude support from the religious family (not the individual religious, him/herself) which is a vital aspect of the vow of poverty that no religious' family lacks when they are in genuine and dire needs.

The vow of poverty also demands a proper care for every member of the religious community. It is sad to note that there are members of religious communities who have left everything to follow Jesus but still depend on their families for basic essentials and sometimes, expenses that are beyond the easy reach of members of their biological families, such as sponsorship through tertiary institutions which includes monthly allowance. When Jesus invited his followers to leave everything and follow him he meant that he would take care of their necessary needs. If congregations cannot support membership, why found them?

Leaving everything to follow Jesus allows us to totally trust superiors through the vow of obedience. This must become visible in the issue of conflict resolution among consecrated persons in communities. For conflicts resolution, many turn to their biological families rather than resolve differences using the apparatus of the religious communities. Reports are made to members of biological families who naturally take sides with their own, despite the fact that they have little or no understanding of the sacrifices that go with religious life. Usually, the opinions of members of the biological families compound matters and the situation festers. This is nothing but turning away from following Christ. It is important to examine and put in place practical and productive conflict resolution strategies in religious communities.

Having strong ties with biological families breaches the principle of religious life. There exists some unfavourable situations, where members of biological families are brought into religious communities or are made to depend financially on the religious communities without the agreement of all the members of the community and worse still, they are made to over stay their welcome to the discomfort of the *bona fide* members of the community. How effective are boundaries in communities?

The lack of total commitment to following Christ make some religious to hold members of their biological family in confidence over grave matters that require the attention of their communities. These matters are such that ought to be handled by communities, not families. A big example is related to health issues. In situations like these, family members are involved until things get out of hands and the religious communities are brought into the already complicated scenario. If the situation goes awry, who bears the brunt?

A distraction from following Christ results in consecrated persons not merely financing family celebrations but worse still, using community funds to train their siblings or their nephews/ nieces. In some circumstances related to this, the community members of these religious have been denied the same gestures which they extend to their own families. Worse still are those who fearlessly take returns from apostolates meant for their congregations to their families. Even more incomprehensible are situations where consecrated person build structures for theirs and their families' comfort. This is the opposite of what Jesus told the rich young man, go sell all you have and follow me, these examples show people following Christ in order to acquire possession. What does the vow of poverty really signify?

It is important to note that following Jesus Christ entails giving up what is rightfully ours for the sake of the kingdom. It is a common thing today to have religious persons who against communal agreement would rather celebrate important Christian feasts such as Christmas and Easter with biological families rather than religious families. While our families share in our successes and/or failings, our communities are sometimes left to wonder what is going on in our lives. Where is *home* for the consecrated person?

St. Paul's letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 7 verse 34 -- which says "*The woman who is unmarried, and the virgin, is concerned about the things of the Lord, that she may be holy both in body and spirit; but one who is married is concerned about the things of the world, how she may please her husband*" -- buttresses the importance of the vow of Chastity in this discourse. It will not be out of place to recognise the fact that, when the Religious maintains a seemingly indispensable relationship with their family, there is such distraction that does not afford them the joyful communion which persons of like calling are supposed to share with their community which represents the body of Christ their Spouse.

One of the most challenging situations is when members of the same community live as co-tenants or worse still, strangers. Shared prayers, meals and recreation are obsolete in some communities. Celebration of important landmarks in one another's lives is more of family affair than the joyful and shared responsibility of the community. What is our understanding of communion/community?

These examples could go on and on.

Without being judgmental, the truth is that religious who find it difficult to bond with their communities do not understand the life they have freely chosen to live and so they are not living it consciously. Consciousness, as we know, precedes being. In this state, one lives a life of routine with neither depth nor authenticity. While the individuals hardly share a decent length of time with their communities, they often find that the time they spend chatting or visiting with their families is insatiable.

Culturally, consecrated persons in a country like Nigeria will more likely than not find it difficult to restrain from the temptation of tilting the scale of support towards their families rather than their communities because as Africans, family bond is a strong value we uphold. Also, there is more certainty of survival in religious communities than many families can boast of. It progressively seems that now more than ever, the future of true religious life seems so bleak in this country, especially with the level of corruption, high unemployment rate, disregard for the rule of law, widening gap between the rich and the poor, escalating inflation, seemingly untameable crime rate, terrorism, insurgency and in religious circles, dichotomy between belief and practice, many families are clinging to their vowed siblings for sustenance.

Religious communities need to become aware of the tension between loyalty to blood ties and commitment to the bond of consecrated life. There is need for greater sensitivity in addressing it. Strategies to curb this fast pervading problem have to be quickly installed so that it is stopped before it becomes too difficult to manage. Formation houses need to accommodate this in their curriculum. The religious' biological families are the first "world" that needs to be "woken up" by educating them on the implication of the religious life. The religious also must be willing to detach appropriately from their families as it has been discovered that some actually offer unsolicited assistance to their families especially when in positions that affords them such opportunities.

In conclusion, whatever the case may be, the religious must always keep focused on the Lord Who called. There is need to believe in divine providence and trust that God is able to do infinitely more than one can ever ask or imagine. While it may be quite challenging for the religious to place the bond of religious community above family ties, remembering that their response to Christ's invitation to this life of perfection means constantly staying focused on Him and His mission within the sanctuary of community should be helpful.