

RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY LIFE AS A FAMILY LIFE:

The contributions of candidates in formation in advancing family values, and the experience of mercy and healing, within the Religious community life.

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ABSTRACT

A Community built on a solid foundation cannot be destroyed (cf. Lk. 6:48-49). Religious Community Life is also a form of Family Life, though not based on blood relationship, but on a relationship rooted in Christ; they are both the intention of God who is love, the Triune God – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit – an undivided unity. Candidates on formation, who would in the nearest future become Religious, come from a family which is the first place of formation. Religious Formation House would build on the Family’s efforts – in line with the Patrimony of their Founder or Foundress – during which transformation takes place. The future of the society and of the church is largely determined and influenced by the quality of the family and, so, imbuing values would help create an acceptable society for all. Efforts to enhance family values and the expression of mercy must be put in place. His Holiness, Pope Francis, urges us to be “persuasive preachers of mercy”², and not to neglect the Corporal and Spiritual works of mercy by reawakening the zeal to be merciful in the Jubilee Year of Mercy and beyond, thereby building a community where members “love” one another and take care to persevere in the unity of the Spirit (cf. Eph 4:1-3). The proclamation of mercy and of truth is the obligation of every Consecrated person, and the Candidates on formation should begin to take steps right from the initial formation in order to internalize these values and not back out.

INTRODUCTION

Life is not expected to be lived in isolation. Two or more who live in company of another would live far better than anyone who lives in isolation. Even the Hermits who usually live alone return once in a while to the community for their needs, and when they are back to the desert, they are not alone in the real sense, but “Alone with God.”

In so far as a person is not living in isolation, if he or she has a companion, then a community is established. One can then say that members of a family or those who live together as Religious form a community. “A community is a union of persons who live together and share in mutuality their most precious possessions among themselves. They know and are open to one another, they are for one another. They share in love their persons and lives.”

A Religious Community is not an exception to this. The members of a Religious Community live together as members of the same family. The Religious Community Life and the Family Life have some things in common. These two realities take their root from the Trinity – God the Father, God the Son and God the Holy Spirit, and comprise a Leader (that is, the Parents - in a Family, and the Superior - in a Religious Community) and the members of that family. These members live together, pray together, eat together, share things and life in common, celebrate each other, encourage and commend each other, care for each other, bear each other’s burden, mourn with each other, disagree to agree, and so on (cf. Acts 2: 42-47).

With all these in mind, Religious Community life does not in any way conform to the following quote by Voltaire:

People who come together without knowing each other,
People who live together without loving each other,
People who die together without mourning for each other.

In the book of Genesis, God made man and woman; and through these parents, human descendants came into being. God gave a command that “a man must leave his father and mother to cling to his wife.” (Gen 2: 24). This is also similar to that which Christ said, “If you leave father and mother for my sake you will gain eternal joy.” (Matt. 19:29). We see that these two forms of life involve leaving one place to another place to start a union and commitment. Each person in these forms of life is a helpmate to another; a good couple will prefer their marital home to their biological home because a new family is formed. This also applies to a Religious because his or her father, mother and siblings are the brothers or sisters he or she lives with in the community.

THE FAMILY

The family takes its origin from the creation story – God made man in His image and likeness. Prior to this, an undivided union existed, that is, the Triune God. This is confirmed in the statement “Let Us make man in our image, after our likeness” (Gen. 1:26).

The family is the smallest unit in the society, a social unit consisting of parents and the children they raise; the most organized and most stable of all human organizations; the antediluvian community and the oldest organization in the world ever known. It is a divine institution where each individual is connected by blood as initiated by God through Adam and Eve, our first parents. The family is a domestic Church, exhibiting in its own way the identity and mission of the mother Church. Parents teach their children the Church’s doctrines in some form of family catechesis; this effort not only helps the children but endows the whole family with spiritual strengths and prepares them for the work of evangelization in the Church at large.

Family values, sometimes referred to as *familial values*, are traditional or cultural values (that is, values handed down from generation to generation within families) that pertain to the family’s structure, functions, roles, beliefs, attitudes, and ideals. Family values involve all of the ideas of how you want to live your family life. They can help define behaviour in various situations, help youth and adults make good choices, and solidify the bond that a family has.

The future of the society and of the Church is largely determined and influenced by the quality of the family and so imbuing these values would help create an acceptable society for all.

THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY

Born not "of the will of the flesh", nor from personal attraction, nor from human motives, but "from God" (Jn. 1:13), from a divine vocation and a divine attraction; religious communities are a living sign of the primacy of the love of God who works wonders, and of the love for God and for one's brothers or sisters as manifested and practiced by Jesus Christ. The life is not something isolated and marginal, but a reality which affects the whole Church.

A religious community is a community of grace or a theological community that God has called together: it is not based on blood relationship and natural bonds, but on a new relationship rooted in Christ, who calls them to live among themselves.

Before being a human construction, religious community is a gift of the Spirit. It is the love of God, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit (cf. Rom.5:5), from which religious community takes its origin and is built as a true family gathered together in the Lord's name.

It is therefore impossible to understand religious community unless we start from its being a gift from on high, from its being a mystery, from its being rooted in the very heart of the blessed and sanctifying Trinity, who wills it as part of the mystery of the Church, for the life of the world.

Every family would want to safeguard its name and so breed Children that would help in treading in this accord. Candidates in Formation Houses who would in the nearest future become Religious come from a family and the family, being the first Formation House for a child, would have incorporated some values into the child of which the Religious Formation House would build on. However, if this foundation is faulty, as we see in some individuals who are clearly incapable of living community life due to problems of insufficient maturity and psychological weakness, or due to factors which are more pathological, there is need for extra effort to make amends so as not to jeopardize the innocent community life of other Consecrated Persons.

We see in Children the virtue of tolerance, forgiveness and love; they do not care about their family differences or background, rather, they relate with each other in trust; even when they disagree, we see them becoming friends in no time. Such should be the atmosphere/attitude of a Religious Community which has Christ for its foundation and assimilated family values.

THE ROLE OF FORMATION IN PLANTING FAMILY VALUES IN CANDIDATES FOR RELIGIOUS LIFE

The primary objective of the formation process is to prepare people for the total consecration of themselves to God in the following of Christ, at the service of the Church's mission. To say "Yes" to the Lord's call by taking personal responsibility for maturing in one's vocation, is the inescapable duty of all who have been called. One's whole life must be open to the action of the Holy Spirit, travelling the road of formation with generosity, and accepting in faith the means of grace offered by the Lord and the Church.

Formation should therefore have a profound effect on individuals, so that their every attitude and action, at important moments as well as in the ordinary events of life, will show that they belong completely and joyfully to God. Since the very purpose of consecrated life is union with the Lord Jesus in his total self-giving, this must also be the principal objective of formation. Formation is a path of gradual identification with the attitude of Christ towards the Father. If this is the purpose of the consecrated life, the manner of preparing for it should include and express the character of wholeness.

Formation should involve the whole person, in every aspect of the personality, in behaviour and intentions. Precisely, because it aims at the transformation of the whole person, it is clear that the commitment to formation never ends. Indeed, at every stage of life, consecrated persons must be offered opportunities to grow in their commitment to the charism and mission of their Institute – these are majorly the values passed on from one generation to the next. The Patrimony of the Founder must be held with high esteem.

For formation to be complete, it must include every aspect of Christian life. It must therefore provide a human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation which pays special attention to the harmonious integration of all its various aspects. In families, we learn

different values of life and all these aid personal responsibility of each individual. These same values are well enhanced and incorporated as one undergoes formation so as to become an authentic person in the journey of life.

Since formation must also have a communal dimension, the community is the chief place of formation in Religious Life. Initiation into the hardships and joys of community life takes place in the community itself. Through fraternal life, each one learns to live with those whom God has put at his or her side, accepting their positive traits along with their differences and limitations. Each one learns to share the gifts received for the building up of all, because "to each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good" (1Cor 12:7). At the same time, from the moment of initial formation, community life must disclose the essential missionary dimension of consecration. Thus, during the period of initial formation, Institutes do well to provide practical experiences which are prudently followed by the one responsible for formation, enabling candidates to test, in the context of the local culture, their skills for the apostolate, their ability to adapt and their spirit of initiative.³

God the Father, through the unceasing gift of Christ and the Spirit, is the educator par excellence of those who consecrate themselves to him. But in this work he makes use of human instruments, placing more mature brothers and sisters at the side of those whom he calls. Formation then is a sharing in the work of the Father who, through the Spirit, fashions the inner attitudes of the Son in the hearts of young men and women. Those in charge of formation must therefore be very familiar with the path of seeking God, so as to be able to accompany others on this journey. Sensitive to the action of grace, they will also be able to point out those obstacles which are less obvious. But above all, they will disclose the beauty of following Christ and the value of the charism by which this is accomplished. They will combine the illumination of spiritual wisdom with the light shed by human means, which can be a help both in discerning the call and in forming the new man or woman, until they are genuinely free.

In the family, various values are inculcated and these are later developed and practiced daily in the Religious Communities; they help to produce responsible Religious in future. The following are some of the values:

- Praying together;
- Being respectful and courteous in one's interactions;
- Caring, bearing and sharing with others;
- Volunteering time and skills in the community;
- Being generous with what you have, submitting them when expected to;
- Participating in teamwork in the community whenever possible;
- Showing compassion to those in need;
- Continually learning and growing both spiritually and intellectually;
- Always putting in your best at every community work;
- Being grateful for your achievements;
- Treating fellow Religious the way that you want to be treated;
- Being patient, courageous, honest and trustworthy with others;
- Never giving up.

As Candidates, we are not just to learn for the sake of learning, rather, we pass through the formation in its entirety and also allow the formation to pass through us, without any form of pretence. The work of our Formators should be brought to limelight. We who have come with the intention of being formed into a Religious person so as to entirely conform to Jesus should then be disposed to be formed, by being docile to formation, incorporating it and internalizing it.

ENHANCING FAMILY VALUES AND EXPERIENCE OF MERCY AND HEALING WITHIN THE RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY LIFE IN NIGERIA

We cannot dispense mercy if within our communities it is lacking. Candidates in Formation Houses are, therefore, called to see the need to accommodate each other as companions on the same journey of which not all may make it to the end and so life is to be taken with great awareness of this fact.

So many Religious Communities no longer portray the fraternal life that is intended from the onset. This is because members of these communities have thrown aback all these important values/virtues that were acquired during initial formation and fail to identify or become aware of each other's differences not to talk of accepting and tolerating them.

Bearing in mind that the present situations in our communities, our country, our Church and the world at large require urgent attention, Religious should rekindle that initial zeal prior to their entering into the Religious life and begin to practice all the values/virtues that were learnt during their initial formation; this effort will help to enhance family values and the experience of mercy and healing within the religious community.

Just as in every family, the husband is in a spousal relationship with the wife which extends to the loving care they have for their children, so also is the Religious with Christ and in extension, to fellow Religious in whom Christ is present. Candidates in formation need not wait for profession of vows because the Novitiate is the beginning of their Religious Life. "We have to ask ourselves: Is Jesus really our first and only love, as we promised he would be during the profession of the vows? Only if he is, will we be empowered to love, in truth and mercy, every person who crosses our path. For we would have learned from Jesus the meaning and practice of love; we will be able to love because we have his own heart."⁴

Commitment and trust are vital links in community living but are easily thrown overboard. Religious that commit themselves to each other's needs lay foundation for lifelong happiness in a community that will be more gratifying than they ever deemed possible. Communities, just like the family, must be conducive for fellow Religious. There must never be a diary of wrongs. From experience, some Religious discovered that bottled-up anger causes them sickness and so it is recommended that before we retire daily, there should be an examination of conscience so as to wipe off the slate of wrongdoings both to us and to others and possess a better tomorrow.

By their frequent encounter with God's mercy, they purify and renew their hearts, and through the humble recognition of their sins achieve openness in their relationship with him. The joyful experience of sacramental forgiveness, on the journey shared with one's brothers or sisters, makes the heart eager to learn and encourages growth in faithfulness. Confident and humble recourse to spiritual direction is of great help on the path of fidelity to the Gospel, especially in the period of formation and at certain times in life. Through it individuals are helped to respond with generosity to the movements of the Spirit, and to direct themselves resolutely towards holiness.⁵

The identity of a consecrated person depends on spiritual maturity; this is brought about by the Spirit who prompts us to be conformed to Christ, according to the particular characteristic provided by "the founding gift which mediates the Gospel to the members of a given Religious Institute". For this reason, the help of a spiritual guide, who knows well and respects the spirituality and mission of the institute, is most important. Such a person will "discern the action of God, accompany the Religious in the ways of God, and nourish (his /her) life with solid doctrine and the practice of prayer". This accompaniment is particularly

necessary in the initial stage of Formation, but it is useful throughout life, in order to foster "growth towards the fullness of Christ".⁶

In order to stabilize these family values and the experience of mercy and healing within the Religious Community, it is necessary to:

a) Celebrate and give thanks together for the common gift of vocation and mission, a gift far surpassing every individual and cultural difference; to promote a contemplative attitude with regard to the wisdom of God, who has sent specific brothers or sisters to the community that each may be a gift to the other; to praise him for what each brother or sister communicates from the presence and word of Christ;

b) Cultivate mutual respect by which we accept the slow journey of weaker members without stifling the growth of richer personalities; a respect which fosters creativity but also calls for responsibility to others and to solidarity;

c) Focus on a common mission: each institute has its own mission, to which all must contribute according to their particular gifts. The road of consecrated men and women consists precisely in progressively consecrating to the Lord all that they have, and all that they are, for the mission of their religious family.

PROMOTING AND EXPRESSING THE VIRTUE OF MERCY WITHIN THE COMMUNITY

Mercy is the very foundation of the Church's life. "The Church lives an authentic life when she professes and proclaims mercy – the most stupendous attribute of the Creator and of the Redeemer – and when she brings people close to the sources of the Saviour's mercy, of which she is the trustee and dispenser"⁷

Candidate(s) on formation and even those already professed are not left out; as members of the Church, they are also dispensers of Mercy. They should make effort to cooperate with God's grace in bringing to fruition the desire of His Holiness, Pope Francis, when he prayed - "May the balm of mercy reach everyone, both believers and those far away, as a sign that the Kingdom of God is already present in our midst!"⁸

This strive should not just be in the year of mercy alone but interminably. Everyone (even the most wounded) is part of this task, no one is left out. Therefore, in order to promote and exercise the virtue of Mercy, the following must be in place:

1. **Pray:** By praying, we promote mercy, this is with a special reference to the great apostle of mercy, Saint Faustina Kowalska through whom the Divine Mercy devotion came to be. We make reparation for our own sins and those of the whole world.

2. **Preach Mercy:** In preaching Mercy, we promote mercy, Jesus Christ preached mercy, he gave many instances in the different parables he told those around him. We are heralds of the good news and by extension dispensers of God's Mercy. Pope Francis urges us to be "persuasive preachers of mercy."⁹ In our Formation Houses, we preach mercy by encouraging each other to be merciful to whoever does wrong, having in mind that being merciful does not mean condoning everything and that reprimanding (fraternal corrections) is put in place when necessary because this in itself is an act of mercy.

3. **Repentance and Conversion of Heart:** God's mercy surpasses our sinfulness. God's mercy, instead of being a sign of weakness, is a sign of strength, his omnipotence. When we are repentant of our own sins, our companions realize this and they see the mercy of God at work. The penitent in this way becomes strengthened for the task ahead and passes on the message of repentance and conversion of heart such that fellow companions are also moved to recognize their sinfulness and ask for God's mercy.

4. **Prudence:** We are to show concern and not turn away when faced with an opportunity to be merciful; our greatest temptation is to look away. If we want to be merciful, we have to be willing to stand beside the other person, even if it makes our own life more difficult.

5. **Accept Mercy (i.e. feedback):** When we are shown mercy, we should not refuse it but accept, let us not see it as a weakness on our part. When we accept mercy, we promote mercy and receive joy because a community with persons rich in joy will continue to blossom and become a genuine gift to one another. True joy is contagious, it impels one forward.

6. **Show Mercy:** To promote mercy, we need to show mercy, we start with our very self. Jesus affirms that mercy is not only an action of the Father; it becomes a criterion for ascertaining who his true children are. In short, we are called to show mercy because mercy has first been shown to us. Pardoning offences becomes the clearest expression of merciful love, and for us, it is an imperative from which we cannot excuse ourselves. To even the score is not the mind of Christ, our model; He wants us to take after Him, He would prefer we pray for those who hurt us than strike back. To let go of anger, wrath, violence, and revenge are necessary conditions to living joyfully. Let us therefore heed the Apostle's exhortation: "Do not let the sun go down on your anger" (*Eph 4:26*). Above all, let us listen to the words of Jesus who made mercy an ideal of life and a criterion for the credibility of our faith: "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy" (*Mt 5:7*): this is the beatitude to which we should particularly aspire.

Another practical way which the Pope calls everyone is to reflect on the *corporal and spiritual works of mercy*. It will be a way to reawaken our conscience, too often grown dull in the face of poverty. Let us rediscover the practice of the *Corporal Works of Mercy*:

- To feed the hungry,
- Give drink to the thirsty,
- Clothe the naked,
- Welcome the stranger,
- Heal the sick,
- Visit the imprisoned, and
- Bury the dead.

And let us remember to practise the *Spiritual Works of Mercy*:

- To counsel the doubtful,
- Instruct the ignorant,
- Admonish sinners,
- Comfort the afflicted,
- Forgive offences,
- Bear patiently those who do us ill,
- Pray for the living and the dead.

7. **Love:** In the gospel of Mark 12:33, Jesus admonishes us to love unconditionally without exceptions. Irrespective of differences in age, culture, family background, temperament, etc, we are expected to bear with each other. These differences are sure to arise in Religious Communities and cannot be dodged. So accepting each other in love is a way of promoting mercy.

Faithful practice of all these will go a long way in establishing a continuous positive change and its impact will most definitely be felt in our lives, in our communities, in our county Nigeria and even the world at large.

WHY IS IT SO IMPORTANT AND URGENT TO PROCLAIM MERCY AND TRUTH IN RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES, INCLUDING FORMATION HOUSES?

These two are very important requirements for living in a Religious Community, the Psalmist considers he who speaks the truth from his heart as one who is worthy of admittance onto the holy mountain (cf. Ps 15). “All the paths of the Lord are mercy and truth” (Ps. 25:20), so it should also be of those who are called together to live in a Religious Community.

1. It is so important to proclaim mercy and truth in religious communities because we are following Christ’s footsteps when he says be merciful just like the heavenly father is merciful. A typical example of this is the Parable of the Prodigal Son (cf. Luke 15:11-32). Through it God shows us how merciful He is, and this is seen in practical terms as we meet Him in the person of the Priest in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. If God should mark our guilt, who would survive?

2. Religious are the face of the Church, even of the world to come; they are a Prophetic sign to the world. So if we are not merciful and truthful amongst ourselves, how then do we want to teach people to be so? We should by our way of life preach it and not act like the Pharisees who only preach and do not practice what they preach. It is necessary to begin with ourselves; proclaim it in our communities because charity begins at home and then we can freely teach others.

3. The act of proclaiming mercy and truth rebuilds broken bonds among Religious, thereby establishing true fraternity in Religious communities.

4. If mercy and truthfulness are established in our communities, there will be unity and peace. We take after the example of the Holy Family – Jesus, Mary and Joseph – by modelling our community life after theirs. Jesus, Mary and Joseph! Make our home and our Religious Community like that of the Holy Family at Nazareth!

5. When there is mercy, healing automatically takes place. We do not live in acrimony and would not want to extend the day’s troubles to another because the troubles of each day are enough for it (cf. Matt. 6:34).

6. Whenever we discover a truth, we let it out and do not conceal it, if we do, it becomes sinful, neither are we helping the community nor the individual involved. Through mercy and truth iniquity is purged: and by the fear of the Lord men depart from evil (cf. Prov. 16:6).

7. A family that prays together stays together; where two or more are gathered in God’s name there He is in their midst. God is fully present in his merciful love. And so in God’s abiding presence, mercy and truth should prevail.

8. It is important for us to show mercy because receiving mercy is consequent upon showing mercy, as we have it in Matt. 6:14-15: “For if you forgive men their trespasses, your heavenly Father will also forgive you: But if you do not forgive men their trespasses, neither will your Father forgive your trespasses.”

9. Mercy aids us understand Truth. Genuine mercy always leads us to the recognition of Truth because mercy is based upon Truth. The Psalmist says: “Mercy and Truth shall meet” (Ps. 85: 10). They are to meet in our religious community life, as in the parish and other ecclesial communities.

A Religious community is believed to be a community of Religious who love without distinction. There are many families and persons who are in one way or another wounded within our parish and religious communities. They need and want to hear and experience both mercy and truth from us all, individually and collectively, as members of the communities, and so we share in Jesus’ mission who compassionately spoke his gracious word when he

saw the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd; healed the sick; gave bread to the hungry and offered his own life as a sacrifice (cf. Mk. 6:34; Matt. 14:14; Rom. 5:8). We should in our own way be of service to our fellow Religious and all those we come in contact with especially those who are most wounded. This act of charity is boundless; it is able to find countless ways of bringing the newness of the Gospel within our communities. In the second letter of St. Paul to the Corinthians, we are encouraged to help those in all kinds of troubles as Christ himself has helped us in our troubles (cf. 2 Cor. 1:3-5). Among the wounded persons are:

- The Sick,
- The aged,
- Those with psychological problems,
- Loners,
- Members of the community who have homosexual and lesbians tendency and/or practice,
- Individuals who are separated from our religious Institute and Formation Houses,
- Members of the community who are isolated in practice,
- Those who are in significant crisis and often unable to identify with or integrate serenely into almost any community of the Religious Institute, living the vows, but under whose roof they continuously live.

By extension we also consider the following:

- Persons whose marital relationships have broken down;
- Divorced and remarried persons;
- Childless couples;
- Lay men and women who feel called to marital life but forced by circumstances into an unchosen continuous single (or “celibate”) life;
- Polygamous couples of whom either the husband wants to receive baptism, or at least one of the couples desires to receive communion;
- Single parents.

These and other similar groups of persons need pastoral and spiritual care; they may not have been in that situation from the beginning of the journey into their vocation except if at some point or another, the truth about themselves was concealed. They need someone who could look beneath their surface needs and able to share in whatever pains, fears or discouragement such persons are passing through. These set of people should be seen with the eyes of Jesus, who is merciful, tender, compassionate, and so help them out of their situation to become fully fledged members of their communities like others. They should be pastorally accompanied: this also means sharing with them the truth of the Gospel values, and of Consecrated life, the truth of marriage and family values, as taught by Scriptures and the Church’s Magisterium and in such a way that they see the mercy of God. We all need to - with humility and courage - say or/and hear the truth that liberates and heals, even in the most difficult situations. St. Paul reminds that our calling is to be free *and* faithful in Christ: “For freedom Christ sets us free; so stand firm and do not submit again to the yoke of slavery” (Gal. 5: 1). We are to witness to truth in mercy; and “living the truth in charity” we should grow in every way into Christ (Eph. 4:15), who for all is the Way, the Truth and the Life. Truth is mercy that binds and obliges us.

BENEFITS OF PRACTISING FAMILY VALUES AND WITNESSING TO TRUTH AND MERCY

There is definitely a reward for a job well done. Practising family values; witnessing to truth and mercy in formation has great benefits on the life and mission of members in Formation Houses and Religious communities. Some of these benefits are stated below:

- When family values are internalized, well integrated persons are produced to inhabit our Religious Communities; we would have communities where disciplined persons are formed.
- Respect: One who has self respect would also be able to show respect to others irrespective of age, academic qualification or length of years of profession, etc.
- Religious make a living memorial of Christ in the spirit of adoration and thanksgiving, in readiness to accept apostolate even in difficult places and in effort at living as a family with fellow Religious in spite of differences.
- We live in love as Christ loves us (cf. Eph. 5:2) when we practice these values and witness to truth and mercy.
- Other benefits includes breeding personalities that would have the following characteristics:
 - Sensitivity
 - Punctuality
 - Sincerity
 - Authenticity
 - Consistency
 - Tranquillity

CONCLUSION

The community established by those who have done a Self-donation to God is expected to live a true Religious community life. An unflinching commitment is required for survival.

Prophets receive from God the ability to scrutinize the times in which they live and to interpret events: they are like sentinels who keep watch in the night and sense the coming of the dawn (cf. Is. 21:11-12). They know God and they know the men and women who are their brothers and sisters. They are able to discern and denounce the evil of sin and injustice, so they promote mercy and truth. Because they are free, they are obliged to no one but God. These are the existing traits in every Religious; so rather than living in some “utopia”, Religious should find ways to create “alternate spaces”, where the Gospel approach of self-giving, fraternity, embracing differences, and love of one another can thrive.

Monasteries, communities, centres of spirituality, schools, hospitals, family shelters – all these are places which the charity and creativity born of each institute’s charisms have brought into being, and with constant creativity must continue to bring into being the Patrimony of their Founder or Foundress. They should increasingly be the leaven for a society inspired by the Gospel, a “city on a hill”, which testifies to the truth and the power of Jesus’ words.

At times, like Elijah and Jonah, the Religious may feel the temptation to flee, to abandon the task of being a Religious because it is too demanding, wearisome or apparently fruitless. But the Religious know that they are never alone. As he did with Jeremiah, so God encourages us: “Be not afraid of them, for I am with you to deliver you” (Jer. 1:8). We need to ask the Lord, who understands our individual personalities and situations, to help us recognize the various ways we can each live His mercy in our daily lives, communities, families, country and the world at large.

We ask God to fill us all with the knowledge of his will, with all the wisdom and understanding that his Spirit gives, so that we may be able to live as the Lord wants and always do what pleases him. May we be made strong with all the strength which comes from God’s glorious might, so that we may be able to endure everything with patience (cf. Col. 1:9-11).

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- The New Jerusalem Bible*. Darton, Longman & Todd Ltd. and Doubleday & Company Inc. 1985.

¹ This reflection was written by the Novices of the *Institute of the Sisters of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus* (EHJ), in September 2016, under the supervision of the Novice Mistress, Rev. Sr. Josephine Akwaowoh, EHJ. Their Novitiate House is located at Ibonwon-Epe, Lagos State (Nigeria). The EHJ Institute is of Pontifical right and was founded by Late Archbishop Leo Hale Taylor, SMA on 18th January, 1943. The apostolate of the Institute in the medical, educational, social and pastoral field, give concrete expression of the purpose of the Institute. Presently, in the formation house, its members are primarily concerned with their formation and spirituality according to the Constitutions of the Congregation. Our Motto: *All to the greater glory of God – "Ad Majorem Dei Gloria"*. Editor's Note: Special thanks goes to Sr. Josephine Akwaowoh, EHJ, for facilitating the collaboration and reflection of the EHJ Novices (2016 set) for this edition of the *Catholic Voyage*.

² Pope Francis: *Misericordiae Vultus*, Rome, 11 April 2015, 18

³ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996, 65-67

⁴ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter of His Holiness to all "Consecrated People" on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life*, Rome, 21 Nov. 2014. (Aims. 2)

⁵ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March 1996, 95

⁶ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Fraternal Life in Community "Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor"*, Rome 2 February 1994, 36

⁷ Pope Francis: *Misericordiae Vultus*, Rome, 11 April 2015, 11

⁸ Pope Francis: *Misericordiae Vultus*, Rome, 11 April 2015, 5

⁹ Pope Francis: *Misericordiae Vultus*, Rome, 11 April 2015, 18