

Bénézet BUJO, *Religious Life: A Sign of Contradiction*. Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa. (2017). ISBN: 9966-60-23-3

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Religious Life: A Sign of Contradiction is written by Rev. Professor Bénézet Bujo, a priest of the Diocese of Bunia in the Northeast of the Democratic Republic of Congo. Prof. Bujo, since 1989, has been a professor of Moral Theology and Social Ethics at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. He has authored many books on intercultural morality and African Theology.

This book by Prof. B. Bujo is a well-researched, articulated, reflective, rich and beautiful meditation given as a retreat to the Congregation of the Sisters Servants of Jesus (Wamama Watumishiwa Yezu) of the Diocese of Bunia in Ituri (Congo Kinshasa). Prof. Bujo with his decades of experience has in a unique manner offered such a rich and calculated meditation as a great African Theology who has encountered countless religious on numerous capacities in different parts of the globe. Drawing upon this experience, he offers us something of what is essential to religious life with particular reference to the three evangelical counsels in African context. He enriches the meditation by taking into account the African woman religious background as an African and modern situation. This he did without losing sight of the classical teaching on the subject matter. He used a very simple, down-to-earth, lucid, succinct language and African stories and examples to drive home his message and to aid both the young and elderly religious to comprehend the text.

The book has two unequal parts. Part one examines the vows and explores their impact on the life of the religious and her environment. He interestingly points out briefly the rudiments of the African tradition that could be useful to preserve the religious life alive in Africa.

Prof. Bujo refers to the root of the vow of poverty (and the rest of other vows) as having nothing of one's self, except the life of God, losing everything for the sake of Jesus. He quotes St Paul's letter to the Philippians to buttress his statement: "More than that, I even consider everything as a loss because of the supreme good of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have accepted the loss of all things and I consider them so much rubbish, that I may gain Christ." (Phil 3:8). For him, poverty is not a state of destitution or loss but a freedom, a detachment from accumulation of material, unnecessary and unessential things. Poverty is a call to die to self and put on the love of Christ who had given away everything for our sake.

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Prof. Bujo, considering poverty from African point of view notes that our African families are often socially poor. Therefore, "Our entering religion is not resented, at least by our surroundings, as protesting against riches. On the contrary, given the social and economic conditions of our people, the masses think that becoming religious or a priest is equivalent to entering a life of ease" (p.25). As an erudite scholar Prof. Bujo corrects the above idea and suggests that our life as religious is not 'social insurance' as our people think and claim but a life for others especially the poor and the needy. Therefore, an African woman religious life is a life of service for others, she is expected to be physically *present* amongst the poor and the needy, "praying with them and empowering such prayers with practical commitments." (p.25).

The vow of chastity according to him is not a question of never to marry because of certain commitment but it is a question of total self-giving to God for the sake of the Kingdom. Considering the situation of things today, he posits that the vow of chastity is a "radical protest and criticism of a world that lives as if pleasure was a natural need like food." (p.42). Thus, the life of a religious should contradict this notion of the world, food is meant for the stomach and the stomach is meant for food. He advances to say that the vow of chastity is then a demanding commitment and a difficult one; hence, it is only through God that we can dare to undertake the journey. He cited three great figures of Christianity that lived a life of radical and perpetual self-giving: Jesus the Founder, John the Baptist, the Precursor and Paul, the Apostle of the Gentiles. These were celibates, though Jesus was one by nature, as Son of God, the other two gave up married life for the sake of the Kingdom of Heaven.

Prof. Bujo's insight and interpretations of the vow of chastity with reference to African culture is thought-provoking. He connects chastity with motherhood: "A woman religious that considers herself as mother to all others is one who understands well her consecrated virginity: she never stops being good to others, does all that she can to help the others blossom and develop" (p.47). Therefore, the spirituality of an African woman religious should not just end or concentrate on I am the 'spouse' of Christ. I am the 'spouse' of Christ is very much of Western expression, for him, I am 'mother' of Christ is very much better. He compares the women religious to our Blessed Mother Mary, though lesser than her, receive the Holy Spirit and give birth to Jesus in Bethlehem which means wherever God sends us to proclaim the Gospel. He argues that our meeting other people should always be like Mary's meeting with Elizabeth. Just as John danced and rejoiced in the womb during the encounter, people should also recognize the presence of Christ in us and dance for joy for we have brought them true joy and Salvation. Thus, through the vow of chastity we are sent to bring life to people and not death as Eve did.

The first argument of Prof. Bujo on the vow of obedience is based on the Constitution of the Sisters Servant of Jesus, Art. 33: "Our obedience is a participation in that life of Christ, following him in the docility of the Spirit..." So, a religious who embraces this vow gives up what is precious to her above all other things in life, her freedom, her self-will. But in his own words, he considers the vow of obedience from another angle: evangelical obedience is a "radical giving of one's self to the Father so

as to relieve the oppressed and free prisoners from the fetters of this world.” (p.52). Therefore, we should think of the vow not only as the formal conformity to rules and orders but to master the virtue of humility embodied in Christ.

Prof. Bujo admonishes both the religious superior and the subject on the dimension of obedience with particular reference to African culture where leaders could not be questioned in some African communities. Most importantly, he postulates that the authority of the superior is relevant only if it has root in God who never destroys life but gives life. Her utmost duty is to give life to people, to be the advocate of people without rights and human dignity, etc. While the subject should recognize the authority of the superior and have the sense and conviction to do God’s will for her through her superior.

He concludes the meditation on the three vows with a beautiful analogy; he refers to the religious as the standard bearers of bronze serpent who represents Christ. The Christ whom people look at and are healed and consoled. Thus, the religious should be the bronze serpent (Christ) that people will look at and be healed and consoled. They should always demonstrate the presence of Christ within them by their appearance. Prof. Bujo briefly describes how the religious communities should be oases in the desert. At the end, he articulates the modern idolatry to be rejected if we want to be true signs for others. They are uncontrolled desire for wealth (vow of poverty), disordered carnal desire (vow of chastity) and the obstinacy to doing our own will (vow of obedience).

The second part calls for the restoration of the vitality of religious life with ecclesia palaver. He points out the necessity to address every issue in the religious communities in the light of the Word of God and on the level of the Church as family of God. Prof. Bujo recognizes that the Word of God should be the model for all our human word to be uttered. He proffers three places we need ecclesial palaver for the growth of religious life in Africa: agnostic, irenic and therapeutic palaver. These are very important for positive progress in religious life especially for preserving the spiritual and bodily health of the religious community.

In summary, I found the book very inspiring. It offers valuable material for meditation. The book contains a comprehensive understanding of religious life from Scriptural, historical, theological and African traditional perspectives. The rationale behind the book is to give the religious especially the African women religious a new impulse to their religious spirituality as Africans which was met by the author. It is meticulously documented and reasoned with care and precision. A strong impression after reading the whole text is that this book has made an important contribution to the wider discussion of religious life in modern-day African cultures. Unfortunately, most of the footnotes were in either German language or French language, none was in English language which made the reading of the text a bit difficult. There was also lack of a useful selected bibliography for better understanding and further reflection of the subject matter. All in all, I would happily recommend the book for use in our formation houses and religious communities for spiritual reading and for those interested in religious life in modern-day African culture. In fact, my community has read and assimilated the book; we all enjoyed the invaluable content of the book.