

**THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN THE FORMATION
OF A COMMITTED CHRISTIAN IN THE SOCIETY**

Sr. Maria Regina Osondu, DMMM¹

ABSTRACT

This paper examines the role of a Christian family in the spiritual and social formation of a committed consecrated person. It addresses the family as central in the life of a child and the inalienable right of the child as a member of the family. The family, therefore, serves as the child's first domestic Church and micro-society. As a result, the child's family should respect and uphold the rights of the child. It also discusses the role of the family as the first Local Church and the evangelizer of the child. As primary evangelizers, parents initiate the primary growth in the spirituality of their child in words and practice. Pope Francis calls the parent-children evangelization Kerygma, "the most beautiful, most excellent, most appealing, and at the same time most necessary." Such gestures of faith in action nurture the spiritual growth of the children kindle the child's desire to embrace a higher commitment to a life of total self-giving in the service of the Lord and the Church. The call to total consecration, therefore, is an additional call to a Christian that requires total submission to the will of God through the observation and practice of the publicly or privately professed Evangelical Counsels: Obedience, Poverty, and Chastity in a stable state of life recognized by the Church. As some of the disciples of Jesus Christ withdrew when they could not embrace Christ's teaching on the Eucharist, so would a consecrated person who did not understand or accept the implications of the religious commitment question the rationality of the vows until such a person separates him or herself from the religious community. When the consecrated person decides to withdraw his/her religious obligations and returns to his or her former way of life, parents ought to respect such decision and strive to reintegrate him or her with the full rights of the member of the family and society.

INTRODUCTION

The role of the family in the formation of a committed consecrated person is dominant in God's creative work. At creation, God made them male and female and gave them the mandate to increase and multiply. When man disobeyed God his creator, God, in his infinite love and mercy wishing to restore man to his original glory of paradise, chose the human family. A committed consecrated person is likely to originate from a stable family where a man and a woman are lawfully united by the sacrament of matrimony and raise their children according to the mind of Christ. The Church and other authors teach that the family is the first Local Church and spiritual formator of the child. Through such stable families, God can call and form an authentic and committed consecrated person. A consecrated person, according to the teaching of the Church, is one that hears and

answers God's call to live a stable form of life in an institution approved by the Church.

THE ROLE OF PARENTS

The parental obligation in the formation of a Christian cannot be overstated. The role of parents toward the overall development of the child begins at the child's conception. The paternal concern, love, and care commence from the moment of conception and grow with the birth of the child. Because of the cares and concerns, parents invoke God's blessings and protection of their child. They begin to have extensive dreams about the education, moral, and perhaps the spiritual development of the child. They become the child's first natural and religious and the child's first Domestic Church. As parents endeavour to understand the material and health needs of the child they trace the sign of the cross on the forehead of the infant prior¹to baptism; thus, parents claim their child for God and informally make the child a Christian. Thus, *David, M. T.* referencing Pope John Paul II and St. John Chrysostom states that the role of parents as the first evangelizers of their children is to embody the gospel love in all their daily words and actions.¹ Steven Meyer, S.T.D. refers the family as the Micro-church that is comprised of the communion of the baptized, father, mother, and the children. He also states that the family, for Chrysostom, is like the Church as the family is a communion of baptized persons living in unity under the Headship of Jesus Christ that has visible and invisible dimensions.² Two types of activities make homes as Churches, he says, prayer and the centrality of Scripture.¹ Similarly, S. J. Pope states that the practices shared in Christian households provide a necessary foundation for family members' emotional health, moral and spiritual growth, social commitment, and ecclesial identity.³

In his Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, the Holy Father Francis believes and teaches that parents should provide the initial growth in spirituality to their children. Francis encourages parents to become the first evangelizers of their household. He states in an unequivocal way the importance of the contribution of parents in the evangelical mission of Jesus Christ. Francis writes that catechizing the children by the family and in the family is paramount in the formation of Christian families. He calls family evangelization Kerygma, "the most beautiful, most excellent, most appealing, and at the same time most necessary" that the Gospel message should resound in and among families.⁴

The universal Church that has been called to cooperate with parents through pastoral initiatives to achieve the mission of educating their children is deeply joyful, grateful, and comforted when families embrace the Church's pastoral ministry and continue faithful to the Gospel teaching. The Church also encourages such families to remain steadfast in the testimony they give as Domestic Church. Families should be glad and consoled when

they realize that they are partners with the Church to enter upon an ecclesial experience of communion among persons, which reflects, through grace, the mystery of the Holy Trinity from which they learn endurance, the joy of work, fraternal love, generosity, continuous forgiveness, and divine worship in prayer.⁵ This aspect of steadfastness in the spiritual and moral education of their children bears witness to the centrality of the family in the development of a solid and authentic Christian and a consecrated person.

Meyer, Steven writes that when a family becomes the Local Church, Christ is the visible and invisible head who presides in their midst when they gather in prayer, read the scriptures, and share their meals.⁶ This is an undeniable truth because the Lord says, "where two or three are gathered in my name, I am in their midst, (Matt.18: 20).⁷ From the Micro-church germinates the child's seed of faith, love, and stability; and God could choose a person to the consecrated life as Samuel, the son of Elkanah and David, the son of Jesse, were chosen for a specific purpose. (Sam. 3: 1-11, 17: 13).⁸ *David* writes that John Paul II affirms the parental role especially during the early stages of the development of the life of the child. He states that parents symbolize God for their children and that "Within the 'people of life and the people for life,' the family has a decisive responsibility."⁹ Part of this responsibility is to nurture stable children who would become reliable and committed Christians and or Consecrated persons in the service of God and his Church or in the society.

Parental responsibility to their children as a Micro- church is not limited to reading and oral encouragement and taking them to weekly or daily masses. It requires that parents send their children to catechism classes, take them to regular Sunday Masses (and Church for people that live far from the parish Church), and receive the sacraments especially the sacrament of reconciliation. Parents are to encourage their children to join pious societies and perform spiritual and corporal works of mercy. These aspects of parental responsibilities were what I received from my parents who were poor and semi-illiterate. They did not have the money, they had the faith and the authority that helped my siblings and me to embrace the Catholic faith, and in my case, a religious.

THE FAMILY

Although the modern society had developed various units called family, such as single-parent family, family through civil union, heterogeneous, and homogeneous member-families, an original family could be defined as a group of people knitted together through the union of lawfully married male and female who bear children and live together in a household. In the African context, the family encompasses both the nuclei and distant blood relatives, (the extended family system). The natural family, therefore, is critical and the only appropriate environment for developing and nurturing of a whole person for the Church and the society.

This is true as most of the parents of first candidates that received the call to the priesthood or the religious life were persons that were properly united according to the marriage customs and tradition before the advent of Christianity in Igbo Land. Some of these parents became converts to Catholicity at or after the ordination of their child

The Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace states that God plans that Adam and Eve, the first created persons should begin a family. Therefore, God gave them the authority to procreate when he commanded them to "Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth, (Gen 1:28)."¹⁰ Thus, in God's plan, the family is to be "the primary place of 'humanization' for the person and society." It is also the "cradle of life and love" where children learn the love and faithfulness of the Lord, and the need to respond to God's faithfulness and love in return.¹¹ It is in the family that children learn their first and most important lessons of practical wisdom that are inter-connected with Christian virtues. Because God regards the human family at creation, Jesus was born and lived in a concrete family and accepted all its characteristic features. God conferred to man the highest dignity on the institution of marriage, making it a sacrament of the new covenant. The family, therefore, can be defined as a divinely instituted organization born of the intimate communion of life and love founded on the marriage between one man and one woman. Being a divine and human institution the family has its own specific and original social dimension of interpersonal relationships that is a primary and vital cell of society.¹²

THE CONSECRATED PERSON

A consecrated person is one who God called from a family to embrace a life whose ultimate end is to build up the Church of God through love for the salvation of souls. The Code of the Canon Law of the Catholic Church,¹³ refers to a consecrated person as one who strives to live a life of perfect charity in the service of the kingdom of God thus, serving as an outstanding sign in the Church of the heavenly glory. The consecrated life, therefore, is an additional call to a Christian that requires a complete submission to the divine will through the observation and practice of the publicly professed Evangelical Counsels: Obedience, Poverty, and Chastity in a stable state of life recognized by the Church. Through their authentic Christian life, a family participates through prayer in nurturing the spiritual growth and stability of the one taken from its midst and who has accepted this additional positive step to co-operate with the grace of God to embrace the life of holiness and total surrender to the will of God. Consecration sets a person apart. He or she is synonymous with the Igbo Land sacrificial animals offered to the gods (*Iheagorola Arusi*) the untouchables abandoned in the wilds. Thieves would not steal, nor would a poor man sell them. The animals find themselves befitting environment for their abode and progeny.

The family and the community that understand this aspect of the life of a consecrated person would redesign their expectation from *Aturu ha jichuola Chineke Aja*, (the lamb they have offered to God). Realizing that he or she is a sacrificial animal that is set apart for the glory of God, the consecrated person is to understand and uphold the dignity befitting his or her consecration.

THE HOME OF A CONSECRATED PERSON

The consecrated person belongs perpetually to the family of the universal Church, the Domestic Church, and nuclei family. Because of this trinitarian belonging, the universal Church, the Domestic Church, and the nuclei family are obliged to support candidates to and consecrated persons with supplications to God to enable them to remain faithful and bear fruitful witness to God through the Church. With prayers like this, the family becomes like the Blessed Virgin Mary who hears the prophecy of the old Simeon, meets her only son viciously tortured and carrying the heavy cross on the way to Calvary yet encourages him to accomplish his mission for the redemption of humanity, (Luke: 35).¹⁴ She does this because she is convinced that the cross of her son is for the liberation of humanity bound by the chains of godlessness. The family that understands the mission and the elevated state of their child as the building up of the kingdom of God rejoices in both the poverty and riches their child, (when the child comes home, and requests for Garry and other edibles or comes home with a loaf of bread). Such resignation to the will of God for their child is an expression of the utmost conviction that the life of consecration is beyond the glamour, pomp, and jubilation of the day of ordination to the priesthood or religious consecration. It is a life of supreme sacrifice that the poverty of the family should not destroy.

Bishop Michael Burbidge stresses the importance of the family in raising people for the consecrated life. He writes that the family should be the foundation from which seeds vocations are received, planted, and the nurtured. Although parents nurture the seed of vocation with the help of God's grace, parents might not grasp the full demands of the life of Consecration. Therefore, Burbidge reiterates the responsibility of the consecrated persons to assist parents and family members to understand the responsibilities associated with their call. A fair understanding and knowledge of being set apart for the service of God in the Church, parents and family's perspectives might change. They would consider encouraging their consecrated child to fully embrace and adhere to the obligation of the life of consecration which include obedience and docility to the will of God.¹⁵ When families understand the essence of the life of consecration as the perfection of the love of God, they have understood that they offered to God an acceptable oblation that would begin on earth to yield its benefits. Because of this deep conviction, their view of the benefits of the priestly and

religious life deviates from the natural gain to spiritual benefits. Christ doubtlessly would fulfill his promise that abundant gift, pressed down, shaken together, and running over that would be poured into their laps, (Luke 6: 38)..¹⁶If Christ guaranteed a heavenly reward for anyone who gives these little ones a glass of cold water because they belong, Christ,(Matt. 10:42; Mark 9:41).¹⁷ how much more blessings would Christ bestow on the family that offers their child to God through the Church as a perpetual victim?

A Consecrated life is, therefore, according to the Code of the Canon law of the Catholic Church, a stable form of Christian living by those faithful who are called to follow Jesus Christ in a more exacting way recognized by the Church. The Catechism of the Catholic Church also states that the consecrated life is a life consecrated to God and it is characterized by the public profession of the Evangelical Counsels of Poverty, Chastity, and Obedience, in a stable state of life recognized by the Church.¹⁸Through their authentic Christian life, families participate in nurturing a person that cooperates with the grace of God to embrace the life of sanctification. Thus, the Code of the Canon Law refers to consecrated persons as people whose ultimate life- end is to build up the Church of God for the salvation of souls through striving for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom of God and, having been made an outstanding sign in the Church, for the heavenly glory.

The role of the development of a stable and consecrated person begins from the family - the Micro-church and the first evangelizer of the consecrated person. As the embodiment of the treasures of the Christian faith, parents, through their practical Christian life become the model for their children.¹⁹Thus, a stable family supports the spiritual journey of the child till Christ is fully formed in the child and a song of thanksgiving and praise resounds from the whole Church for the consecrated person that has become the sign of the eschatology.

THE PERSEVERANCE OF THE CONSECRATED PERSON

The light of faith, love, and stability that a family kindled which produced a consecrated person or an authentic Christian contribute to the growth of Christ's body the Church and kingdom of heaven. However, the authentic Christian- family- belief plays a little role in the eternal commitment of a consecrated person. During his earthly ministry, many became the disciple of our Lord Jesus. Discipleship was interesting, and many followed the Master. Their faith failed when the Lord Jesus preached the Eucharist. Many of his disciples withdrew because of Christ's teaching that his Flesh was real food and his Blood true drink for all who would enter the kingdom of God. The Lord turned to the twelve and asked them if they were to go. The fruit of this question is the unparalleled profession of faith that Peter made for himself and on behalf of the rest of the Apostles, "Lord

to whom shall we go? You have the word of eternal life"²⁰. As many of the disciples of Jesus withdrew their discipleship due to the Lord's teaching they found difficult to accept, so do many who zealously embraced the life of Consecration turn back when they encounter the responsibilities and obligations of consecrated life they did not comprehend. Moreover, in the modern world, the prevailing culture of materialism and hedonism conflict with religious practices. When a religious begins to experience such internal conflicts, the effect would be to start to rationalize and compromise the call to complete self-giving to the service of God and the Church. Such rationalization could result in disobedience as such religious would perform a task that his mind deems observable.

A disobedient religious is less likely to keep the other two vows, Poverty and Chastity. The Consecrated Life and its Role in the Church and the World state the difficulty to respond to the vocation to the life of Consecration is the idea of total surrender of oneself that some who felt they are called encounter. The inability to understand and make a total commitment to God and the Church prevent some people to make the fundamental and lasting commitment. What will the family do when their son or daughter had made a contrary decision? Does he or she no longer belong to the family? The child still belongs to the family and parents should embrace and reintegrate him or her into the family and society. The Compendium of the Church's Social Doctrine based on the biblical viewpoint teaches that the family is central in the life of the child and that the rights and dignity of the child as a member of the family are inalienable rights. As the first natural society of the child, the Church places the family at the center of the child's social life without compromising the rights of the child.²¹ As parents fulfill their role as the first nuclei and Local Church for and the first evangelizers of their children, the dimension of the perseverance of their consecrated child moves from their parental care. The candidate or the consecrated person becomes an adult. As an adult, his choices and decisions can no longer be questioned since his faith in and love for God no longer depend on the faith of his parents.

CONCLUSION

The role of the Christian family, therefore, is indispensable in the growth of the seed of a committed consecrated person. Parents are to view their role as the role of a Domestic Church and first evangelizers of their children through which the seed of vocation of their child to a life of consecration is propagated. They are to understand as the blessed Virgin Mary understood the vocation of Jesus and supported him to accomplish the redemption of humanity. Hannah also offered Samuel to God before Samuel heard and answered the voice of God. Similarly, God called David. All those that God called, he entrusted them with a specific mission. Parents and

The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life

Vol. 16, 2019. ISSN: 2659-0301 (Online) 1597 6610 (Print)

families are to persevere with the sacrifice they have offered to God, not letting poverty or riches distract and destroy the grace God has bestowed on them through the call of their child. Nonetheless, the perseverance of the consecrated person relies on God's will and Mercy. And the family should accept the will of God and reinstate their child should he or she make decision short of perseverance in a religious community.

References

- David Michael Thomas, (2003). *Pope John Paul II's Advice for Families*¹A Foundation for Life. <https://www.franciscanmedia.org/pope-john-paul-iis-advice-for-families/>
- Meyer, Steven, S.T.D. *St. John Chrysostom. The family as Micro-Church* <http://truthandcharityforum.org/st-john-chrysostom-the-family-as-micro-church/>
- Michael Burbidge (OCT. 30, 2014) *Families Need Contact with the Consecrated Life* <http://www.ncregister.com/daily-news/bishop-families-need-contact-with-the-consecrated-life>
- Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, (2004). *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church* (part 2, ch. 5). http://www.antoniano.org/carbajo/FST/Readings/Magisterium/EN_Compendium_CST.pdf (Accessed: September/24/2018)
- Pope Francis. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia* https://w2.vatican.va/content/dam/francesco/pdf/apost_exhortations/documents/papa-francesco_esortazione-ap_20160319_amoris-laetitia_en.pdf
- Pope S. J. *A place for everyone. Pastoral Challenges to the family* (C21 Resources Spring 2015). www.bc.edu/c21
- The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (CCC 944 -945) <http://archeparchy.ca/wcm-docs/docs/catechism-of-the-catholic-church.pdf>
- The Code of the Canon Law* (Can. 573 §1 & 607 §1).
- The Holy Bible*. Revised Standard Version, Old and New Testaments Catholic Edition (1946& 1952).
- Vatican (1994). *The Consecrated Life and Its Role in the Church and in the World* (1996).. <https://www.catholicculture.org/culture/library/view.cfm?recnum=5116> (Accessed: Sept. 23, 2018)