

**THE RELEVANCE AND MISSION OF THE INSTITUTES
OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA**

Rev. Dr. Victor Onwukeme, MSP
Superior General, Missionary Society of St. Paul.
Former Lecturer in Biblical Theology,
National Missionary Seminary of St. Paul,
Gwagwalada, Abuja (Nigeria).

ABSTRACT

The article looks at the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. Through the few samples chosen, the article examines the distinctive marks of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. People who are called to this vocation are meant to be with Jesus, learn at his feet and eventually to live like him. They live a life of detachment and abandonment embracing the evangelical vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, a life of solidarity, simplicity and service. Like Jesus, they give up marriage and family life in order to give undivided attention to Jesus and his work. Their mission is to live in community and through a life of witness proclaim the Gospel values in season and out of season.

INTRODUCTION

In the Church we have various groups of religious institutes such as Canon Regulars (Congregation of the Immaculate Conception), Monastic Orders (Order of St Benedict), Mendicant Orders (Franciscans), Clerics Regular (Clerics Regular of the Mother of God), Religious Clerics (Oblates of Mary the Virgin), Religious Institutes of Sister (Daughters of Mary Mother of Mercy) Religious Institutes of Brothers (Marist Brothers), Societies of Apostolic Life (Missionary Society of St Paul). Here can be reworked as follows: The above come under Institutes of Consecrated Life except Missionary Society of St Paul which come under Societies of Apostolic Life. Most of these live more or less the same kind of life guided by their charism and the inspiration of their founder. The paper will focus on Institutes of Consecrated Life, examining their relevance and mission in Contemporary Nigeria.

It is difficult to think of any parish or cathedral which is not the fruit of missionary work of the religious. Missionaries are usually sent to difficult terrains. Led by the Holy Spirit, they move into these tough places and like Caesar, they come, they see and they conquer. Missionaries do this, following the instruction of our Lord who before he left the world, gave his disciples a special mandate: *Go therefore, make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit* (Matt 28,19; cf. Mark 16,15). Along the same line, Jesus called his disciples to be with him; to be sent out and then to preach and drive out demons (Mark 3, 13-

15; cf. Luke 9,1-6; 10,1-12). In the above texts, Jesus emphasized the three Missionary 's' which should characterize the life of every religious – solidarity, simplicity and service. According to Richard Baawobr, the life of the religious can be summarized by these three¹.

DISTINCTIVE MARKS OF THE INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Pope Francis noted that every baptized faithful by virtue of his baptism is a missionary disciple (*Evangelii Gaudium*, 120). They are conscious of the fact that they are the hands of Jesus, his legs and so forth. However, Institutes of Consecrated Life are made of various groups of men and women who come together led by the Holy Spirit with the aim of knowing Christ more and making Him known; loving Christ more and making Christ loved; serving Christ more and making him served. They usually live community life and have a special charism and apostolate which guide their life and work.

These men and women model their lives on that of early Christians who owned everything in common and nobody was in need (Acts 2,42; 4,32). They model their lives on the lives of the apostles who were called by Christ. The term apostle is from the Greek verb *apostellein* which means to send out and from here comes the noun form *apostolos* meaning apostle. It denotes the one who is sent, carrying with it the notion of delegation of authority.² This is seen clearly in Mark 3,13-15. Jesus went up to the mountain and called those whom he wanted and they came to him. He appointed twelve whom he named apostles to be with him and to be sent out to proclaim the message and to have authority to cast out devils. In this text, we see the meaning and implication of the word *apostle*. For one to be an apostle of Christ, one has to be called and having been called one has to stay with Jesus to learn at his feet; and one has to be sent and having been sent, one carries out the work of service. So, the call is for service. The background to the above text can be traced to the Israelites. God called the twelve tribes of Israel up to the mountain and he made Israel a light to the nations (Isa 49,6).

Let us take a brief look at the three 's.' Solidarity – When Jesus called the first disciples he called them first to be with him and then to be sent out. So, he called them to live together. Gregory the Great has the following commentary on the sending of the disciples: *The Lord sends his disciples out to preach in twos in order to teach us silently that whoever fails in charity towards his neighbour should by no means take upon himself the office of preaching.*³ In Luke 9,1-6 (Luke 10,1-12) Jesus sends out seventy-two disciples indicating he is sending them to the whole world. Jesus sends his disciples out as lambs among wolves. He knows they will meet violent rejection (Acts 14,19). They will be rejected, mocked, derided and ridiculed. However, if they live in community, this will help to strengthen them. And so, he prepares their

¹ R. BAAWOBR, 'The Spirituality of Apostolic Missionary Institutes', a paper given to the Superiors General of Societies of Apostolic Life at Gwagwalada (April 30 2017) 14

² PHILLIP CARRINGTON, *According to Mark, A Running Commentary on the Oldest Gospel* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1960) 84.

³ See the "Second Reading" of the Office of Reading for 18th October, Feast of St Luke.

minds for such tough times. In the community, they are meant to treasure and appreciate the presence of one another. They must be a source of encouragement to one another and never a stumbling block.

Simplicity – Jesus sends out his disciples instructing them not take a bag, sandals, purse and so forth. They are to travel light trusting in God’s providence. Poverty does not necessarily mean absence of possession but rather not being possessed by anything, be it money or other worldly belongings. A religious community should be rich while individuals are meant to be poor. Poverty is being free from what is mine, recognizing that the earth is the Lord’s and its fullness (Ps 24,1; 1 Cor 4,7). Evangelical poverty is imitating Christ in his *kenosis* which means self-emptying (Phil 2,6-11). Jesus is calling the religious to leave themselves fragile. Jesus is reminding us that we are not masters of the mission but its servants.⁴ As noted above the early Christians owned everything in common. In that same spirit, the religious are not supposed to possess properties. This is the reason they are not allowed to have private bank accounts; properties such as lands, houses and even costly movable belongings such as cars, helicopters, airplanes, boats and so forth. Everything is owned in common and everyone’s needs are catered for by the community. Among the Israelites, priests who are consecrated to God are not allowed to inherit landed properties because the Lord is their inheritance (Deut 10,8-9; 18,1-5; Num 18,19-20; Josh 13,14). Along the same line, the religious are not supposed to be attached to any person or anything rather they are to have intimate communion and union with God.

Service – A religious like Christ gives his life in service of the people among whom he works. The focus is on salvation of the human person in the spirit of Christ who said: *I have come that they may have life and have it to the full* (John 10,10). This is why the assembly of the Latin American Episcopal Council, better known as CELAM, held at Puebla (Mexico) in 1979 makes a lot of meaning. That Conference recognized that preaching the Gospel should not be limited to spiritual ambient. It should go above this to ensuring justice, goodness and overall wellbeing of the human person. The insight of this conference is captured in the following statement: *Action on behalf of justice is a constitutive part of the preaching the Gospel.*⁵ Missionaries should see to it that their people get justice; that they live a meaningful life; that they are able to feed. They are able to live a decent and modest life; that they have employment and so forth.

RELIGIOUS INSTITUTES IN CONTEMPORARY NIGERIA: MISSIONAND RELEVANCE

Some years back Nigeria received a lot of missionaries (men and women) from Ireland, Italy, Canada, Spain, Portugal and USA. Those missionaries were brave men and women. The priests belonged to one religious congregation or the other while others were diocesan priests who volunteered to go on mission. Those men and

⁴ R. BAAWOBR, ‘The Spirituality of Apostolic Missionary Institutes’, a paper given to the Superiors General of Societies of Apostolic Life at Gwagwalada (April 30 2017) 14.

⁵ Cf. <https://www1.villanova.edu/content/dam/villanova/mission/JusticeIntheWorld1971.pdf>

The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life

Vol. 14, 2018. ISSN: 2659-0301 (Online) 1597 6610 (Print)

women defied our excruciating heat; they did not mind our strange language, our mosquitoes, scorpions and snakes, our strange food, strange environment and the like. The first group arrived and within a week nearly all of them died. The second group arrived and shared the fate of the first arrivals. One of the survivors wrote:

*As man followed man into the soft red clay of Africa, the survivors gathered around his grave, crossed hands and kneeling with bent heads, made a solemn demand on God: 'Accept O Eternal Father, they prayed, the sacrifice of the life of this our brother in Christ; the sacrifice of our life too. But grant that over his bones and ours a great Church will arise amidst a people whom we serve.'*⁶

These missionaries were not deterred. They were not frightened. Even if they were frightened, they did not allow fear to conquer them. They left familiar environment for an unfamiliar environment; familiar food, potatoes for unfamiliar food, *eba*; they left the people they knew for a people they did not know. They left familiar culture for an unfamiliar culture. They passed through difficult moments and some of them persevered. At that time, there were no airplanes. We had no electricity. They travelled on the sea for months. One day, I was reflecting on their lives and their sacrifices asking myself: What was motivating them? Why did they refuse to yield to fear and many other dangers threatening their life? Why did they brave it all the way? I found the answer in 2Cor 5,14 *Caritas Christi urget nos*. They were led by the love of Christ. Many of those missionaries would go home and ask for help from their families and friends in order to help build churches, build schools, help the poor in Nigeria. The Church in Nigeria owes a lot to the Church in Europe and Americas.

In 1969 Pope Paul VI said to the African Bishops gathered in Kampala, Uganda: You Africans have received a lot of missionaries, now you too must become missionaries. Dominic Cardinal Ekandem took the words of the Pope to heart and this led to the founding of the Missionary Society of St Paul in 1977. Cardinal Ekandem was then the President of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) and so he got the Nigerian Bishops to key into this. St Patrick's Missionaries did a lot in order to see that this missionary congregation called The Missionary Society of St Paul (MSP) saw the light of day. Apart from MSP many other missionary congregations who have been in the country such as Vincentians, Dominicans, Society of African Missions, Missionaries of Africa, St Patrick's Society, Augustinians, Oblates of Mary the Virgin and so forth have begun to harvest local vocations. Many dioceses have also begun to send priests to needy dioceses not only in Nigeria but to other parts of the world.

Today there are many priests from Nigeria working in various parts of the world. Some belong to one religious congregation or the other, some are *fidei donum* priests, and others are diocesan priests who volunteer to go on mission. There are also numerous groups of women religious dispersed and working in various parts of the world. We must thank God sincerely for the current vocation boom in the country. John Cardinal Onaiyekan once said that the current vocation boom cannot

⁶ COSMAS NWOSUH, *Dominic Cardinal Ekandem & the Growth of the Catholic Church in Nigeria* (Iperu-Remo, Ambassador Publications, 2012) 513.

simply be attributed to the poverty in the country. After all there are countries like Tchad, Niger and others which are poorer than Nigeria but such boom is not the case in these countries. Due to the vocation boom in the country, Institutes of Consecrated Life are blessed with so many vocations. However, care must be taken so that only those who have vocation to the religious life are admitted into it. When those who have no vocation get into it, the result is not edifying. After taking the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience, you discover that the same person who has taken the vow of poverty has become importer and exporter. Such a person is importing cars and other valuables for business; building mansions and renting them. Recall the mark of a true missionary as displayed by early Christians and early missionaries who came to Nigeria. They would go home and bring things back to enrich the people. Let the opposite not be the case with missionaries from Nigeria. It is true that the solidarity in African families poses a huge challenge to an African religious who is not allowed to own property. In exceptional cases where a family member is seriously in need of help, this can be brought to the attention of the Order who in charity can render some help. Among the three vows taken by the religious, poverty seems to be the most challenging for an African religious. The reason is that sometimes such a religious sees his or her relatives in dire need and s/he lacks the capacity to help. African family spirit invites the religious to render help. My opinion is that each congregation must continue to emphasize the vow of poverty. However, each congregation can set up some kind of structure through which a family member who is seriously in need can be helped by the community.

Some religious take the vow of chastity and yet they live a life of questionable character. More work needs to be done in the formation houses so that those who find it extremely difficult to live celibate life are not admitted into religious life. Some religious take the vow of obedience but they are not obedient to their superiors. Greater work needs to be done in the formation house in this regard. Some religious are unable to live in community with fellow religious. This can be quite scandalous. When the people do not see love among the religious, the whole ministry becomes counter-productive.

Nigerian religious men and women must continue in the same spirit as the apostles, early disciples and early missionaries. They are called to rediscover the burning zeal of those early missionaries, the passionate love for Christ demonstrated by the apostles and the spirit of detachment shown by early Christians. They must continue to live the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. They are called to have an undivided heart in living out their religious vocation. Led by the Holy Spirit, they must continue with the great zeal to know nothing but Christ Jesus and the power of his resurrection (Phil 3,10). In this way they will continue to make the Gospel relevant in the midst of the hostility and impending aberrations of today.

CONCLUSION

The mission of the religious in Nigeria today is to continue the mandate of Christ both in Africa and in the places where the faith is waning due to lack of priestly and

The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life

Vol. 14, 2018. ISSN: 2659-0301 (Online) 1597 6610 (Print)

religious vocation. The Gospel must continue to be preached undiluted even when the modern world with its ideology looks at the Gospel values as if they were strange and untenable. This is what Paul meant when he said: *proclaim the word welcome or unwelcome* (2 Tim 4,2).