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WITNESSING TO MERCY AND TRUTH IN THE FAMILY:

***HEALING AND CARING FOR THE WOUNDED IN THE CHRISTIAN
COMMUNITIES AND IN SOCIETY***

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CONTACT

For contributions and all correspondence, write to:

The Editor,
The Catholic Voyage,
P.O. Box 2832, 400001, Enugu, Nigeria
Email: voyagecmsn@gmail.com
Tel. 08036002628; 042-251858

For Marketing, Distribution, Subscription and Adverts, contact:

The Marketing and Advert Manager,
The Catholic Voyage,
The Executive Secretary
Nigeria Conference of Women Religious
P. O. Box 2832
Enugu 400001,
Enugu State, NIGERIA Email: cmsn.mensecretariat@yahoo.com ; ncwrsec@yahoo.com.
Tel. +234 - 8036345466; +234-80-3404-7133; +234 - 042-251858.

CONTRIBUTORS

- Dr. Bartholomew CHIDILI, OSA
- Margaret FAGBAMIGBE, SSMA
- Lucy S. GIDADO, OLF
- Ikechukwu Anthony KANU, OSA
- Charity IMOEKO, SSH,
- Anselm JIMOH
- Ignatius MAKOJI, MDM
- The NOVICES OF THE INSTITUTE OF
THE EUCHARISTIC HEART OF JESUS (2016 Set),
with Rev. Sr. Josephine Akwaowoh, EHJ.

- Emeka NWOSU, OP
- Prof. Michael Alasa OGUNU
- Cecilia OMEIFE, EHJ
- Richard OMOLADE
- Maryann OSAROEJII, PHJC.

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EDITORIAL

This edition of *The Catholic Voyage* is inspired by the 14th Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2015) on the *Family* and by the Jubilee Year of *Mercy* which concludes on November 20, 2016. Mercy and the family remain themes of major interest and concerns today. The Synods of Bishops (in 2014 and 2015) propose a pastoral care attentive to mercy and truth, especially for the “wounded” persons and families, but also for the families who are not necessarily in crisis and are united, joyful and serene, albeit amidst daily struggles, while they strive to live faithfully their vocations according to the values of the Gospel and the teachings of the Church. All of them need and have a right to pastoral accompaniment. What's more, the agents of evangelisations such as the consecrated persons and clergy need encouragement. During the celebration of the Year of Mercy, the Church invites us to seriously dedicate ourselves -- at the level of reflection and of pastoral practice -- to give special attention to the family and promote the joy of love in the family life. Pope Francis' Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*, and his catechesis on the family offers some support and orientations in this regard, continuing the efforts of John Paul II and his *Familiaris Consortio*. The values and virtues of family are always necessary and relevant for all: they are relevant for the Christian married couples and their children; they are, in many ways, relevant for consecrated persons who not only come from biological families but are also called to live and relate with each other in their community as in a family; indeed, an entire religious institute is often described as “family”, a religious family. So, the institution of the family, the family values and virtues are important and pertinent to the Pastors, the religious leaders, consecrated persons, and other agents of evangelization. Hence, the Church calls them to offer committed pastoral care – by being faithful to their

own vocations but also by knowing, loving, and serving in truth and mercy the families that Christ entrusted to them.

The present volume attempts to take these elements into account. It proposes as its general theme: *Witnessing to Mercy and Truth in the family: Healing and caring for the wounded in the Christian Communities and in Society*. Many of the authors explore the role of consecrated persons in this matter. Here, note however, that the word “family” must be understood in both its strict and broad or analogous senses. This is because we recognise that: a) the family - the vital cell and the basic unit of society - is that based on marriage between man and woman, and it is composed of the parents, children, grandchildren, and other relatives; (b) The Religious Community, including the Formation Houses, of the institutes of Consecrated Life is seen and called to live as a family; (c) the community of believers are gathered and united in a diocese, a parish, or in Basic Ecclesial Community as a community of persons and families: the Church is a “Family of God”, as the prayers of the Eucharistic liturgy and the first African Synod (1994) frequently and forcefully remind us.

The Catholic Voyage, since recent years, tends to be mono-thematic, as the reader will have noted in its general themes and is reflected mostly in the first Section or column (“*Studies and Perspectives*”) of each edition: normally, these are scholarly articles. However, the journal also retains its good tradition of openness to welcome, in its other sections, write-ups on some other topical and important issues, presented in diverse genre of writings, that enrich, widen horizons and complement the broad theme and concerns of each edition. This volume maintains this tradition.

The volume opens, in its first Section, with Fr. Richard Omolade’s study on the mystery of God’s mercy. His article attempts to respond to this question: “Can we talk of human virtues, like mercy, only because human beings have been made in the image of God who gives the true meaning to all human striving?”. Fr. Bartholomew Chidili reflects on the Church as a symbol of God’s Mercy. He argues that by adopting the African image of hearth-hold, the Church poses to spread her limitless mercy to every human person but particularly to targeted downtrodden persons, through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy; the virtue of almsgiving is emphasized.

Within the Church and her mission the consecrated persons enjoy a unique place and have a vital role. The Christ’s lay faithful, too, acknowledge it. Professor Michael Ogunu, the National President of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites in Nigeria, describes the role of consecrated men and women as God’s instruments of mercy in our contemporary world. He explains what Christ teaches about mercy and the reasons for showing mercy, as well as the conditions for obtaining God’s mercy. Drawing from Sacred Scriptures and the works of eminent experts on works of mercy, the author describes practical ways in which consecrated persons, and indeed all Christ’s faithful, can perform the corporal and spiritual works of mercy in our broken world.

Fr. Anselm Jimoh, a philosopher, invites readers to a walk toward an authentic ontology of marriage. Relooking at recent attempts to redefine marriage as a union between “two persons,” his paper argues that contemporary definitions that deliberately omit the gender implicating terminology of “opposite sex” mutilate the authentic ontological meaning of marriage. He argues that, until we can correctly talk about a ‘female husband’ and a ‘male wife’ without contradictions in terms, the new definitions of marriage that recognizes same-sex unions is incorrect and ontologically misleading.

Fr. Kanu Ikechukwu’s research highlights the African family as a context for the Jubilee Year of Mercy. It focuses on the contextualization of the Bull of Indiction of the

Jubilee Year of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*, within the familiar parameters of the family, taking into account the socio-economic experiences of families in Africa. Sr. Cecilia Omeife's article highlights the responsibility and influence of the family and society in the necessary grooming of young people for ministry. It argues that the peace and development a society enjoys is the fruit of society's investment in its citizens' moral, social and spiritual welfare. The author attempts to respond to the question of whether grooming young people for ministry is, after all, a worthwhile enterprise.

The second Section turns our attention to matters that predominantly relate to consecrated life. Sr. Osaroeji investigates the value and role of conscience and discernment in the decision-making process in a religious community-family. Our conscience as Christians and as Consecrated persons, she argues, must be very active and alive. Decision-making is a process that is all-encompassing. It involves our daily lives. Religious Superiors, who are responsible for decision-making of their communities, should, according to the author, make the truth their focal point and, to achieve this purpose, be committed to discernment, communal discernment. What is the place and role of the Constitutions and the spirit and charism of the Founders/Foundresses in the process of making judgement?. On her part, Sr. Margaret Fagbamigbe, SSMA responds to this vital question: How can members of the religious family help their Superiors achieve the mission of healing and caring in the community? Her article intends to demonstrate that the mission of healing and caring is a feat of communal enterprise and a personal responsibility, and points out some attitudes which the members of the community must espouse in order to help the Superior fulfil his/her role as a leader.

Charity Imoeko, SSH, proposes a rich reflection on the engaging theme of the integration of faith and cultural values into the Consecrated Life in Nigeria. The necessity, importance and urgency of inculturation are emphasized. Drawing from Church documents and scholarly studies, Imoeko's insightful study shows how integrally our cultural values cannot be exempted from our Christian values. She explores the role of Consecrated persons in integrating authentic cultural values into every aspect of their witnessing to the Gospel values.

Outside the Religious community, consecrated persons carry out apostolates. Sr. Lucy Gidado explores one area of these. She examines the role of Consecrated Persons in the Pastoral Care of the family. As members of the church-family of God, all Consecrated persons somehow share in the church's concerns for the family. The apostolic charism of some Religious Institutes include the family apostolate. The author tries to articulate some key pastoral challenges the family is facing and practical ways in which Consecrated persons can offer a pastoral care to families that is holistic, effective, love-driven and value-based in our challenging and ever changing globalized world. She seems convinced that "consecrated persons have all what is required to competently keep Christian families 'alive' in faith, hope and love."

Another section of this journal -- designed to share reports, witness, experiences and/or interviews -- presents, in this edition, an interesting and practical reflection by a vibrant group of young religious women in formation, the Novices of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus. Their reflection focuses on the Religious Community as a family life, as they consider what the contributions of candidates in formation could be in advancing it. Since the future of the society and of the church is largely determined and influenced by the quality of the family, the authors acknowledge that the proclamation of mercy and of truth is the obligation of every Consecrated person. Consecrated persons, the authors claim, should be "persuasive preachers of mercy."¹ The efforts to enhance family values and the expression of mercy in religious community must be put in place.

The reflection shows why and how candidates on formation should begin to take steps right from the initial formation in order to, with perseverance, internalize the desired values. Fr. Ignatius Makoji, MDM, writes on the Great Jubilee Year of Mercy, and highlights that the Church is at the service of men and women in their earthly undertaking; nothing that is genuinely human fails to find an echo in the hearts of the Christians.

Finally, Fr. Nwosuh presents a critical review of the widely acclaimed and popular book collection titled, *Christ's New Homeland: Africa: Contributions to the Synod on the Family by African Pastors*. The reflections in this book are authored, as its subtitle indicates, by some experienced African pastors. A review of this famous and influential book shows that the voice and opinions of the church in Africa must not only count but be given serious consideration. This review fittingly complements the reflections of the preceding authors in this volume concerning marriage and family. It is a book that, as has been suggested, must be read alongside other documents of the two recent Synods of Bishops on the Family and particularly Pope Francis' Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*.

Consecrated life, mercy, truth, marriage/family life, inculturation are among the key issues the reader finds in this volume. In it, looking forward, we are not only offered additional resources for our further *reflection* on consecrated life and mission, on mercy and on family values; we are also presented with a challenging opportunity for a renewed and creative commitment to the spirit and apostolic *mission* of our respective Institutes of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life insofar as it concerns pastoral care of family.

Enjoy the reading!

Oseni J. Osilama Ogunu, OMV,
Editor-in-Chief

STUDIES AND PERSPECTIVES

BE MERCIFUL LIKE THE FATHER (LUKE 6:36): ENTERING INTO THE MYSTERY OF GOD'S MERCY

Rev. Dr. Richard OMOLADE²

ABSTRACT

The invitation of Pope Francis to Catholics and the world in general to celebrate a Jubilee Year of Mercy is both a profession of faith in God's goodness and an invitation to become like him. This presupposes the fact that while we acknowledge that God is undeniably merciful, human beings who are often recipients of God's mercy are far from being merciful. In a world that is daily characterized by violence and hurts inflicted by human beings upon one another, in a world filled with injustice and oppression inflicted by people who claim special affiliation to God; The face of God has become hidden and mercy seems more like an empty slogan, an unattainable goal. Yet, in relationships and legal processes, many continue to beg for mercy and hope that mercy will cushion the shortcomings in their relationships, but it is still a scarce virtue in human beings. No wonder many regard it as essentially an attribute of God that human beings are called to cultivate.

This paper examines the nature of mercy as an attribute of God and why human beings need it today. It also places in the right perspective the human desire to be like God by examining the necessary relationship between human virtues and divine attributes that provide the firm foundation for all virtues. In the final analysis, the paper argues that we can talk of human virtues only because human beings have been made in the image of God, and only God gives the true meaning to all human striving.

In the course of human history, certain years have been set aside to mark certain events. In essence, the year so set aside offered the world renewed opportunity to pay attention to the theme and to work towards the actualization of certain objects closely related to the theme. For instance, the Jubilee Year 2000 was set aside to mark the 2000 years of the Christian faith and the presence of Jesus Christ in human history. The Year of St. Paul proclaimed by Pope Benedict XVI took place between June 28, 2008, and June 29, 2009 to celebrate the 2000 years since the birth of St. Paul. Activities of the year focused on the life and writings of St. Paul, with a renewed call to Christians to model their life after this great apostle to the nations.

The Jubilee Year of Mercy, declared by Pope Francis and fixed for between December 13, 2015 and November 20, 2016 is meant to draw humanity's attention to one of the attributes of God, that of mercy and to invite human beings to work to receive this mercy as they extend the same to their fellow human beings. The theme of the Jubilee Year of Mercy captures this succinctly: "Be merciful like the Father." (Luke 6:36)

This presupposes that mercy is inherently to be found in God. It belongs to his nature as God to be merciful. Secondly, the mercy ascribed to God is not something that enhances his nature or an abstract quality. Mercy is ascribed to God because it is the essence of God, a mode of being, and a mode of doing something principally directed towards his creatures. God is merciful thus makes sense when fully expressed as God is merciful to his creatures. Human beings are the principal recipients of God's mercy. The call of the Jubilee Year of Mercy is for human beings to become like God; to be merciful, in this regard, not to God, since he does not need it, but to other human beings who constantly stand in need of mercy or loving kindness.

This goal of this paper is to clearly situate mercy as a divine attribute that is found in a preeminent way only in God but one which God also invites his children to share, such that through the practice of mercy, the divine transforms the earthly and the earthly is uplifted in an embrace of redeeming love. The first part of the paper is devoted to an examination of the term mercy. This is then followed by an examination of mercy as an attribute of God by a close study of some biblical passages. The next part examines the implication of man's beneficial relationship with God that is experienced in merciful deeds. Thus this part deals also with an examination of mercy as a virtue, especially as an effective virtue, one that the world is in dire need of today, just as the world is always in great need of the mercy of God.

Definition

The Hebrew word for mercy is חסד *hesed*. This is often translated as God's loving kindness or God's covenant love. According to *Theopedia*, "The term **mercy** may designate both character and actions that emerge as a consequence of that character."³ Viewed as a character, it is expressed in the form of compassion and forbearance. As an action, acts of mercy often include pardon, forgiveness or reduction of penalties. According to Louis Berkhof, mercy is "The goodness or love of God shown to those who are in misery or distress, irrespective of their deserts."⁴ It is a kind treatment accorded someone who deserves to be treated harshly. It is also in the nature of mercy, that it is exercised by a person who has another in his power or debt, or under his authority, for instance, a creditor or a judge. This understanding is well brought out in the Hebrew *Racham* – which means "to love," "to have compassion," or "to show mercy." Another way to understand mercy is to contrast it with grace. While Grace is getting what we don't deserve, hence it is known as gratis – free gift; Mercy is not getting what we do deserve. The Greek equivalent of mercy is *Oiktirmos* which means "compassion" or "pity." From the above analysis, mercy can be ascribed to both God and man, both can be merciful, but only man can experience the mercy of God and cannot exercise mercy towards God because God is not under the authority of man, but human beings are under the authority of God. It is this understanding that ascribes mercy to God as an attribute and to human beings as a virtue.

There have also been debates about whether mercy is virtue or passion. In the *Summa Theologica*, Aquinas remarked:

Mercy signifies grief for another's distress. Now this grief may denote, in one way, a movement of the sensitive appetite, in which case mercy is not a virtue but a passion; whereas, in another way, it may denote a movement of the intellective appetite, in as much as one person's evil is displeasing to another. This movement may be ruled in accordance with reason, and in accordance

with this movement regulated by reason, the movement of the lower appetite may be regulated. Hence Augustine says (De Civ. Dei ix, 5) that "this movement of the mind" (viz. mercy) "obeys the reason, when mercy is vouchsafed in such a way that justice is safeguarded, whether we give to the needy or forgive the repentant." And since it is essential to human virtue that the movements of the soul should be regulated by reason, as was shown above (I-II, 59, A4,5), it follows that mercy is a virtue.⁵

Furthermore, in the consideration of whether mercy is the greatest virtue, Thomas Aquinas says:

A virtue may take precedence of others in two ways: first, in itself; secondly, in comparison with its subject. On itself, mercy takes precedence of other virtues, for it belongs to mercy to be bountiful to others, and, what is more, to succor others in their wants, which pertains chiefly to one who stands above. Hence mercy is accounted as being proper to God: and therein His omnipotence is declared to be chiefly.⁶

Biblical Foundations of mercy as attribute and virtue

From a theological perspective, mercy is rooted in God and experienced in relation to God, from whom it may be acquired as a Christian virtue and exercised in relation to fellow human beings. Mercy is a central theme in the Old Testament as clearly illustrated in the theme of the Covenant. Though the covenant is essentially a relationship of love between God and his people, Israel, it was a relationship kept alive by the *hesed*, the loving kindness and forgiveness shown by God to his people. For instance, we read: "Do not hold past iniquities against us; may your compassion come quickly, for we have been brought very low. Help us, God our saviour for the glory of your name. Deliver us, pardon our sins for your name's sake." (Ps 79:8-9) Hence, according to Stackpole,

... if we understand mercy in the Biblical sense, then without any fear of error contrary to the faith, it can be said that mercy is the greatest attribute of God... [in other words] within this Biblical understanding, the results of the activity of merciful love are the greatest in the world and in this respect, mercy surpasses all other Divine attributes.⁷

In the New Testament, God's mercy is vividly and unequivocally seen in the sacrificial death of his only begotten Son, Jesus. His death was an act of mercy, a ransom that only God could come up with. The Hebrew word, *Kapporeth*, expresses this same understanding, since it

means "ransom," "propitiatory," Hence we read "But God proves his love for us in that while we were still sinners Christ died for us." (Rom 5:8) If God has done this much for human beings, the same is required of them. "Be merciful like the Father." (Luke 6:36) And it does not stop there, there is always a reward for virtue, hence "Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy." (Matt 5:7)

Mercy as an attribute of God

Mercy is one of the intrinsic attribute of God. It is one that is easily seen, experienced and talked about in the Old Testament (Ex. 34:6; Deut. 4:31, 2Chr. 30:9; Jonah 4:2). Numerous Psalms celebrate God's mercy and sinners confidently bask in its availability. While God's mercy is freely bestowed on the people if they repent, it is equally withdrawn on many occasion and draws down on the people severe judgment, such as in the flood, and the punishment of the people following the rebellion at Horeb. However, since mercy is a quality intrinsic to God's nature, God's judgment and discipline do not preclude mercy, they rather open new vistas of God's mercy. For instance, the following passages show that God's mercy always shines out and can be hoped for even in crisis, or when the wrath of God is being suffered. (2 Sam 24:14 ; Psalm 51: 1; Psalm 57:1 ; Isa 55:7 ; 60:10 ; Jer 31:20 ; Hab. 3:2)

When placed in the same situation, mercy does not come naturally to human beings, a lack of mercy is more natural to the human condition (Prov. 12:10). In 2 Sam 24: 12-16, even the choice of pestilence instead of being pursued by his enemy three months reiterates the fact that David felt more confident of finding mercy with God than from any human being. In this case as in many others, God's mercy is also the unmerited and undeserved favour bestowed on his people. It is a free gift, that is why some call it favour or grace. (Gen 19:16; Exod. 33:19 and Jer 42:12) An expression of God's mercy is his forgiveness of offence and the

people who commit them. The Psalms bear abundant testimony to the prevalence of mercy in such Psalms as Psalm 25:6 ; 40:11; 51:1 ; 69:16 ; 103:4 ; 119:77 ; Jer 3:12 ; 16:5.

While love epitomizes the core of the covenant between God and his people, it is vividly celebrated in the rich spectrum of acts that translate into mercy, such as compassion, forgiveness, pity, forbearance. Just like the love of God which is everlasting, God's mercy is also never-ending. Hence, in Lamentation, we read "The steadfast love of the Lord never ceases; his mercies never come to an end; they are new every morning; great is your faithfulness."⁸

Expression of God's mercy in the New Testament

According to the fathers of the Second Vatican Council, "God, the inspirer and author of both Testaments, wisely arranged that the New Testament be hidden in the Old and the Old be made manifest in the New."⁹ Hence the OT celebrates and points to, is made more manifest in the NT in various ways, but especially in the incarnation and death of Jesus Christ. The gift of his only begotten Son, is still the expression of God's merciful love to sinful humanity, a testimony to God's abiding love and fidelity to his people and covenant agreement, a point solemnly recalled by Mary in the *Magnificat* (Luke 1, 50;54;58;72;78). As was the case with the covenant, when it comes to mercy, God is always the initiator and his mercy is gratuitous. This is a point not lost to Paul when he said, "So it depends not upon a person's will or exertion, but upon God, who shows mercy." (Rom 9:16) The bestowal of mercy is entirely God's prerogative (2 Cor 1:3 ; James 5:11) and as Scripture testifies in numerous places, God grants it to whomever he wills. A useful example is the plight of the Pharisee and the Tax Collector in the Luke 18:9-14. Aware of his state as a sinner, and supposedly deserving of a harsh judgment, the tax collector entreated, "O God, be merciful to me a sinner." There is no doubt from the passage that he received mercy as a free gift from the Lord. Was it to

show himself benevolent that he first leads people to disobedience as implied by Paul in Romans 11:30-36, or the disobedience of mankind became an opportunity to receive God's mercy? Whatever the case, this situation of fall, weakness and helplessness describes all humanity and so opens the door of salvation to the Gentiles and not only the covenant people, Israel.¹⁰ Peter said the same when he remarked: "Once you were not a people; but now you are God's people; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy" (1 Pet 2:10). It is God the creator of all things that invites everyone into fellowship with him and an experience of his mercy. Hence it becomes all the more easy for people to cry for his help and mercy in their needs (Luke 18:13 ; 2 Timothy 1:16 Timothy 1:18 ; cf. Matt 15:22 ; 17:15).

Jesus, the physical embodiment and expression of mercy

The gospels testify clearly that Jesus is the perfect manifestation of the Father. The love of the Father for sinful humanity was demonstrated clearly in the life and death of Jesus, "for God so love the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him might not perish but might have eternal life." (Jn 3:16) The one who was sent, who died for humanity is the expiation for our sins (1 Jn 4:10). In other words, Jesus is the actual expression of God's love and mercy. In his life, words, and deeds Jesus also displayed eloquently the mercy of God. We have the deliverance of the man possessed by unclean spirit as a good example. This was a pathetic case; he could not be helped by anyone. After his deliverance, Jesus said to him "Go home to your family and announce to them all that the Lord in his pity has done for you." (Mark 5: 19) The mercy shown to the man is in contrast to the seemingly lack of mercy shown to the herd of swine that was lost. This was Mark's way of showing how much love and concern God has for human beings. A similar passage is found in Mark 10:47-52, when Bartimaeus was healed of his blindness. While the crowd

showed no pity (mercy) to the blind man, Jesus proved himself different and granted the man's request. In a similar way, Jesus cleansed the ten lepers who begged for his pity (mercy) (Luke 17:13). These passages show clearly that the people recognized that only God could show them mercy, not human beings.

In other words, God's mercy or merciful love is shown in his saving acts to his people. While the exodus exemplifies the unfailing love of God for his people in the Old Testament, in the New Covenant, it is the passion, death and resurrection of Christ. While in the OT, God delivered his people from bondage to Pharaoh, in the NT he saved them from bondage to sin. Both must be seen as God's acts of mercy. Jesus is thus the physical and fullest expression of God's Mercy. Hence, Scripture says "Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who in his great mercy gave us a new birth to a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead..." (1 Pet. 1:3) In the same vein, we read, "But when the kindness and generous love of God our savior appeared, not because of any righteous deeds we had done but because of his mercy, he saved us through the bath of rebirth and renewal by the holy Spirit, whom he richly poured out on us through Jesus Christ our savior." (Titus 3:4-6)

The proper response to God's acts of mercy both in the OT and in the NT is that of reciprocity, this time, not to God, but to others around who stand in need of mercy. One of the expressions of mercy among human beings is called almsgiving and it is highly prized in the New Testament (Lk 11:41; 12:33). The most challenging response demanded of believers is compassion as exemplified in the Parable of the good Samaritan (Luke 10:29-37). Mercy, otherwise celebrated as compassion, is expected of true disciples of Jesus. Here, mercy or compassion or pity is prized higher than pious observance of the law. 'Go and do likewise', Jesus told the Scholar of the law and all his followers are expected to heed the same

injunction. In so doing, believers mirror the same saving act of God. This in essence is what living the life of God entails. For Luke, it means “Be merciful like the Father” (Luke 6:36) and Matthew avers that the merciful will be shown mercy (Mt 5:7), a situation that was graphically demonstrated in the Parable of the unforgiving servant (Mt 18: 21-35). Having been forgiven his huge debt by his master, he was expected to show mercy, or have pity on his fellow servant, but he did not. Consequently, he forfeited the mercy he had received as grace and received the wrath that he deserved.

Unable to respond to God’s mercy by showing mercy to those who need it, human beings place themselves in position contrary to that ordained for them at creation, *imago dei*. Having been created in the very image of God, God has made it possible for human beings to have access to him. In the experience of God’s mercy, we experience an in-breaking of God’s kingdom and, in a similar way, by showing mercy to others, the in-breaking is extended to others. Refusal to practice mercy may therefore be likened to a denial of God or lack of faith in God. True faith in God must be expressed in real compassion towards others, hence, Jesus admonished the Pharisees to “Go and learn the meaning of the words, ‘I desire mercy, not sacrifice.’ (Mt 9:13)

Appropriation of divine attribute in human affairs

While human beings were created in the divine image, they remain human beings, essentially limited, fragile, material and mortal. One of the consequences of original sin is the pervasive weakness that often dominate human affairs such that, in the words of Paul, “For I do not do the good I want, but I do the evil I do not want” (Rm 7:19). The only way opened to humanity to get out of this dark tunnel of weakness, sin and death is the inestimable grace of

Jesus Christ (Rm7: 25; 8:1-10). In Christ, believers have a model to imitate. Christ embodies for the Christian the totality of the good desirable. In Christ and through Christ, a path is laid open to humanity and those who follow that path can hope to be recipient of the blessedness of heaven (cf. Matt 5:3-9). In deed there is need for this appropriation. Traditional Catholic theology has always seen God as immutable, unchanging, while this is true metaphysically, pastorally, it presents a picture of a God that is cold and uncaring, one that is hardly concerned about human affairs. It is difficult to conceive this God as a God of mercy. Yes, this precisely is the God that Christ has revealed to us. God is thus revealed as intimately involved in human affairs, uplifting it, redeeming it and transforming it. For Walter Kasper, mercy is a pastoral virtue, by which he means it is the virtue that brings love and Christ to people.

There are historical records to show the close affinity between Roman culture and the Christian faith, since the later developed rapidly in the Greco-Roman environment. One of the things we learnt about the Romans is their excellent legal system with its disdain for indiscipline and preference for justice, discipline and courage. Mercy has no role to play in this environment. No wonder, the crucifixion of Jesus has been couched as a typical display of Roman punishment, full of torment, lacking in mercy. Whereas mercy in Latin is *Misericordia* – literally meaning – *miserable heart*, because it goes out in compassion to the recipient, hence to the Romans, it is a disease of the soul. Here the difference between Christianity and Roman culture begins. Where mercy was not valued hitherto, Jesus came and taught that “Blessed as the merciful” (Mt 5:9). By this preaching and his very life, Jesus clothe in desirability what was hitherto spurned. Mercy is no longer an emotion we feel secretly in our mind or heart. Mercy makes sense only if it is what we do. If mercy is also understood as compassion, then it is pity with action, it is feeling with, being one with the one

who suffers or stands in need and doing something about it. Mercy is never an abstract idea; it must be expressed in action. This must be seen as an integral aspect of spirituality and religiosity. Jesus desires mercy much more than sacrifice, thus, the righteous must be a merciful person. The more righteous or spiritual one is, the more merciful one becomes. The righteous person is one who has been able to conform his life to God and lives in fidelity to his or her nature of having been created in God's image.

As object of God's mercy, human beings are therefore called to become agents of mercy. In the words of Cardinal Kasper,

This is exactly how God himself deals with us. God bends down in order to raise us up; to comfort us and to heal our wounds; and to give us a new chance, to bestow on us new life and new hope. And who would be so self-righteous as to think that he would not need such mercy? Mercy is the name of our God. Mercy is the call to be a human being, who feels with other human beings who suffer and are in need. Mercy is the call to be a real Christian, who follows the example of Christ and meets Christ in his suffering brothers and sisters. Mercy is the essence of the Gospel and the key to Christian life. Mercy is the best and most beautiful news that can be told to us and that we should bring to the world. As God by his mercy always gives us a new chance, a new future, our mercy gives future to the other, and to a world that needs it so much.¹¹

Human beings ought to cultivate the practice of mercy as one of their habits. The more noble, the better.

What is virtue?

“From the Latin word *vir*, meaning “man,” the Romans formed the word *virtus* to describe such so-called “manly” qualities as firmness of purpose and courage. Gradually this word was used for any good qualities in males or females. The English word *virtue* came by way of

French from Latin *virtus*.¹² Virtue then is considered to be a good and moral quality or a morally good behavior or character. Virtue is also seen as a commendable quality or trait, otherwise regarded a particular moral excellence. It is also a capacity to act, which in classical philosophical term is a potency.

Is virtue then an action or emotion? Thinkers such as Marc Jackson argues that virtues are good emotions, these include love, kindness, pity etc. For him these virtues are not character traits expressed by action, but emotions that people feel and are emotions developed essentially by feeling much more than by acting.¹³ For Kant, a virtuous act must be in conforming to moral principle. Even Aristotle's conception of Virtue as being closer to the golden mean, a point closer to one extreme than the other suggest that virtue relates to action. For him, virtues are not about feeling, since they are not acquired without a deliberate choice. No wonder, for Aristotle, virtue is excellence, and not just an average deed.¹⁴ In other words, virtue is not just action, but what makes us act in a certain way. Hence Arthur F. Holmes describes "virtues" in the following way:

A virtue is a right inner disposition, and a disposition is a tendency to act in certain ways. Disposition is more basic, lasting and pervasive than the particular motive or intention behind a certain action. It differs from a sudden impulse in being a settled habit of mind, an internalized and often reflective trait. Virtues are general character traits that provide inner sanctions on our particular motives, intentions and outward conduct.¹⁵

The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* provides a holistic view of virtue when it defines *Human virtues* as:

Firm attitudes, stable dispositions, habitual perfections of intellect and will that govern our actions, order our passions, and guide our conduct according to reason and faith. They make possible ease, self-mastery, and joy in leading a morally good life. The virtuous man is he who freely practices the good. The moral virtues are acquired by human effort. They are the fruit and seed of morally good acts; they dispose all the powers of the human being for communion with divine love.¹⁶

Putting all these traits together, the same documents says that “Virtue is a habitual and firm disposition to do good.”¹⁷ Seen this way, the list of virtues includes Prudence, Justice, Fortitude and Temperance, together known as the Cardinal virtues and, Faith, Hope and Love known as the Theological virtues. We also have Chastity, Generosity, Temperance, Brotherly love, Meekness, Humility and Diligence, sometimes referred to as the Capital virtues. A careful study should show that Mercy is not listed as a virtue. What then do we make of mercy as virtue to be cultivated and practiced by human beings? Hence the analysis of Ferkany as to the nature of mercy is incisive at this stage.

According to Ferkany, Mercy may be viewed as (1) Forgiveness of wrongdoing by someone, but principally overcoming hatred or resentment and the desire to punish the person who wronged us. (2) The penalty that someone deserves but is withdrawn, or reduced by the one who has the right to impose it, principally so that the execution of the penalty does not cause usual suffering to the person again; (3) Intentionally and compassionately treating another less harshly than we have reason to do, either morally or rationally; (4) Treating a person less harshly than, given certain rules, one has a right to treat that person.¹⁸ According to Ferkany, (1) is the least adequate form of mercy, since it is experienced only as forgiveness, and mercy goes beyond forgiving another person. For almost the same reason, Ferkany says the second conception is also inadequate. Conception (3) and (4) are worth evaluating in detail. Conception (3) requires that the agent of mercy must have the intention and be motivated by compassion. For this conception of mercy, its activities are done not from selfish reasons. As with the forgiveness element of mercy, Ferkany wonders if compassion is essential to mercy. Spiritually speaking this would have been an absurd thinking, but as an intellectual and rational discourse, it is a question worth examining.

If compassion is the painful emotion of having the suffering of another as its object and the desire to relieve it, which perfectly coincides with its Latin root – *cum passio* – to suffer with, some have argued that altruistic persons could perform their acts of mercy without experiencing the emotion we call compassion. The other explanation from the people of faith is to regard this deed and similar ones not pious acts but social acts. Ferkany actually listed situations where compassion may be difficult to muster, such as when the agent of mercy has been grievously wronged, or when the recipient is not experiencing any suffering.¹⁹

Where then does mercy lie? For Ferkany, and even Cardinal Kasper, mercy assumes its importance only when there is a right to treat another harshly and this is forgone. According to Ferkany,

Mercy is normally possible only when relevant social rules give us a right to treat another harshly. Having a fairly strong reason is not enough... mercy, as a form of charity, has a gift-life quality as part of its normative structure. So mercy ordinarily cannot be demanded in-principle, but only implored or pleaded for.²⁰

In the final analysis, mercy is intrinsically unmerited and undeserved, if it is deserved, then it falls under the realm of justice. God has shown his mercy to human beings, not because he derives any benefit from it, that would be selfish, or because it offers him opportunity to show compassion, he would be causing us harm or suffering just so he could show pity and this would be contrary to his nature as the supreme goodness. Human acts of mercy, therefore, must fulfill the same criteria. The point I am making is that if the exercise of mercy is out of man's goodness to another, or that it makes man feel good and look good, then the exercise of it is conditioned and does not meet the standard set by God. God is merciful to his creature because it is his nature, it is not required of him. Being merciful is who he is. This is what human beings are called to imitate, emulate and incarnate in their own relationship.

The exercise of mercy by God is the communication of his perfection to his creature, that is why Aquinas says that mercy is not just affective emotion, but effective, because it must involve a positive action. The mercy of God is not an abstract reality, it is a concrete experience, at this junction, human exercise of mercy cannot but follow the same path. Aquinas writes: "To feel sad about another's misery is no attribute of God, but to drive it out is supremely His, and by misery here we mean any sort of defect. Defects are not done away with save by an achievement of goodness, and as we have said, God is the first source of goodness"²¹

In the final analysis, while mercy is one of the attributes of God, the Jubilee Year of Mercy invites all people to embrace the practice of mercy towards others and actually make a habit. Mercy, seen as a desirable virtue is both a tendency and disposition arising from the core of our being, persons created in the image of God, who must, therefore, act in a certain way – like God himself. Mercy as a virtue then is more than an occasional impulse or a burst of energy to be good, flowing from God's goodness to human beings, it ought to become a habitual state of the mind, that propels us to act in this manner always, like God. In the *Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee Year of Mercy*, Pope Francis reminds humanity that "without the witness to mercy, life becomes fruitless and sterile, as if sequestered in a barren desert... Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instils in us the courage to look to the future with hope."²²

In conclusion, the virtue of mercy relates to who we are, *imago dei*. This is also true of the Church as a body, hence Pope John Paul II asserts "The Church lives in 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."²³Hence, for human beings, mercy remains a necessary

virtue to be cultivated and constantly nourished especially when it seems that human nature is more inclined to righting wrongs in the name of justice than restoring relationships in quest of our fundamental identity as persons in communion with God and the other. The plead for mercy is always a call directed to the core of life, be it divine life or human life. When we beg for God's mercy, we appeal to his nature as God who is infinitely good to his creatures. When others plead for mercy from us, they are always appealing for the goodness in us to come to the fore. Thus, mercy should not be a seasonal subject, an occasional enterprise, but an enduring character. Then shall we experience mercy as an attribute, an enduring trait reflecting our true identity and as a virtuous response to a world constantly in need of mercy. Then, we would have plumbed in some measures, the depth of the mystery of God.

THE CHURCH AS A SYMBOL OF MERCY: THE HEARTH-HOLD METAPHOR

Fr. Bartholomew Chidili, OSA
Kaduna State University,
Kaduna, Nigeria.
E-mail: udachidili@gmail.com

Abstract

This essay is essentially based on boundless mercy of God as it affects human persons. By adopting the African image of hearth-hold, the church poses to spread her limitless mercy to every human person but particularly to targeted downtrodden persons. The church is effecting this mercy through the corporal and spiritual works of mercy. The essay is particularly choosing almsgiving as the virtue that portrays proper conduit through which the intended mercy reaches the consumer. In the process it will be discovered that this particular works of mercy demand more than a humanitarian basis to articulate possible instruments in bringing about our eternal salvation. That is why the church in this essay insists that an indispensable motive drawn from supernatural order is crucial to authenticate the validity of our works of mercy. Hence, the work asserts that the Church's love for the

poor is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, by the poverty of Jesus and by his attention to the poor. Since this love concerns material poverty as well as the numerous forms of cultural and religious poverty, the church does whatever it takes at this moment in time to reach the desired audience. This is why, since her origin and in spite of the failing of many of her members, the Church continues the said various works for the relief, defence and liberation of human persons through almsgiving. It is against this backdrop that this essay articulates the mercy of God in this special year of Mercy.

Key Words: Mercy, Hearth-hold, Christianity, Community, Kingdom, *Kindom*, Family

(1). Preamble

The church as a symbol of mercy is conceived in Ekejuiba's metaphor of hearth-hold. She contends that the new metaphor understands the church as a 'hearth-hold' where all the children gather to receive their succour in times of need. When this new concept is grounded in African custom, it becomes the centrepiece of the community or family. In this case then, whereas the hearth-holder is the cynosure of the community or family the "householder is not necessarily the focal point of the well-being of that community." Consequently, the new church is envisioned to be a hearth, around which all should organize just as Africans organize around the hearths of women, some of whom might be 'biological mothers but not necessarily so'.²⁴ If this is accepted it follows that the image of the Church as the mother would be the same as the one mentioned in Gal. 4: 26.²⁵ If this is the case, it follows that the image resonates not only with 'the images of God as mother in some traditions and as provider and sustainer in Christianity.' But also corresponds with images of the compassionate Jesus, who cared so much for the physical and mental well-being of all he encountered. More so it tallies with the image of "the Holy Spirit, the advocate and comforter, many of whose attributes reflect the mothering on which African society depends"²⁶

Moreover, the church is likened to the African hearth-hold situation where people stay together for mutual support and encouragement. A typical illustration is when Africans gather around the hearth of their women to draw food, drink, banter and encouragement, just like the fearful nascent church gathered together after the Ascension of the Lord in mutual support for one another. In so doing they developed a community of human persons who believed in Jesus as their Messiah.²⁷ The present children of the church should gather around the church for their needs.²⁸ In other words, the present children of the church must do what it takes to form a kind of mother-child relationship, a community whose 'food security' and whose faith in God is nourished by Jesus".²⁹ While a Christian community that totally lives under God promotes the traditional terms such as 'kingdom,' 'reign,' 'household' as the image that guides them, at this point in time, within the African milieu it will be understood within the *kindom* which expresses the more meaningful term since it tells more of human relations than dominations.³⁰

(2.) The Church as a Family within the House-hold of God

At this period, as the Church is concentrating her meditation on the Mercy of God as it reflects on human persons, we assume this image of the hearth-hold of God to redefine the family of God. In this regard, we borrow from Bronstein *et al*, who in their journal, 'Family Relations Journal,' explain that there is no particular definition of family.³¹ This is because there is no single correct definition of what a family is. Instead, there are multiple definitions in the literature, and these are necessarily related to the values of those who supply the definitions. That is why Burnett and Lewis adopted a pedifocal definition which includes as family members, all individuals who are involved in the nurturance and support of a child, regardless of where the child lives. Their inclusive definition, according to the Journal, suggests that families may include nonrelatives and may have flexible boundaries. Moreover, the former tendency to treat individuals in the study of family type as homogenous has changed since Hare and Richards studied lesbian mothers with children. The Journal maintains that the heterogeneity that is inevitably present in any large grouping of people clearly emerged. The study demonstrated that the experiences of these women may differ depending on how their children were conceived.³² Similarly, by studying gay stepfathers, Crosbie, Burnett and Helmbercht cast light on the varying experiences of both gay men and stepfathers and therefore it affected the definition. The foregoing is an effort to say that the concept of family is no more what it used to be - i.e. a socially constructed phenomenon with fixed norms, values, and behaviours that vary widely and are formed or created by several processes.³³ Furthermore, Eshleman argues that viewing selected patterns of behaviour as fixed has led a number of scholars to question if the word family is even a meaningful concept, since it implies images of married couples, love, permanence, children, sexual exclusivity, home makers, legal unions, and intergenerational continuity. Such scholars have questioned whether these images are more than perceived idealism that is inconsistent with the realities of today's relationships: remarriages, dual careers, childless couples, one-parent households, same sex unions, gender inequalities, abusive partners and intergenerational disruptions.³⁴ Some writers, according to Eshleman, have asked if it is time yet to begin thinking about the family and families less in terms of traditional images and standards by which everything else is judged and more in terms of close relationships and sexually bonded primary relationships. The former term, he explains, suggests a traditional view held by a small segment of the population, while the later suggests a broader, comprehensive, more accurate portrayal of the reality of human close, primary, sexually bonded relationships.³⁵

Nevertheless, Eshleman accepts that it is difficult to find terms or concepts that differentiate family from nonfamily relationships and experiences. He quoted Ivan *et al* as suggesting the term sexually bonded as a characteristic. According to him, other scholars have suggested family realm as a term that differentiates familial types of human relationships from nonfamilial types, such as political, economic, medical, educational, military, and artistic relationships, among others. The family realm establishes ties across generations and includes characteristics of permanence, a comprehensive concern for all members, a process orientation that grows out of care-giving, a unique and intense emotionally, an emphasis on qualitative purposes and processes, an altruistic orientation, and a nurturing form of governance.³⁶

Consequently, all the preceding shades of family definitions fall within the adopted children of the church. Thus, the church as the hearth-hold presents all her children before the throne of Mercy, This is to purify them and adopt them as the children of God. Moreover, it is from this perspective then that the Church is theologically conceived as mother who provides, advocates and deeply cares for her children. This will bring the mystical church within the concept of African philosophy and religion where all human beings are construed as children of God. All these children of God belong to the household of God within which many hearth-holds exist. This means that all human beings belong to visible and invisible realms of God's world. It also follows not only that 'all of creation is cared for by God, the source of our being' but that 'the whole cosmos constitutes the *oikonomia* of God'³⁷

(3.) The Articulation of Mercy within the Jubilee Year of Mercy

It is from this understanding therefore, that the church conceives the 'Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy,'—as a period for remission of sins and universal pardon of the children of God, focusing particularly on God's forgiveness and mercy. From this understanding mercy is further understood as a virtue influencing one's will to have compassion for other people, and at times the said mercy alleviates another people's adversity.³⁸ According to St Thomas Aquinas, mercy is a spontaneous product of charity. But it is distinguishable from charity in the sense that it is a special virtue that draws out special sentiment of pity from the doer to the victim of mercy.³⁹ So while we can say that charity is a general term that covers the work of mercy, mercy itself goes specifically for individuals specifically targeted by the performer. This is why when cataloguing mercy, the Scholastics consider it to be refer to the quality of justice mainly because, like justice, it controls relations between distinct persons. It is as they say *ad alterum*.⁴⁰ Furthermore, as a virtue, mercy is always motivated by the misery discerned by people in another people, particularly in so far as this condition is deemed to be, in some sense at least, involuntary. Clearly the necessity which is to be assisted can be either of body or soul.⁴¹

Thus, the works of mercy are understood to be such charitable actions by which we assist our neighbours in their bodily and spiritual needs. In practice, they are known, in part, as spiritual works of mercy which translate to mean: instructing, advising, consoling and comforting as well as forgiving and bearing wrongs of the targeted neighbour patiently. When they are executed as corporal works of mercy they literally consist of feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead. Among all these, giving alms to the poor is one of the chief witnesses to fraternal charity: it is also a work of justice pleasing to God.⁴²

(4.) Almsgiving as an Expression of Strict Natural and Divine Law

From the divisions above it is clearly obvious that the works of mercy practically coincide with the various forms of almsgiving. Undoubtedly, this follows the classification of St. Thomas Aquinas. Deriving the proper meaning of almsgiving from Greek *eleemosyne*, *eleein* (to have mercy) and even Latin *miseratio*, with the same meaning, Thomas averred that almsgiving is an act of charity through the medium of mercy.⁴³ We have to note clearly, here

that the doing of works of mercy is not merely a matter of exalted counsel; it is rather a strict precept imposed both by the natural law and the Divine law enjoining their performance. When mercy is interpreted as essentially arising from the natural law it is as a result of the fact that the work of mercy is based upon the principle: do to others as you would have them do to you.

Moreover, focusing on the Divine command, we discover that it is strictly set forth by Christ under the pains of damnation in the event of anyone dares to fail to do it. For example, on the occasion of the Last Judgement in Matthew 25:41, Christ addressing those stationed on his left hand, saying: "Depart from me, you accursed, into eternal fire that has been prepared for the devil and his angels. For I was hungry, and you gave me nothing to eat. I was thirsty, and you gave me nothing to drink. I was a stranger, and you did not receive me as a guest; naked, and you did not clothe me; sick and in prison, and you did not visit me", etc. This is how corporal works of mercy is interpreted and how it is strictly binding. The spiritual works of mercy deal with a distress whose relief is even more imperative as well as more effective for the grand purpose of man's creation, but still the injunction above also extends to them. Moreover, Christ plainly refers to such works as fraternal correction such as, "If your brother sins, go and show him his fault when the two of you are alone. If he listens to you, you have regained your brother" (Matthew 18:15). Likewise, the forgiveness of injuries is another spiritual work of mercy. Christ clearly stated in Mat. 6:14 as follows: "For if you forgive others their sins, your heavenly Father will also forgive you." It is in the injunctions such as these and others like them that we mainly fulfil the spiritual works of mercy. Nonetheless, we have to bear in mind that the precept is an affirmative one, that is, it is of the sort which is always binding but not always operative, for lack of matter or occasion or fitting circumstances. It obliges, as the theologians would say, *semper sed non pro semper (season and out of season)*. In general, we assert that the determination of its actual obliging force is dependent on a given case. This also depends largely on the degree of distress to be assisted, and the capacity or condition of the one whose duty in the matter is in question.⁴⁴

(5.) The Nature of Our Obligation Towards the Indigent.

The variety of actual conditions delineating the needy specifies the nature of indigence. For example, where the necessities of life are drastically lacking or where imminent danger imposes threats on vital interests, indigence is understood to be crucially dangerous. Furthermore, where the absence of aid leads to serious reverses in goods or fortune, indigence is said to be serious or pressing. But where the quest for the necessities of life involves considerable trouble, indigence is understood to be common or ordinary. Thus, the obligation of almsgiving extends to this triple indigence as mentioned above. Certainly, the Scriptures and indeed the Fathers of the Church speak extensively on the poor, the needy, and the indigent Christians without restricting the obligation of almsgiving to any particular types of indigence. The same view is generally upheld by nearly all theologians.⁴⁵

However, in order to concretely determine the nature of the obligation, it is essential to consider the character of temporalities in those who possess property. In this case, 'property' is translated to mean assets or worldly goods; hence, those who possess worldly goods are the ones to be considered in this regard. Accordingly, the property necessary to maintain vital interests is crucially necessary. Moreover, property without which vital interests are not jeopardized is considered unnecessary to that interest. Property that is required to maintain social prestige, i.e. to live in keeping with one's position in society, to educate offspring, to

engage domestics, to entertain, etc., is considered equally indispensable from a social standpoint. Property without which social prestige is not endangered is reputed superfluous to that property. Consequently, there is never any obligation of using the necessities of life for almsgiving because well-regulated charity ordinarily obliges everyone to prefer his own vital interests to those of his neighbour. The only exception occurs when the interests of society are identified with those of a needy member⁴⁶

Furthermore, the Catholic moralists teach that a neighbour, who is in extreme indigence, must be relieved by using such commodities that are superfluous to vital interests, even though such should be required for social advantages.⁴⁷ For charity demands that the vital interests of an indigent neighbour should supersede personal advantages of a much lower order.⁴⁸ It should be noted also that the transgression of this obligation involves a mortal sin. Nevertheless no one, however wealthy, is obliged to take extraordinary measures to assist a neighbour even in direful straits, e.g. a wealthy citizen is not bound to send a dying pauper to a more salubrious clime or to bear the expense of a difficult surgical operation for the betterment of a pauper.⁴⁹ Nor is a wealthy individual obliged to endanger his social standing to assist a neighbour in extreme need.⁵⁰ For charity does not bind anyone to employ extraordinary means in order to safeguard his own life.⁵¹ However, alms must be given to a neighbour in a serious or pressing indigence by using such commodities as are superfluous in relation to present social advantages. Certainly, more likely in the more acute forms of such indigence those commodities which may in some measure tend to future social advantages must be taxed to succour this indigence.⁵² The transgression of this obligation likewise involves a grievous sin because well-regulated charity obliges one to meet the serious needs of another when he can do so without serious personal disadvantage.⁵³

Moreover, in the ordinary troubles confronting the poor, alms must be given from such temporalities only as are superfluous to social requirements. This does not imply an obligation of answering every call, but a readiness to give alms according to the dictates of well-regulated charity.⁵⁴ Theologians are divided into two schools regarding the character of this obligation. Those holding the view that the obligation is serious seem to espouse a cause in harmony with the teaching of the Scriptures and the authority of the Fathers.⁵⁵ At all events, such affluent individuals as always fail to give alms or harshly repel mendicants indiscriminately are unquestionably guilty of grievous sin. Whosoever is actually obliged to relieve extreme or pressing indigence must give whatever is necessary to ameliorate existing conditions. While it is not an easy matter to determine what amount must be given as alms to those labouring under ordinary indigence, St. Alphonsus, whose view on this matter is shared by many modern moralists, holds that an outlay corresponding to two percent of temporalities superfluous to social prestige suffices to satisfy the obligation because were all concerned to adopt this method ordinary indigence could easily be remedied. At the same time it is not always practical to reduce problems depending so largely on moral appreciation to a mathematical basis.⁵⁶ Consequently, all the concerned persons who are either spontaneously contributing to public and private charities or are forced by the law of the land to pay such levied taxes to support the indigent, fulfil this obligation to some extent.⁵⁷ Physicians, attorneys and artisans are bound to render their services to the poor unless provision is made for them at public expense. The extent of services to be rendered and the character of the obligation binding thereunto depend on the kind of indigence and the inconvenience which such ministrations impose on physicians, attorneys or artisans.⁵⁸ Though the notion of almsgiving embodies the donation of commodities necessary to lighten human misery, moralists admit that it is sufficient to lend an object whose use alone serves to meet a

neighbour's need.⁵⁹ Moreover, common sense repudiates almsgiving to those in need simply because they will not labour to escape such need.⁶⁰

(6.) The Distinctive Characteristics of Spiritually Fruitful Almsgiving

In addition to its innate characteristics, almsgiving should be vested with qualities tending to garner fruitfulness for giver and receiver. Almsgiving should be discreet, so as to reach deserving individuals or families.⁶¹ It should be prompt, so as to warrant opportuneness.⁶² It should be secret and humble,⁶³ cheerful,⁶⁴ and abundant.⁶⁵ The harvest of blessings to be reaped by almsgiving amply suffices to inspire noble-minded Christians "to make unto themselves friends of the Mammon of iniquity." First of all, almsgiving renders the donor like unto God Himself,⁶⁶ any more, it renders God Himself debtor to those giving alms.⁶⁷ Moreover, almsgiving adds special efficacy to prayer,⁶⁸ it tends to appease divine wrath,⁶⁹ liberates from sin and its punishment.⁷⁰ Thus, it paves the way to the gift of faith.⁷¹ Daily experience proves that those lending a helping hand to stave off the miseries of the poor frequently prepare the way for the moral reformation of many whose temporal misery pales before their spiritual wretchedness. Finally, almsgiving tends to guard society against turbulent passions whose fury is often checked by almsgiving.⁷²

(7.) The Phases of Almsgiving

The various phases of almsgiving may be reduced to two chief classes: individual or transitory, and organized or permanent.

(7a.) Transitory Almsgiving

Such cases of indigence as frequently fall under the eye of sympathetic observers constitute the subject-matter of transitory almsgiving. Though charity organizations have multiplied their sphere of usefulness, special cases of indigence, more readily and effectually reached by individual attention, will always abound. Moreover, experience proves that the conduct and conversation of private benefactors frequently dispose their beneficiaries to reform their ways and lives and become useful members of the Church and State. For this reason, there will always be a wide field for individual almsgiving.⁷³

(7b.) Organized Almsgiving

At the same time, many worthy poor people are too sensitive to appeal to private persons, while many undeserving persons assume the role of professional mendicants to extort aid from those whose sympathy is easily moved, and whose purse strings are loosened to answer every call. Moreover, how much better to forestall than to relieve indigence? To render the poor self-reliant and self-supporting is the noblest achievement of well-regulated charity. Sound religious and secular education, means and opportunities for labour, more than almsgiving, will facilitate the realization of this lofty object. This is why various organizations have been established to alleviate the different forms of corporal misery.⁷⁴ From empirical evidence, it is glaringly clear that the Church has since the time immemorial been and still the best friend of the poor people all over the world. Up to this moment, the credit of taking the initiative in promoting systematized effort for the welfare of the needy goes incontestably to the Church. So abundantly have her labours been blessed that her success has evoked the admiration of her sworn enemies.⁷⁵

Moreover, organized charity is furthered by the concerted efforts of persons in their private capacity or by the official proceeding of those whose position binds them to seek the temporal well-being of all classes in society. The various corners of the globe are dotted with institutions of innumerable kinds, reared and maintained by the generosity of private parties. Human misery in its various stages, from the cradle to the grave, finds therein a haven of consolation and rest, while the prayers of inmates, legion in number, call the blessing of Him who is the Father of the poor, upon the heads of those whose liberality proves that the charity of the brotherhood defies limitation.⁷⁶

Though admirable and far-reaching in its influence, privately organized charity is incapable of effectually coping with the various forms of misery. This is why civil governments shape their legislation to make provision for such subjects that failed in their efforts in the struggle for existence. Various institutions destined to provide for needy citizens of every class are conducted under State patronage.⁷⁷ Directors are appointed, attendants installed, visiting and inspection required, reports submitted, and appropriations annually made to meet the exigencies of such institutions. Encouragement and opportunity are not denied to those disposed to self-drive, self-respect, and self-support.⁷⁸

Noteworthy indeed are the associated charities inaugurated by the government to promote organized charity. Throughout cities, bureaus are established and officials deputed to examine the actual condition of mendicants, so as to discriminate between worthy and unworthy appeals. To this end friendly visiting is encouraged. Proselytizing is discountenanced, so much so that in many localities Catholics and non-Catholics join hands in the work of organized charity. Movements along these lines are to be found in England, Scotland, France, Italy, and Canada. Those best qualified to speak authoritatively in this matter are eloquent in their expression of the good feeling between Catholic and non-Catholic workers, and equally eloquent in summarizing the admirable results attained through this union of forces. These movements represent the culmination of noblest effort to concrete almsgiving in its fullness, so that givers themselves may share in affection, sympathy and thought with receivers, thereby animating almsgiving with a human, nay, more, a Divine element tending to ennoble the poor in healing their misery.⁷⁹

Similarly, the law imposing spiritual works of mercy is subject in individual instances to important reservations. For example, it may easily happen that an altogether special measure of tact and prudence, or, at any rate, some definite superiority is required for the discharge of the oftentimes difficult task of fraternal correction. Similarly to instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, and console the sorrowful is not always within the competency of everyone. But to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive offences willingly, and to pray for the living and the dead are things from which on due occasion no one may dispense himself/herself from on the pleas that he/she has not some special array of gifts required for their observance. This is to say that they are evidently within the reach of all.⁸⁰ Continuing his series of weekly address devoted to mercy, in this line of thought, Pope Francis reflected on Luke 6:36-38 during his September 21st general audience, saying: “We are reminded of our call to be merciful even as our heavenly Father is merciful (cf. Lk 6:36).” Then he adds, “When we look at salvation history, we see that God’s whole revelation is His untiring love for humanity which culminates in Jesus’ death on the Cross.” Continuing, the Pontiff exclaims: “So great a love can be expressed only by God!” Additionally, the Pope explains that Jesus’ call to humanity to be as merciful as the Father is, however, not a question of quantity (i.e. number of times). Instead it is a summons to be signs, channels and witnesses to his mercy. This is the church’s mission

[on earth], to be God's sacrament of mercy in every place and time. As Christians, therefore, God asks us to be his witnesses, first by opening our own hearts to his divine mercy, and then by sharing that mercy towards all people, especially those who suffer.⁸¹

(8.) Conclusion

From the foregoing, we can certainly assert that the works of mercy, are charitable actions by which we assist our neighbours in their bodily and spiritual needs. In practice, they are known, in part, as spiritual works of mercy which translate to mean: instructing, advising, consoling and comforting as well as forgiving and bearing wrongs of the targeted neighbour patiently. When they are executed as corporal works of mercy they literally consist of feeding the hungry, sheltering the homeless, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, and burying the dead as narrated earlier, demand more than a humanitarian basis if they are to serve as instruments in bringing about our eternal salvation. That is why the church in the aforementioned works of mercy insists that an indispensable motive drawn from supernatural order is crucial to authenticate the validity of our works of mercy. Hence, we assert that the Church's love for the poor is inspired by the Gospel of the Beatitudes, by the poverty of Jesus and by his attention to the poor. This love concerns material poverty and also the numerous forms of cultural and religious poverty. This is why, "since her origin and in spite of the failing of many of her members, the Church has not ceased to work for their relief, defence and liberation through numerous works of charity which remain indispensable always and everywhere".... In her teaching, the Church constantly returns to this relationship between charity and justice: Thus, when we attend to the needs of those in want, as enumerated above we give them what are theirs and not ours in actual fact. Thus, we can honestly submit conclusively that works of mercy are more than performing works of mercy; we are indeed paying a debt of justice.⁸² In this way, we earnestly articulate the mercy of God within this year of Mercy.

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TOWARDS AN AUTHENTIC ONTOLOGY OF MARRIAGE

JIMOH, Anselm Kole, Ph.D.⁸³

Department of Philosophy
Seminary of Saints Peter and Paul
P.M.B. 5171, Secretariat P.O.
Bodija – Ibadan. Nigeria.
jimohanselm1@yahoo.com

Abstract

In recent times, marriage is redefined to accommodate the concerns of “gay-rights” movements. Against the classical understanding of marriage as a union between two persons of opposite sex for the purpose of domestic partnership and reproduction of one of its kind, contemporary definitions tend to leave out the gender implicating terminology of “opposite sex”. Marriage is thus defined as a union between two persons. This paper argues, using the Kantian notion of marriage that such definitions that deliberately omit the gender implicating terminology of “opposite sex” mutilates the authentic ontological meaning of marriage. Ontologically and etymologically, real marriage is between a male and a female, where the male is the husband and the female the wife. Until we can correctly talk about a “female husband” and a “male wife” without contradictions in terms, the new definitions of marriage that recognizes same-sex unions is incorrect and ontologically misleading.

Key Words: Marriage, Ontology, Same-sex union.

Introduction

The legalization of same sex union in the United States of America by the Supreme Court attracted public outburst of rejection by some and jubilation by others. It awakens fundamental issues bordering on the ontology of marriage. Marriage is the foundation of the family and the family is the foundation of society. Therefore, marriage is the foundation of society. Sequel to this logic, if the marriage institution is destroyed, the foundation of society is under the threat of destruction. Generally, marriage is considered as the contractual union aimed at raising a family. It bestows on the married partnership, the right to have sex, and provides domestic security. Marriage is a socially or ritually recognized union between two spouses it establishes rights and obligations between the married couple, between them and their children and between them and their in-laws. Although we find different definitions of marriage arising from different cultures, all cultures however, acknowledge marriage as an institution within which sexual interpersonal relationship is acknowledged.

Moral philosophers raise issues about interpersonal moral obligations and their limits, as well as a good human life within marriage. Political philosophers consider whether, and if, how society and the state should organize sex, love and intimacy. These considerations have narrowed down to the legality, morality and appropriateness of same-sex unions, polygamy and abolition of marriage. In the light of these issues, using the Kantian notion of marriage as contained in *The Science of Rights* (1790), this paper, through a critical analysis reaffirms the authentic ontological meaning of marriage. It therefore, contests the appropriateness of same-sex union and calls for a return to the traditional notion and values of marriage.

The Kantian Notion of Marriage:

Kant’s discussion of marriage under the rights of the family as a domestic society is preoccupied with four issues: (i) The natural basis of marriage, (ii) The rational right of

marriage, (iii) Monogamy and equality in marriage, and (iv) Fulfilment of the contract of marriage. These came under his title of conjugal right.

The Natural Basis of Marriage:

Marriage, for Kant, is the foundation of domestic relations and it is the foundation of the natural reciprocity or intercommunity (*commercium*) of the sexes.⁸⁴ The emphasis is on ‘the natural reciprocity’, which brings about a union of the sexes. It takes three forms according to the mere animal nature: *vaga libido*, *venus vulgivaga*, and *fornication*, or according to law. When it is according to law, it is referred to as marriage. Therefore, marriage is “the union of two persons of different sex for life-long reciprocal possession of their sexual faculties”.⁸⁵

The union of marriage may be directed towards “the end of producing and educating children [which] may be regarded as always the end of nature in implanting desire and inclination in the sexes”.⁸⁶ This is however, not necessarily an end that legitimizes marriage. If it is, it implies that marriage would cease to be when the production of children ceases. The intercommunity of marriage which serves the purpose of conjugal union, “*usus*”, of the married persons is a natural one and thus enables the married to reproduce their own kind. But it can also be unnatural, when marriage is between persons of the same sex or between a person and an animal of another species than humankind.⁸⁷ For Kant, the unnatural “*usus*”, either between persons of the same sex or between a person and an animal of the different species is a transgression of all law that should not even be talked about. It is a wrong against humanity in the person that cannot be saved from entire reprobation by any limitation or exception.⁸⁸ Kant considers marriage, either for reproduction of one of their own kind or for reciprocal sexual enjoyment “a contract necessary in its nature by the law of humanity”.⁸⁹ According to him, “if a man and a woman have the will to enter on reciprocal enjoyment in accordance with their sexual nature, they must necessarily marry each other; and this necessity is in accordance with the juridical laws of pure reason”.⁹⁰

ii. The Rational Right of Marriage: The natural *commercium* of the marriage union, which implies an enjoyment in which one person gives up him/herself to the other does not translate into a situation of one person possessing the other for selfish sexual gratification. In Kant’s opinion,

In this relation the human individual makes himself a *res* [something substantive or concrete as against a *spes*, which is something unreal or ethereal], which is contrary to the right of humanity in his own person. This, however, is only possible under the one condition, that as the one person is acquired by the other as a *res*, that same person also equally acquires the other reciprocally, and thus regains and reestablishes the rational personality.⁹¹

This implies that such a reciprocal and respective surrendering and acceptance of, or by, one sex in relation to the other is really only possible and permissible under the condition of marriage. It is only within the condition of marriage that the personal right acquired is real in kind by both partners. As the one partner receives and acquires the other partner so the other partner receives and acquires the one partner. Therefore, Kant argues that this characteristic of marriage is established by “the fact if one of the married persons run away or enter into the possession of another, the other is entitled, at any time, and

incontestably, to bring such a one back to the former relation, as if that person were a thing”.⁹² By this, Kant implies that each partner in marriage has equal right over the other, while none of the partners loses his/her personality. What partner A gives up he regains in partner B, ditto, what partner B gives up she regains in partner A. This introduces the grounds for monogamy and equality in marriage.

iii. Monogamy and Equality in Marriage: Married persons are related to each other as equals in the mutual possession of each other as well as their goods.⁹³ Consequently, marriage can only be appropriately and truly realized in monogamy. Polygamy negates the fullness of giving in reciprocal order. As Kant puts it, “in the relation of polygamy the person who is given away on the one side, gains only a part of the one to whom that person is given up, and therefore becomes a mere *res*”.⁹⁴ Although, under a special contract, they have right to renounce the use of any part of their goods, which means that, while they can regulate the use of their goods in polygamy without one partner being a mere *res*, same cannot be with the giving of self. Consequent upon this principle, concubinage would be more like a situation where one can hire and fire the other and therefore, does not enjoy the status of marriage. It involves the acquisition of another for the sole purpose of use – a mere *res*.

iv. Fulfilment of the Contract of Marriage: Conjugal cohabitation completes the contract of marriage. Therefore, when two persons of different sex enter into the contract of marriage and mutually agree to abstain from conjugal cohabitation or with the consciousness of the other person’s inability to conjugally cohabit, what you have is a simulated contract of marriage and not marriage in the real sense.⁹⁵ Such a simulated contract can be dissolved by either of the partners at will. However, if it is a case of inability that arises after marriage, which means it is a contingency that is not legally blameable, the contract of marriage is valid and not diminished by the fact of the inability.

Marriage is not constituted by the very fact of cohabitation without a preceding contract, neither is it constituted by a mere contract without subsequent cohabitation. Marriage is the effect of the obligation formed by two persons of different sex, who enter into sexual union on the basis of reciprocal possession of each other.

The Altering Notions of Marriage

The classical notion of marriage as ‘made in heaven’ offers a theological justification for the conception of marriage as an indissoluble union, which constitutes the only permissible *locus* of sexual activity.⁹⁶ It is also conceived as a biological phenomenon instituted by human societies. This latter notion accommodates various forms of marriage, like polygamy and polyandry, and justifies them in relation to their social functions.⁹⁷ From its Latin etymology, *maitare*, which means “to marry” or “provide with a husband or wife”, and *matrimonium*, which is a combination of the concepts of “mother” and “action, state or condition”, marriage has always being tied to cohabitation, procreation, and family. Socially, marriage denotes a recognized union between spouses who have obligations towards each other as well as rights. The meaning varies from one culture to another, but generally implies an institution that recognizes and acknowledges sexual interpersonal relations between the married.

Over the centuries, the notion of marriage evolved to accommodate the wide variety of marital practices obtaining in various cultures. Anthropologists propose various

competing definitions of marriage and according to Evan Gerstmann, “definitions of marriage have careened from one extreme to another and everywhere in between.”⁹⁸ Even the scripture, which many often refer to in establishing their take on marriage does not seem to provide an explicit definition of marriage. According to Anthony Ewherido, there is no exact definition of marriage in scripture, “what we have are establishments that are identified as marriages”.⁹⁹ Edvard Westermarck once defined marriage as “a more or less durable connection between male and female lasting beyond the mere act of propagation till after the birth of the offspring”.¹⁰⁰ Later he abandoned this definition for a provisional definition of marriage as “a relation of one or more men to one or more women that is recognized by custom or law”.¹⁰¹ This provisional definition of Westermarck simply follows the drift of society by accommodating different forms of unions that contemporary society recognizes as marriage. If he were to define marriage now, it is likely that he would drop the terms that are gender referent and simply refer to two or more persons. This would ensure the accommodation of same-sex unions as marriage.

The *Merriam-Webster Dictionary* defines marriage as “the state of being united to a person of the opposite sex as husband or wife in a consensual and contractual relationship recognized by law” ... “the state of being united to a person of the same sex in a relationship like that of a traditional marriage”.¹⁰² The second definition, which is apparently a more recent inclusion is an attempt to include the concern of gay-lobbyists and bring to bear current trends in the social and legal understanding of marriage. These attempts by Merriam-Webster and Westermarck to accommodate same-sex marriage prompts the question whether marriage is a mere social, political or legal phenomenon or it goes beyond these, as an institution?

Authenticating the Ontological Meaning of Marriage

Within the understanding of the Kantian notion of marriage, what *is* marriage? The interest in this fundamental question is the “is”. It gives the crucial understanding of the ontology of marriage. The term ontology was fleshed by Aristotle and Thomas Aquinas. As a 17th century concept that designates *being* as a *model*, it points to the *essential* in the existence of a thing. The emphasis is on *esse*, which is the Latin infinitive for “to be”, from which the modern word “essence” is derived. The essence of a thing is absolutely necessary to the *being* of the thing; separate the essence from the thing, it ceases to be the thing. Therefore, the essence defines the very core of the thing.¹⁰³ In the question, what is marriage, if we suppose the answer to be, “marriage is a union between husband and wife”, where lies the essence?

This definition provides us with two possible interpretations: (i) that the essence of marriage is the participation and union of husbandness and wifeness, and (ii) that marriage as observed historically appears to be the participation and union of husbandness and wifeness. To accept one interpretation or the other, we must appeal to ontology.

Ontology makes a distinction between the substance and the accidents of a thing. While the substance of a thing refers to that, without which the thing cannot be, the accidents are properties of the thing that are not essential to it – the thing can be without its particular accidents. Take for instance, a triangle. The accidents, which Aquinas refers to as quiddities or peculiarities would be its acuteness, obliqueness or dimensions, while its substance would be its ‘third’, which makes it ‘tri’ by closing up the open and contiguous

side to form a ‘third and final angle’. This distinction between substance and accidents remains a debate, with some arguing that it is non-existence, others argue that they may exist but such a distinction is not necessary.¹⁰⁴

Traditionally, the participation and union of husbandness and wifeness – that is, of maleness and femaleness is conceived as the substance of marriage.¹⁰⁵ The factor of maleness which corresponds to the husbandness and femaleness, which corresponds to wifeness provides the prospect of generating one of its kind – reproduction. This is a historically secular and religious fact. As Shaun Kenney posits, “to remove husbandness or wifeness from this equation makes the statement false”.¹⁰⁶ Therefore, ontologically, marriage *is* between a husband and a wife. Does it mean that husbandness or wifeness is the essence of marriage?

Kant’s analysis of the ontology of $7 + 5 = 12$ would be enlightening here. According to Kant, sevenness or fiveness is not the essence of 12, but if we remove either of them, along with the plus or equal sign, the equation $7 + 5 = 12$ would be false and nonsensical. In the same vein, while husbandness or wifeness is not the essence of marriage, to remove either of them would implicate the definition of marriage. That marriage is ontologically between a husband and wife is an analytic truth. The concept of husband necessarily implies a man who has a wife, while the concept of wife necessarily implies a woman who has a husband.

Aside the fact of history, the etymology of the term “marriage” confirms this. Marriage is a derivate of “marry”, which itself derives from the Latin words: *maritus* – a husband, and *marita* – a wife. The English “husband” comes from the Old English word for house – *hus* and owner or owning yeoman – *buondi*. “Wife” comes from the Old English word for woman – *wif*.¹⁰⁷ It will not only be ontologically absurd to talk about a husband without a wife or *vice versa*, it would be contradictory and nonsensical. To define marriage without the notion of husband or wife would be contravenous as well as ontologically irrational.

Conclusion

Contemporary attempts to redefine marriage as a union that does not necessarily have to be between persons of different sex – male and female, throws up the question whether we can talk about a female husband and/or a male wife. If this is ontologically possible, it follows that same-sex marriage does not contravene the ontological status of marriage.

The notion of a “female husband” implies a woman who is a man. Note that we are not talking about *a woman who is playing the role of a man* or *a man who is playing the role of a woman*, as we would be made to accept with the case of same-sex unions. The definition of husband, both from its ontological meaning and its etymology implies that “husband” is necessarily a man and therefore a male. A “woman man” or “female husband” is therefore a contradiction as it falls foul of the logical laws of identity and non-contradiction, it is absurd. The essence of marriage requires the concepts of husbandness and wifeness. Both concepts ontologically imply maleness and femaleness, respectively. Consequently, the idea of same-sex marriage is not only absurd, it is ontologically meaningless and epistemologically ridiculous.

**THE AFRICAN FAMILY AS A CONTEXT FOR
THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY**

By

Kanu Ikechukwu Anthony, O.S.A, Ph.D.

Augustinian Institute, Makurdi

Ikee_mario@yahoo.com

Abstract

The Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, Misericordia Vultus was given on April 11th 2015, the eve of Divine Mercy Sunday. In the Bull, the Holy Father, Pope Francis said that he proclaimed the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy so that the Church may gaze even more attentively on mercy so that she may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives. It is also a special time for the Church when her witness might grow stronger and more effective. The present research focuses on the contextualization of the Bull within the familiar parameters of the family. This contextualization is necessitated and anchored on the socio-economic experiences of families in Africa. For the purpose of this research, the

phenomenological and particularist approach are employed for the purpose of contextualization. This piece has discovered that the contextualization of the Jubilee Year of Mercy to the African family provides a locale for a more effective discourse in the Jubilee Year of Mercy for progressive transformation.

Keywords: African, Family, Socio-Economic, Jubilee Year Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus*.

Introduction

The concept ‘mercy’ is at the heart of the redeeming mission of Christ. The whole episodes of leaving the glory of the Father, the Word taking flesh, dying on the cross of Calvary, etc., was simply to give mercy to fallen humanity. And even when the disciples were called by Jesus and sent out, it was to communicate this mercy to those they met. In a world of selfishness, greed, individualism, etc., mercy connected the heart of a person with the other: the unfortunate with the fortunate, the loved with the unloved, the ‘alive’ with the dying, etc. The Latin word for mercy is *misericordia*. Thomas Aquinas interpreted the word *misericordia* in its linguistic sense: to have one’s heart (*cor*) with the unfortunate (*miseri*), to have one’s heart with those who are suffering. It has something to do with feeling with or suffering with (compassion): *miserumcorhaben super miseriaalterius* (having an unhappy heart on account of the misery of another).¹⁰⁸

This notwithstanding, fundamentally, mercy is an attribute of God, which has defined the relationship between God and the human person right from the very beginning of time. The human person, therefore, shares in the life of God- as his image and likeness, who is Merciful. We thus, attain our true humanity when we show mercy after the image and likeness of God. As the church gazes more attentively on mercy in the Jubilee Year of Mercy, that she may become a more effective sign of God’s mercy, situations have arisen when there is a need for the contextualization of the Jubilee Year of Mercy. Following the current conditions of life in the African Family, especially as the African family occupies a fundamental place in the community of traditional African institutions, the present work has chosen the African family as a socio-cultural context for reflection in the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

The Jubilee Year of Mercy

On March 13th 2015, Pope Francis I, at the second anniversary of his election as the 266th successor of Saint Peter, announced that he would be convoking the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. The celebration began on 8th December 2015-the feast of the Immaculate Conception- and it is scheduled to end on 20th November 2016-the Solemnity of Christ the King. Right from the beginning of the pontificate of Francis I, mercy has occupied a central place in his teachings and actions. His Papal motto is the same with the one he had as the Archbishop of Buenos Aires: *miserando atque eligendo*: By having mercy on him, he chose him; this motto is taken from Matthew’ experience of Jesus’ call to discipleship. Matthew was a tax collector, a sinner, however, when Jesus passed by the tax office, he had mercy on him, and in spite of his sins and sinfulness, he called him to be a disciple saying to him: *follow me*. The choice of this motto was also based on his experience at the confessional in September 21, 1953 on the feast of Matthew the apostle. At the age of 17, as a young boy, at the confessional, he had a deep spiritual experience of God’s mercy. This experience

informed his decision of embracing the religious life in the footsteps of St Ignatius of Loyola, founder of the Jesuits.

The Roman Pontiff, thus, sees himself in the light of Mathew the tax collector whom Jesus had mercy upon and chose. More so, the call for the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy was inspired by the Letter of St Paul to the Romans: *for God has consigned all men to disobedience that he may have mercy upon all* (11:32). Also by Matthew's gospel: *Blessed are the merciful for they shall receive mercy* (5:7). In Luke's gospel, the Pope also drew inspiration from the scripture that says: *Be merciful just as your father is merciful*. More concretely, we live in a history that is filled with all kinds of terrors, violence of all kinds against women, children and men. The level of abortion is alarming. Efforts to curb terrorism have created more issues than it set out to control. The number of refugees in the world is on the increase. The Roman Pontiff sees this as an opportune time to seek for God's mercy and be merciful to one another.

The Bull of Indiction - *Misericordia Vultus*

The Bull of Indiction of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, *Misericordia Vultus* was given on April 11th 2015, the eve of Divine Mercy Sunday. In the Bull, the Holy Father, Pope Francis I said that he proclaimed the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy so that the Church may gaze even more attentively on mercy so that she may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives¹⁰⁹. It is also a special time for the Church when her witness might grow stronger and more effective¹¹⁰. The Jubilee year opens on 8 December 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception¹¹¹, reason being that it recalls God's redemptive action of mercy from the very beginning of the history of mankind. After the sin of Adam and Eve, God did not wish to leave humanity alone in the throes of evil. So he turned his gaze to Mary, holy and immaculate in love (cf. Eph 1:4), choosing her to be the Mother of man's Redeemer. When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. The Roman Pontiff writes, "I have chosen the date of 8 December because of its rich meaning in the recent history of the Church. In fact, I will open the Holy Door on the fiftieth anniversary of the closing of the Second Vatican Ecumenical Council. The Church feels a great need to keep this event alive."¹¹² This is based on the teachings of his predecessors and the vision of Vatican II. Saint John XXIII, at the opening of Vatican Council II, indicated the path to follow: "Now the Bride of Christ wishes to use the medicine of mercy rather than taking up arms of severity."¹¹³ The Jubilee Year would end on 20th November 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King. "On that day, as we seal the Holy Door, we shall be filled, above all, with a sense of gratitude and thanksgiving to the Most Holy Trinity for having granted us an extraordinary time of grace"¹¹⁴.

Expounding on the implications of the theological content of the Year of Mercy, the Holy Father taught that this year is a key that indicates God's action towards us. In the Sacred Scripture, God does not limit himself merely to affirming his love, but makes it visible and tangible. Love, after all, can never be just an abstraction. By its very nature, it indicates something concrete: intentions, attitudes, and behaviours that are shown in daily living. The mercy of God is his loving concern for each one of us¹¹⁵. This is the path which the merciful love of Christians must also travel. As the Father loves, so do his children. This is at the heart of the Church's mission: her credibility is seen in how she shows merciful and compassionate love. "Mercy is the foundation of the Church's life. All her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her tenderness to the world can be lacking in mercy"¹¹⁶.

To reinforce the message of mercy, Pope Francis drew attention to the great teaching of John Paul II's encyclical *Dives in Misericordia* (*Rich in Mercy*). He drew attention to two passages: First, Saint John Paul II highlighted the fact that we had forgotten the theme of mercy in today's cultural milieu: "The present-day mentality, more perhaps than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy."¹¹⁷ Furthermore, Saint John Paul II pushed for a more urgent proclamation and witness to mercy in the contemporary world: "It is dictated by love for man, for all that is human and which, according to the intuitions of many of our contemporaries, is threatened by an immense danger. The mystery of Christ ... obliges me to proclaim mercy as God's merciful love, revealed in that same mystery of Christ. It likewise obliges me to have recourse to that mercy and to beg for it at this difficult, critical phase of the history of the Church and of the world."¹¹⁸ The church is, therefore, called upon to be a servant of mercy and to mediate it to all peoples.

The Vicar of Christ places the practice of pilgrimage at the heart of the Year of Mercy. The act of pilgrimage to the Holy Door of Mercy in Rome and other parts of the world requires pilgrimage, which further teaches believers that mercy requires dedication and sacrifice¹¹⁹. He further expresses his burning desire that during this Jubilee, the Christian people may reflect on the corporal and spiritual works of mercy when he said:

It is my burning desire that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may 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. And let us enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as his disciples. Let us rediscover these 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 not forget 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, and pray for the living and the dead¹²⁰.

The document also teaches that the season of Lent during this Jubilee Year is to be lived more intensely, with emphasis on the Sacrament of Reconciliation: "The season of Lent during this Jubilee Year should also be lived more intensely as a privileged moment to celebrate and experience God's mercy. How many pages of Sacred Scripture are appropriate for meditation during the weeks of Lent to help us rediscover the merciful face of the Father?"¹²¹ Focusing more intensely on the sacrament of reconciliation, the Roman Pontiff writes: "Let us place the Sacrament of Reconciliation at the centre once more in such a way that it will enable people to touch the grandeur of God's mercy with their own hands. For every penitent, it will be a source of true interior peace"¹²². In a very practical way, Pope Francis will send out Missionaries of Mercy during Lent of this Holy Year, who will be a sign of the Church's maternal solicitude for the People of God, enabling them to enter the profound richness of this mystery so fundamental to the faith. Added to this is that the jubilee year entails the granting of indulgences¹²³.

The Pope went on to extend the message of mercy to members of criminal organizations and to those who engage in corrupt practices. He writes,

May the message of mercy reach everyone, and may no one be indifferent to the call to experience mercy. I direct this invitation to conversion even more fervently to those whose behaviour distances them from the grace of God. I particularly have in mind men and women belonging to criminal organizations of any kind. For their own good, I beg them to change their lives. The same invitation is extended to those who either perpetrate or participate in corruption. This festering wound is a grave sin that cries out to heaven for vengeance, because it threatens the very foundations of personal and social life. Corruption prevents us from looking to the future with hope, because its tyrannical greed shatters the plans of the weak and tramples upon the poorest of the poor¹²⁴.

The Pope takes the practice of mercy beyond the walls of the church to include other peoples: Muslims and Christians. He writes:

There is an aspect of mercy that goes beyond the confines of the Church. It relates us to Judaism and Islam, both of which consider mercy to be one of God's most important attributes. ... I trust that this Jubilee year celebrating the mercy of God will foster an encounter with these religions and with other noble religious traditions; may it open us to even more fervent dialogue so that we might know and understand one another better; may it eliminate every form of closed-mindedness and disrespect, and drive out every form of violence and discrimination¹²⁵.

Towards the end of the bull, Pope Francis turns to Mary, Mother of Mercy:

My thoughts now turn to the Mother of Mercy. May the sweetness of her countenance watch over us in this Holy Year, so that all of us may rediscover the joy of God's tenderness. No one has penetrated the profound mystery of the incarnation like Mary. Her entire life was patterned after the presence of mercy made flesh. The Mother of the Crucified and Risen One has entered the sanctuary of divine mercy because she participated intimately in the mystery of his love¹²⁶.

After Mary as the Mother of Mercy, the Pope extends his thoughts to the saints and blessed ones who have made divine mercy their mission in life. In this regard, he singles out St. Faustina:

Our prayer also extends to the saints and blessed ones who made divine mercy their mission in life. I am especially thinking of the great apostle of mercy, Saint Faustina Kowalska. May she, who was called to enter the depths of divine mercy, intercede for us and obtain for us the grace of living and walking always according to the mercy of God and with an unwavering trust in his love¹²⁷.

He ended the Bull by asking us to open our hearts to God who can surprise us on the path of mercy¹²⁸.

A Theological Concept of the Family

A cursory glance at the historical evolution of the Church, reveals that throughout the centuries, the Church has maintained her constant teaching on marriage and family. In the Second Vatican Council document, *Gaudium et Spes*, an entire chapter was devoted to the promotion of the dignity of marriage and the family¹²⁹. It defined marriage as a community of life and love¹³⁰, placing love at the center of the family and manifesting, at the same time, the truth of this love in counter distinction to the various forms of reductionism present in contemporary culture. It further emphasized the grounding of the spouses in Christ. So that the bride and groom, consecrated and, through his grace, build up the Body of Christ¹³¹. After the Second Vatican Council, the Church through different documents and in various ways has refined its teaching on marriage and the family. Pope Paul VI, in his Encyclical *Humanae Vitae*,¹³² displayed the intimate bond between conjugal love and the generation of life. In like manner Pope St. John Paul II, in his Letter to Families *Gratissimam Sane*¹³³ and Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio*¹³⁴, devoted special attention to the family.

More recently, Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, took up the topic of the marriage and the family, emphasizing that “marriage based on an exclusive and definitive love becomes the icon of the relationship between God and his people and vice versa. God's way of loving becomes the measure of human love”¹³⁵. Furthermore, in his Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, he emphasizes the importance of love as the principle of life in society¹³⁶. In his Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, Pope Francis, reflected on the relationship between the family and faith: “Encountering Christ, letting themselves (young people) be caught up in and guided by his love, enlarges the horizons of existence, gives it a firm hope which will not disappoint. Faith is no refuge for the fainthearted, but something which enhances our lives. It makes us aware of a magnificent calling, the vocation of love. It assures us that this love is trustworthy and worth embracing, for it is based on God's faithfulness which is stronger than our every weakness”¹³⁷.

Since the family is a miniature Church, a place where the gospel is accepted and transmitted, it is an evangelizing community: it is first evangelized and evangelizes. It is evangelized through the parents receiving and communicating the gospel to their children and the family radiates this gospel, touching other families and the neighborhood of which it forms part. For the fulfillment of these fundamental roles, Pope Benedict XVI called on families to draw strength from the Eucharist, the sacrament from which the marriage covenant flows, is structured and continually renewed¹³⁸.

The Challenges of the Family in Africa

Focusing on the African family, Betty and Khadiagala avers that African families are embedded in political and socio-economic circumstances that are characterized by long-standing domestic dynamics of economic fragility, debilitating poverty, poor governance and civil conflicts. Throughout the 1990s, the scourge of HIV/AIDS has put additional pressures on the sustainability of families and households. Similarly, the new demands unleashed by forces of globalization have had mixed outcomes for African families, simultaneously enhancing the chances of families to seize the opportunities for participation in larger economic exchanges while at the same time heightening their vulnerability to these forces¹³⁹.

John Paul II observes that in the midst of obvious developments and advancements:

Signs are not lacking of a disturbing degradation of some fundamental values: a mistaken theoretical and practical concept of the independence of the spouses in relation to each other; serious misconceptions regarding the relationship of authority between parents and children; the concrete difficulties that the family itself experiences in the transmission of values; the growing number of divorces; the scourge of abortion; the ever more frequent recourse to sterilization; the appearance of a truly contraceptive mentality¹⁴⁰.

There are also cases of selfishness, self-affirmation, a troubling individualism which destroys matrimonial union; there are cases of poverty, the lack in the necessary means of survival, such as food, work, housing and medicine, and the most elementary freedoms. The Fourteenth Ordinary General Assembly observes that there is a general feeling of powerlessness in the face of socio-cultural realities that oftentimes end in crushing families. "The negative impact on the family is clear, as seen in the demographic crisis, in the difficulty of raising children, in a hesitancy to welcome new life and in considering the presence of older persons as a burden"¹⁴¹.

The Assembly further observes that some cultural and religious contexts pose particular challenges like polygamy and arranged marriages; in places where Catholicism is the minority, there are cases of mixed and interreligious marriages with difficulties in terms of jurisprudence, Baptism, the upbringing of children and the mutual respect with regards to difference in faith. This creates the danger of relativism or indifference. There are cases of cohabitation before marriage or simply cohabitating with no intention of a legally binding relationship. There are places where civil legislation has compromised marriage and the family. There are also places where a great number of children are born outside marriage, many of whom subsequently grow up with just one of their parents or in a blended or reconstituted family. Children thus, become a source of contention between parents and become the real victims of family break-ups. In many parts of Africa, simply being a woman is a source of discrimination and the gift of motherhood is often penalized rather than esteemed. There is an increasing violence against women, where they become victims, unfortunately, often within families and as a result of the serious and widespread practice of genital mutilation in some African cultures. The sexual exploitation of children is still another scandalous and perverse reality in present-day Africa.

The family and the Jubilee Year of Mercy

1. The Family and Reconciliation in the Year of Mercy

Pope Francis teaches that "No family drops down from heaven perfectly formed; families need constantly to grow and mature in the ability to love". People grow in holiness, and the family must be there to give them a helping hand rather than turn them away because they have not attained some degree of perfection. Parenting is a unique relationship, a pilgrim journey from birth to death. It is being like God who from the beginning of history still continues to deal with children who can be wayward, disobedient and disrespectful at times and at others loving, caring and obedient. Whoever plays a parenting role in a family can practice and teach the Spiritual Works of Mercy. In fact, it is part of parental obligation to admonish the sinner, instruct the ignorant, counsel the doubtful, comfort the sorrowful, bear

wrongs patiently, forgive injuries and pray for the living and the dead¹⁴². The Jubilee Year of Mercy provides the opportunity for families in discord to come together again.

2. The Family and Education in the Jubilee Year of Mercy

One of the corporal works of mercy is to teach the ignorant. Within the context of the family, one of the fundamental vocations of married couples is giving education that is, teaching their children. In this way, they participate in the creative activity and authority of God the Father, Jesus the Good Shepherd and the motherly love of the Church, by helping the newly born child to live a fully human life. This responsibility on the part of the parents is essential, original and primary. It is a role that is irreplaceable and inalienable, and thus cannot be delegated to others to do¹⁴³. The Church teaches that,

Since parents have conferred life on their children, they have a most solemn obligation to educate their offspring. Hence, parents must be acknowledged as the first and foremost educators of their children. Their role as educators is so decisive that scarcely anything can compensate for their failure in it. For it devolves on parents to create a family atmosphere so animated with love and reverence for God and others that a well-rounded personal and social development will be fostered among the children. Hence, the family is the first school of those social virtues which every society needs¹⁴⁴.

In the whole process of educating the child is the importance of parental love. Parental love is a basic element in this curriculum. Parental love is an animating principle, which places education at the service of life and enriches it with the values of kindness, constancy, goodness, service and self-sacrifice. *Africae Munus* teaches that,

The family is the best setting for learning and applying the culture of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation. “In a healthy family life we experience some of the fundamental elements of peace: justice and love between brothers and sisters, the role of authority expressed by parents, loving concern for the members who are weaker because of youth, sickness or old age, mutual help in the necessities of life, readiness to accept others and, if necessary, to forgive them¹⁴⁵.”

As the first fundamental school of social living, Children in the family must be taught the true sense of justice. By maintaining peace and love within the family, the family therefore becomes the first teacher of peace and reconciliation. This flows from the relationship between the husband and wife; their self-giving therefore becomes a model and a norm for the self-giving that must be practiced in the relationships between brothers and sisters.

For this reason, the family is the first and indispensable teacher of peace.” By virtue of its central importance and the various threats looming over it – distortion of the very notion of marriage and family, devaluation of maternity and trivialization of abortion, easy divorce and the relativism of a “new ethics” – the family needs to be protected and defended, so that it may offer society the service expected of it, that of providing men and women capable of building a social fabric of peace and harmony¹⁴⁶.

Another important element that must not be left out in educating the family is sex education. It is a basic right and duty of parents which develops the child's authentic maturity and makes the child capable of respecting and fostering the nuptial meaning of the body. There is no time when the education of the child assumes more importance than during the Jubilee Year of Mercy.

3. The Family and Prayer in the Jubilee Year of Mercy

Christian families are to offer prayers together, as husband and wife and as parents and children. The words of Jesus have great relevance here: "For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I in the midst of them"¹⁴⁷. Family prayer has for its own very object *family life itself*, which in all its varying circumstances is seen as a call from God and lived as a filial response to (remove the) God's call. Therefore, parents have the specific responsibility of educating their children in prayer, introducing them to the gradual discovery of the mystery of God¹⁴⁸ and to personal dialogue with him¹⁴⁹. By praying together with their children, parents exercise their royal priesthood and penetrate the innermost depths of their children's hearts, making an impression that the future events of their lives may not be able to efface. Thus Pope Paul VI recommends the Family Rosary Prayer¹⁵⁰. Paul VI teaches that it is thus that we build the church¹⁵¹, for there is a deep and vital bond between the prayer of the family and the prayer of the church¹⁵².

Moments of prayer in families during the Jubilee Year of Mercy should be seen as suitable moments for thanksgiving, petition and trusting abandonment of the family into the hands of their common Father in heaven and above all, a time to ask for mercy. The dignity and responsibility of the Christian family as the domestic church can be achieved only with God's unceasing aid, which will surely be granted if it is humbly and trustingly petitioned in prayer.

4. The Family and the Aged in the Year of Mercy

The Year of mercy is also a time when families must ask themselves questions about their commitment to the aged among them, especially aged parents and grandparents. This commitment must include even the members of the Consecrated life. For the Second Vatican Council document *Quitte Ton Pays* creates a bridge between the Consecrated Persons call to detachment from former material and spiritual values, including family and the fourth commandment's obligation to honour parents during times of sickness, age and infirmity¹⁵³. This is very important in relation to families whose condition or situation worsens as a result of sickness, age, infirmity or economic set-backs after the person might have entered the Religious Life¹⁵⁴. When cases of this kind arises, the document teaches that:

More direct help from sons and daughters in religion may then become necessary. In principle, this problem concerns both men and women religious, but it must be acknowledged that, when it comes to providing nursing or home-help, sisters feel more directly involved because generally speaking they are better qualified to render such services¹⁵⁵.

This is very important as people are living longer and this has led to an increase in the number of the aged who need help; Urbanization, with family apartments in the cities not being big enough to accommodate the nuclear family. As such, the aged are not easily accommodated in the cities; Increase in the number of religious sisters, and as such, increase

in the number of aged parents who need attention; Religious communities are beginning to be more aware of this need¹⁵⁶.

Conclusion

The family in African ontology among other social, economic, political and cultural institutions occupy a fundamental place. It is an institution that is loved, nurtured and protected. Because of the fundamental place it occupies, the foregoing has studied the Papal document of the Roman Pontiff on the Jubilee Year of Mercy- *Misericordia Vultus* with the purpose of finding application for it within the context of the socio-economic experiences of families in Africa. It therefore, studied the theology of the family, revealing the Church's long commitment to the development of the family. This was followed by the analysis of the challenges of the family in Africa, and from this analysis, it drew out areas where the Year of Mercy can contribute towards the growth of the African Family. This paper strongly believes that a focus on the institution of the family in Africa during the Jubilee Year of Mercy would create the avenue to give the family the attention it deserves and more so, to attend to the retinue of problems that Africa families are facing.

CONSECRATED MEN AND WOMEN AS GOD'S INSTRUMENTS OF MERCY IN OUR CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Prof. Michael Ogunu¹⁵⁷

National President of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites in Nigeria,

And

Supreme Chancellor, Order of the Knights of St. Mulumba, Nigeria

ABSTRACT

In this article, Professor Michael Ogunu describes the role of consecrated men and women as God's instruments of mercy in our contemporary world. He defines the concept of mercy, what Christ teaches about mercy, reasons for showing mercy as well as conditions for

obtaining God's mercy. Drawing from Sacred Scriptures and the works of eminent experts on works of mercy, he describes practical ways in which consecrated men and women, and indeed, all Christ's faithful can perform the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy to be effective instruments of God's mercy in our broken world.

Introduction

When Pope Francis issued the Bull of Indiction of the Extraordinary Jubilee of Mercy *Misericordiae Vultus* (MV) on April 11 2015, he outlined the purpose and the ways the Jubilee of Mercy was to be celebrated.

He explained that he wanted the entire Church to celebrate the Jubilee year to enable all of us to gaze more attentively on the mercy of God so that we may become a more effective sign of the Father's action in our lives (see MV, no. 3). What this means was that the Jubilee year is to assist everyone of us, bishops, priests, deacons, consecrated persons, and the laity to become more effective instruments of mercy. The theme that was chosen to celebrate the year, “**Merciful like the Father**”, is itself very instructive. Jesus is the one who shows us the face of the Merciful Father. In the words and actions of Jesus Christ we see the Face of the Merciful Father (see MV, no. 1).

In Christ, we find that there is no sin that cannot be forgiven because of his mercy. The Holy Father underscores this point when he states:

When faced with the gravity of sin, God responds with the fullness of mercy. Mercy will always be greater than any sin, and no one can place limits on the love of God who is ever ready to forgive. I will have the joy of opening the Holy Door on the solemnity of the Immaculate Conception. On that day, the Holy Door will become a *Door of Mercy* through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instills hope (MV, no.3).

We as Christians are invited to also reflect the face of the merciful Father in our dealing with our brothers and sisters.

In this Paper, I shall define the concept of “mercy” and explain what Jesus teaches us about it. Some practical ways of performing works of mercy will be explained. I shall also identify some reasons why we should show mercy and the conditions for obtaining God's mercy and describe some practical ways and means in which consecrated men and women can perform the Corporal and Spiritual Works of Mercy to be God's effective instruments of mercy in our contemporary world.

Mercy Defined

As defined in the *Catholic Encyclopedia for School and Home, Volume 7, (1965)*, mercy is “That virtue by which kindness, tenderness and compassion are shown toward one in need”. It was highly esteemed among the Israelites who saw it, first of all, as one of the outstanding attributes of God, especially revealed in His covenant with Israel (Deuteronomy 7:9).

God was consistently merciful to the Israelites, despite their numerous lapses into sin. So great was the connection between God's love and His mercy that the Hebrew words for these virtues were often used interchangeably.

In the context of the works of mercy, mercy is regarded as a virtue influencing one's will to have compassion for others and, if possible, to alleviate another's misfortune. St. Thomas Aquinas is regularly quoted as stating that mercy is the greatest attribute of God. Aquinas does not state it in this fashion in the *Summa*, but he does imply that in relation to His creation, God's actions essentially are merciful. Mercy, explains St. Pope John Paul II, is the "most stupendous attribute" of God! It reveals to us what God is like. It is "love's second name". The Bible, tradition and the whole faith life of the People of God provide unique proof ... that mercy is the greatest of the attributes and perfections of God (John Paul II, *Rich in Mercy 14*).

What better time to get this gift than in a Holy Year, the Jubilee Year of Mercy wherein we have been called to recall and make our own God's ever flowing mercy. Its pertinence is obvious because with indulgence we get closer to Christ who committed no sin yet was wounded for our transgressions, and by his wounds we are healed (cf. Is. 53:4f); it helps us seek our way to the Father through the performance of good works and by penitential expiation which are key elements in this Jubilee Year of Mercy. It obtains for us the graces required to overcome sins, especially the sins confessed. It keeps us holy and pure. Consequent upon this then, in this Year of Mercy, let us make prayer and good works ours so that we can gain the necessary indulgence which will go a long way to secure our spiritual communion with the saints and ultimately with the Father in heaven.

What Jesus Teaches Us about Mercy

Jesus teaches us many things about mercy through his actions and parables.

First, Jesus taught us that proclaiming the Gospel to the poor is his first pastoral priority. When Jesus announced the Jubilee year in the fourth chapter of Luke, he described his mission as announcing the good news to the poor, liberating captives and giving sight to the blind. This provides us, as Jesus' disciples, a template for our task in the Year of Mercy. In setting our individual actions, priorities, plans and strategies of evangelization, let us also prioritize the sharing of the Gospel with the poor.

In the Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, Pope Francis issues the following challenge: "I want to say, with regret, that the worst discrimination which the poor suffer is the lack of spiritual care. The great majority of the poor have a special openness to the faith; they need God and we must not fail to offer them his friendship, his blessings, his word, the celebration of the sacraments and a journey of growth and maturity in the faith. Our preferential option for the poor must mainly translate into a privileged and preferential religious care".

Second, Jesus explains that mercy comes from God, who is our merciful Father. As we learned in the Parable of the Prodigal Son, after welcoming home a child who was lost and forgiving him, the Father rejoices. Mercy brings joy to both the reconciled sinner and to God.

Third, Jesus affirms that he is the face of the merciful Father. He is the Good Shepherd who takes the first action to seek out and find those who are lost. As we learn in his first meeting with Matthew, the tax collector who became one of the Apostles, Jesus seeks to be with us who are sinners and help lead us back to the Father. He looked on Saint Matthew with mercy and chose him for a great mission. He wants to do the same for us. When he saw a large and hungry crowd, Jesus felt compassion and fed them. When the sick were brought to him, he healed them. When the widow expressed her grief that her son died, Jesus raised him from the dead. When a public sinner like the woman caught in adultery was brought to him, he taught that those without sin should condemn her first, and then when they all left, he forgave her and told her to sin no more. Jesus was sent to reconcile us to the Father.

Fourth, Jesus wants us to know that his true disciple is the one who practices mercy. In the beautiful Parable of the Good Samaritan, after the priest and the Levite pass by the beaten and dying man, Jesus tells us of the Samaritan who overcomes prejudice and existing cultural norms to care for the wounded man. The true neighbour is the one who shows mercy. Jesus ends the parable by saying: “Go and do likewise”. As committed followers of Jesus, we must strive to be a face of mercy, an ambassador of the merciful Father. We must practice mercy within our families, parishes and communities. Often, we can be so quick to criticise, to be cynical and to complain. We must practice mercy with those closest to us and be people of reconciliation in a world of such polarisation.

Fifth, Jesus taught us that the Father's mercy and forgiveness are limitless and that we, likewise, should forgive repeatedly. Saint Peter asked him how often he should forgive and Jesus replied “seventy times seven” times. Jesus then told Saint Peter the parable of how the king had mercy on a servant who couldn't repay his debts, forgiving him of what he owed. The servant then didn't do likewise to a fellow servant who was in his debt. The king was furious, asking him, “Should you not also have had mercy on your fellow servant, in the same way that I had mercy on you?”

Sixth, Jesus promises us that mercy and forgiveness will be ours if we practice it. “Blessed are the merciful, for they shall receive mercy”. In the Our Father, he taught us to pray, “Forgive us our trespasses (debts), as we forgive those who have trespassed against us (debtors)”. After teaching us that famous prayer, he taught those with him very directly that, “For if you forgive others for their transgressions, your heavenly Father will also forgive you. But if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive your transgressions”.

Why be Merciful?

The Metropolitan Archbishop of Benin City, Most Rev. Augustine Obiora Akubeze, in his 2016 Lenten Pastoral, titled *“God's Mercy Calls us to be Instruments of Mercy”* explains why we should show mercy to others. According to him,

We show mercy because that is what Jesus commanded, “Be merciful like the Father”. If we are children of the Father, we would desire to behave like our Father who is Himself merciful by nature. The mercy of God is the principle that grounds the Christian teaching on mercy. We show mercy to others because we have first been shown mercy ourselves even when we did not merit it. God's mercy is gratuitous and God does not expect us to place conditions on our showing mercy to our brothers and sisters.

James Keenan identifies six motives for showing mercy in both Scripture and the teaching of the Church Fathers:

- First, Proverbs 15:27 encourage us to practice mercy for the remission of our sins, that is, in gratitude for God's merciful stance toward our sinfulness. John Chrysostom sees mercy, as queen of the virtues, outweighing all our burdensome sins.
- Second, Tobit 12:8-9 tells us that for our prayers to be heard by God, works of mercy should accompany them. This is corroborated by the preaching of several of the Church Fathers, namely, Augustine, Cyprian, Leo the Great, and John Chrysostom.
- Third, Matthew 6:20 suggests the works of mercy will lead to eternal reward, a motivation that Augustine uses.
- Fourth, Matthew 25:40 shows to us that any merciful action is for the sake of the Lord. Cyprian calls this 'the most powerful of all motives'. Here, the example of Martin of Tours who gave a portion of his cloak to a beggar becomes instructive.
- Fifth, Lactantius and Ambrose urged mercy to fortify human solidarity and to extend the circle of fellowship in the Lord.
- And finally, Clement of Alexandria, John Chrysostom, and Leo the Great remind us that works of mercy bring us into the life of perfection. By practicing mercy, we become more like the God who entered into our own chaos.

Conditions for Obtaining God's Mercy

To obtain God's mercy, the following conditions must be fulfilled: First, there must be repentance and conversion of heart. Second, we should be merciful to others. Third, we should forgive those who have hurt us. Fourth, we should have complete trust in Jesus. Each of these requirements is explained below:

Repentance and conversion of Heart

The first requirement for receiving God's mercy is repentance and conversion of heart. The greatest sin imaginable is not too great to be forgiven, if the sinner is truly repentant. "I desire not the death of the wicked, but that the wicked turn from his way and live" (Ez. 33:11). Even the worst of sinners God gives sufficient grace to repent and amend their ways. "If your sins be as scarlet, they shall be made white as wool" (Is. 1:18). While hardened sinners are never excluded from the grace of conversion, they can and at times do, resist God's invitations and inspirations, clinging to their own will and ideas.

Be merciful to others

The second requirement is to be merciful to others. God wants us to receive His mercy and let it flow through us to others. He wants us to extend love and forgiveness to others just as He does to us. While both the Old and New Testament reveal the limitless dimensions of God's mercy, the New Testament goes beyond the old in its emphasis on mercy as a divine characteristic which men must share. If they are to be the recipient of mercy, they must practice mercy.

The devotional practices revealed through St. Faustina were given to us as “vessels of mercy” through which God's love can be poured out upon the world, but they are not sufficient unto themselves. It is not enough for us to hang The Divine Mercy Image in our homes, pray the Chaplet every day at three o'clock, and receive Holy Communion on the first Sunday after Easter. We also have to show mercy to our neighbours through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy summarized by the Church as *The Seven Corporal Works of Mercy* which are: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to clothe the naked, to harbour the harbourless, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned and to bury the dead and *The Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy* which are to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the afflicted, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive offences and to pray for the living and the dead.

Forgive those who have hurt you

The third condition for receiving mercy from God is to forgive those who have hurt us.

Jesus tells us that he will deal with us in the same way and according to the same measure with which we deal with one another. We can sum it up by saying: What we give to others is what we ourselves will receive from the Lord. Jesus emphasizes this point about the measure of mercy:

“Judge not, and you will not be judged; condemn not, and you will not be condemned; forgive, and you will be forgiven; give, and it will be given to you; good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap. For the measure you give will be the measure you get back” (Lk 6:37-38).

We all carry the burden of our sins, the wrongs we do to offend God and to hurt one another. Therefore we always stand in need of God's mercy. We would be spiritually blind if we never acknowledged ourselves as sinners in need of forgiveness from God as well as from those whom we have offended. On the other hand, if we want God's forgiveness, we know we must be ready to forgive. This is what Jesus taught us to ask of our Heavenly Father in the prayer we call the Lord's Prayer: “forgive us our trespasses as we forgive those who trespass against us”.

Our Lord stresses that it is important that we forgive our erring brothers and sisters from our hearts. If our prayer is to be heard, we must pray with a heart that is not closed or hardened by a lack of mercy. Otherwise, we will experience the heart of God closed to us when we offer our prayers and petitions to him. Jesus teaches us:

“So if you are offering your gift at the altar and there remember that your brother has something against you, leave your gift there before the altar and go: first be reconciled to your brother, and then come and offer your gift” (Mt 5:23-24).

In his book titled “What To Do When Jesus Is Hungry” Fr. Andrew Apostoli, C.F.R. cites a moving example of someone who showed extraordinary mercy to another who had done him great harm, and how that mercy brought about a remarkable conversion. A Florentine nobleman named John had a brother who was murdered. According to a common practice of the day, he felt obligated to avenge his brother's death. With the help of some hired henchmen, he tracked down his brother's murderer. The man was unarmed, and John was about to slay him. It was Good Friday. As John approached, the man begged John to forgive him for killing his brother just as Jesus, on the first Good Friday, forgave those who were putting him to death on the Cross. At that moment John was deeply moved by God's grace. Throwing down his sword, he forgave the man who killed his brother and even embraced him. On his way home, he entered a Benedictine Church to pray, and the figure of Christ on the crucifix bowed his head to him in recognition of his generous act of mercy. Because he forgave so profoundly from his heart, John, the would-be murderer, received the grace to become a saint. He is known in Church history as Saint John Gaulbert. He died in 1073 and was canonized in 1193.

Probably the most challenging form of mercy to practice is our Lord's command to forgive even our enemies. He taught this in the Sermon on the Mount. He began by quoting the Old Testament norm of moral behaviour, “You shall love your neighbour and hate your enemy”. What Jesus would teach us would be far different:

“Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you, so that you may be sons of your Father who is in heaven; for he makes his sun rise on the evil and on the good, and sends rain on the just and on the unjust. For if you love those who love you, what reward have you? Do not even the tax collectors do the same? And if you salute only your brethren, what more are you doing than others? Do not even the Gentiles do the same? You, therefore, must be perfect, as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt 5:44-48).

Our enemies include all who have done harm to us. We must forgive them because we wish to be forgiven. We have already seen an example of this in the story of the forgiveness of Saint John Gaulbert. What our Lord meant by “enemy”, however, is not strictly someone who is out to kill us or someone we love. What Jesus meant by “enemy” also includes someone difficult to love, or toward whom we feel a certain repugnance, or whom we may even judge as unworthy of our love or kindness. In other words, an enemy can simply be a stranger whom we may never see again, someone who will not be able to do us good in return for anything good we may do for him. But we must still reach out with kindness and compassion if that brother or sister is in need, no matter who they are. The term “enemy” can also apply to notorious sinners like the woman caught in adultery; we do not condone the sinner's actions but we grant forgiveness because God loves the sinner and seeks to save him from his sins. Forgiving others for wrongs they may have done can give them the courage and trust to believe that even God would be ready to forgive them.

Jesus' teaching tells us that our love must be a love that costs us something to give. He contrasts this with the love that even pagans are capable of. For example, to love people who are friendly or kind to us does not require much effort. It comes naturally. To love someone who has hurt us is another story. But don't we want God to love us even after we have offended him by our sins? If we share only with those who would share with us, we are not doing any more than thieves would do. Rather, the love we give to our enemies, which has to be a very generous, giving love, makes us like our Heavenly Father. He sends the sunshine not only to good people but even to those who are bad! He lets the rain fall on the fields of the just and on the unjust as well. It is no surprise then that Saint Ignatius Loyola, founder of the Jesuits, is quoted as saying: "If you don't have an enemy, you had better go out and find one because you need an enemy to teach you how to love". This is because loving an enemy requires that we open our hearts more fully in order to forgive. Loving an enemy separates a convenient love from a sacrificial, total, and self-forgetting love.

Completely Trust in Jesus

The fourth condition for receiving divine mercy is to completely trust in Jesus. Trust in Jesus is the essence of the message of mercy. In repeated revelations to St. Faustina, Our Divine Saviour makes it clear that the fountain is His Heart, the water is His mercy, and the vessel is trust. The Lord made it clear to St. Faustina that the more we trust in Him and try to live in His will and not ours, the more graces we will receive. He told her, "*Tell (all people), My daughter, that I am Love and Mercy itself. When a soul approaches Me with trust, I fill it with such an abundance of graces that it cannot contain them within itself, but radiates them to other souls*" (Diary, 1074).

On another occasion, the Lord told St Faustina, "*Let souls who are striving for perfection particularly adore My mercy, because the abundance of graces which I grant them flows from My mercy. I desire that these souls distinguish themselves by boundless trust in My mercy. I myself will tend to the sanctification of such souls. I will provide them with everything they will need to obtain sanctity. The graces of My mercy are drawn by means of one vessel only, and that is trust. The more a soul trusts, the more it will receive. Souls that trust boundlessly are a great comfort to Me, because I pour out all the treasures of My graces into them. I rejoice that they ask for much, because it is My desire to give much, very much. On the other hand, I am sad when souls ask for little, when they narrow their hearts*" (Diary, 1578).

The Role of Consecrated Men and Women as God's Instruments of Mercy

The Church enumerates ways and means by which all Christ's faithful including consecrated men and women can be ambassadors of God's mercy in our broken world. These are commonly referred to as the Seven Corporal Works of Mercy which are: to feed the hungry, to give drink to the thirsty, to cloth the naked, to harbour the harbourless, to visit the sick, to visit the imprisoned and to bury the dead and the Seven Spiritual Works of Mercy which are: to admonish the sinner, to instruct the ignorant, to counsel the doubtful, to comfort the afflicted, to bear wrongs patiently, to forgive offences and to pray for the living and the dead.

In the following section, some practical ways in which consecrated men and women and, indeed, all Christ's faithful, can perform the above listed works of mercy will be described.

The Corporal Works of Mercy

Feeding the Hungry

Giving food to the hungry is the first corporal work of mercy. Of all human sufferings, hunger and thirst rank among the greatest. They are also among the most widespread. Countless people in the world go to bed hungry each night. Many people also daily face a critical shortage of drinking water. It is no wonder that Jesus mentions these two human needs, first among all the ways we may serve Him by attending the neediest of His brothers and sisters: "I was hungry and you gave me food, I was thirsty and you gave me drink ... as you did it to one of the least of these my brethren, you did it to me" (Mt. 25:35, 40).

Jesus was greatly concerned about those who suffered hunger. On more than one occasion, he multiplied bread to feed the hungry crowds who had followed him for days while he was preaching.

This divine injunction to feed the hungry is in imitation of God Himself who allowed man to eat freely of all the trees in the Garden of Eden except one and even fed the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness. This same God who cares for us as a father will bless the work of our hands if we feed the hungry.

A passage from Pope Benedict XVI's encyclical *Caritas in Veritate* can serve as a synthesis since it makes the work of mercy "feed the hungry" a responsibility of the Church coming from the very action of Jesus of Nazareth:

Life in many poor countries is still extremely insecure as a consequence of food shortages, and the situation could become worse: hunger still reaps enormous numbers of victims among those who, like Lazarus, are not permitted to take their place at the rich man's table, contrary to the hopes expressed by Paul VI. Feed the hungry (cf. Mt. 25:35, 37, 42) is an ethical imperative for the universal Church, as she responds to the teachings of her Founder, the Lord Jesus, concerning solidarity and the sharing of goods. Moreover, the elimination of world hunger has also, in the global era, become a requirement for safeguarding the peace and stability of the planet. Hunger is not so much dependent on lack of material things as on shortage of social resources, the most important of which are institutional.... The right to food, like the right to water, has an important place within the pursuit of other rights, beginning with the fundamental right to life. It is therefore necessary to cultivate a public conscience that considers food and access to water as universal rights of all human beings, without distinction or discrimination.

In the works of mercy, we should not only feed those who are physically hungry, we should also try to gratify their spiritual hunger. Hungering for the word of God means desiring to hear that word. It is a longing and a welcoming of the word of God into our minds and hearts. Anyone who comes to love God's Word has a certain relish for it. Hearing the word of God

gives them comfort and consolation, courage and guidance. Being deprived of the word of God leaves us with a great hunger for it. We spiritually fulfill this work of mercy to feed the hungry by sharing the word of God with those who long to hear it. According to Fr. Andrew Apostoli, C. F. R. in his illuminating book titled '*What To Do When Jesus Is Hungry*', "When priests preach their sermons, when catechists instruct the young in the faith or when sponsors prepare converts for entrance into the Church, in each instance, someone is ministering the word of God to others who are hungering to receive it". We can also spiritually fulfill the work of mercy of feeding the hungry by encouraging people to receive Jesus often in the Holy Eucharist. We should encourage people to be properly prepared to receive Jesus worthily, especially by being in that state of grace. We should encourage others, especially the young to prepare themselves for receiving Holy Communion by consciously living a good Christian life.

Finally we could also encourage a love for Jesus in the Eucharist by encouraging people to spend time in Eucharistic Adoration. In all these ways, we will be truly feeding the hungry in their need for the greatest food of all, the Holy Eucharist.

To feed the hungry is an obligation. It is an obligation because God wants us to do so and He also feeds us. Everything we have is a gift from Him and should be shared. Thus, the gap between the haves and the have-nots was not in the original plan of God. The early Church understood this well by gathering gifts for the poor after the breaking of the bread. Today also, there are many hungry people around us. It is estimated that more than 25,000 people die every day from malnutrition. From this number, majority of them are children. The awareness that the hungry do exist should incite us to action. Jesus tells us today, "give them food by yourselves" and that we must surely do.

An inconveniencing but painful truth is that our excess bread does not belong to us. Thus, when we give food to the hungry, we are in no way doing them any favour but rather are returning what actually belongs to them. Wastage therefore is a sin. The food we waste does not belong to us. It belongs to those who have nothing to eat. According to Pope Francis, when we throw away food, we are stealing from the table of the poor. Finally, we will not only aim at feeding the hungry, we must move a step further by enabling them to produce food by themselves. In this way God will keep on blessing us.

Giving Water to the Thirsty

According to Pope Francis, "fresh drinking water is an issue of primary importance, since it is indispensable for human life and for supporting terrestrial and aquatic ecosystem..." (*Laudato Si*. 26).

Among the practical ways of observing this Corporal Work of Mercy are the following:

- ❖ Offering a glass of water to a stranger who strayed to your home
- ❖ Giving drinking water to those who are unable to provide it for themselves
- ❖ Fetching drinking water for the sick, elderly and others who cannot do it by themselves as a result of their conditions

- ❖ Individual owners of wells/bore holes should extend a tap outside to supply water to the needy, free of charge
- ❖ Donating wells or contributing to build wells in areas with poor access to clean water.
- ❖ Organizing the youth as a sports team, to deliver water to individuals and families in need
- ❖ Forming Christian groups to sponsor water projects in poor villages and towns
- ❖ Helping to pay for the cost of installing water pipes in impoverished communities
- ❖ Providing irrigation for farmers especially in areas ravaged by drought
- ❖ Engaging in the salvation of souls (giving living water to them)
- ❖ Satisfying people's thirst for prayer (Psalm 42:1-2; 63:1-2)

Clothing the Naked

Among the Lord's words on the Canon of judgement on the last day as recorded in Matthew 25:36a are the following: "I was naked and you clothed me".

Clothing is one of the basic necessities of man. Among us, there are those who are naked and are in need of dressing. Showing charity to this group by donating clothes to them is our concern. It is a work of mercy if we can really share our excess clothes in our wardrobes with others who are in need of clothes to cover their nakedness. Any cloth in our wardrobes that we do not wear in a year does not belong to us. It belongs to the poor and should be given out to them. In clothing the naked, we do not give them our rags or our rejected clothes. We give them from our excess and our excess does not mean our rejected rags.

There is a form of nakedness which is psychological. When someone comes to you as a priest either at the confessional or in a private sharing and discloses his or her privacy to you, the person has stripped himself or herself naked before you. You have become his or her confidant and it is your duty then to cover his or her psychological nakedness. You are therefore morally bound not to discuss whatever the person discloses to you elsewhere. It is also part of the clothing to affirm the person and give him or her confidence and sense of purpose. The person must leave you feeling better and relieved. Above all, it is a grievous offence to gain an undue advantage of one who has confided in you just as it is for a doctor to sexually exploit his patient. The type of power we have over those who have stripped themselves naked before us whether physical or psychological is called aesculapian power or the healer's power – from the Roman god of healing called Aesculapius. An abuse of it is a mortal sin we must avoid. Let us learn to clothe the naked in all forms. Such work of mercy has its own blessings.

Sheltering the Homeless

Our Lord stressed our responsibility to meet the need for shelter among the least of his brothers and sisters when He told us: "I was a stranger and you welcomed me" (Mt. 25:35). After our need for food and drink, the need for shelter is the most important physical need we experience. We cannot not live our life with security and dignity in this world without some place that provides us protection from the elements as well as a place we can call "our own, even if temporarily". Homelessness is a sociological evil. It deprives children of home training and exposes one to danger of all kinds. The state of homelessness appears in different forms today. Many children are on the street with no shelter at night. Tenants run temperature and blood pressure at the beginning of the year. They are afraid of being ejected by their

landlords and landladies. Many face threat of house demolition. They go out in the morning only to come back in the evening to notice that their house is no more. Many live in slums and cubicles.

The evil of homelessness gives birth to other evils. Lives are exposed to dangers, the terrors of the night and the violence of the day. Home is the first seat of education. Any child without this basic education is likely to grow up with a defect. Homeless children are exposed to fear. With time, fear becomes so much part of them that they are no longer afraid of anything. At this, their psyche is damaged. They become prone to all sorts of crime. One notices then why evil is on the increase in slums and other poor living environments. Homelessness produces prostitution, armed robbery and assassination as well as quasi mafia groups. Above all, homeless children can easily be groomed as agents of violence. Children who grow up sleeping in the streets at night and carrying plates during the day begging for food with no school to attend practically have no values. Killing means nothing to them. Simply said, homelessness creates a climate of fear. This fear affects everybody.

Having seen the evil of homelessness, what shall we do? We should appeal to landlords to always put themselves in the shoes of their tenants. They should have a rethink and stop harassing their tenants. Increasing the house rent arbitrarily is a sin. Providing shelter is not a prerogative for only landlords. People can also squat with us till they secure their own shelter. Above all, let us open our hearts to serve as a home for those who feel unaccepted for, according to Blessed Teresa, that is the greatest disease today. When we feel too proud and too important that people no longer have access to us, when we turn ourselves into a deity to be consulted, when people leave us feeling smaller, we are in no way better than those who deprive others of the necessity of shelter. In our Churches and organizations, we should erect places of encounter for the young people or build houses for the homeless. We should also get involved in the work to care for refugees and support construction of shelters in our areas through gifts of time or treasure. When we do all these, Yahweh will be our own shelter, shade us from the heat of the dry season and our refuge and cover from storm and rain (Isaiah 4:6).

Visiting the Prisoners

Visiting prisoners is also included in Christ's Canon of judgement in Matthew 25. Jesus also sees himself in the person of a prisoner and even appears before us in his guise. Paul the great missionary and writer of the epistles was also in jail and some of his works like Letters to the Colossians, Ephesians, Philemon and Philippians are called chain letters because they were written in the prison. Many of the apostles suffered imprisonment. Thus, imprisonment marked the early Church. Paul was converted on his way to chain and imprison the followers of the way (cf. Acts 9:1-19). It belongs to the character of his conversion that the captor became the captive. It is thus not out of place for him to describe himself as a prisoner in the Lord Jesus Christ (cf. Eph 3:1, 4:1, Philem 1). Christ knew that imprisonment will also be the lot of some of his followers and he thus did not hesitate to identify himself in the prisoners. In fact, the mission statement he read in the synagogue which is taken from the prophecy of Isaiah has as one of its elements the liberation of the captives (cf. Lk 4:18, Is 61:1). Even the restoration of sight to the blind has a liberating interpretation. The dungeon is a dark place and those caged in it are considered blind because they do not see the sun. Their liberation

from the dungeon is like restoring their light by leading them away from the darkness of the prison to the light of freedom. The Jubilee year is a year of liberation and social egalitarianism.

The initial idea of prison was to be a place of detention till the actual punishment is carried out. The Romans were highly noted for this. In fact among them, there were various forms of punishment depending on both the gravity of the offence and the social status of the offender. For example, citizens are not crucified. That was why Peter was crucified while Paul a Roman citizen was not. He was instead decapitated. Later, prison came to adopt the model of monasteries as a place of rehabilitation. Like the monks, prisoners live in cells, each in his own room to enable contemplation and remorse. Through work, instruction and other exercises, the prisoner experiences an inner change and at the end of his detention, he comes out a better person and is fully integrated into the society. Today, the prison has become an instrument of torture and intimidation. Instead of cells, the prisoners are dumped together in a small space as if thrown into a zoo. Their living condition is deplorable. The prison becomes a place of encounter for criminals. Innocent people suddenly find themselves mixing up with this set of people and unconsciously imbibing their vices. With this, the aim of imprisonment is defeated. Prisoners come out worse than before. They are psychologically damaged. This also contributes to the fact that today, going to prison is a stigma. The Church therefore is called upon to look into this type of liberation.

The description of what is required of us in this Corporal Work of Mercy can be outlined as follows:

- Participate in parish or diocesan visits to prisons
- Support socio-economic needs of prisoners: Donate food and clothes to prisoners and contribute to their personal care, and improvement of prison environment
- Support children and family dependants of prisoners. Donate to charities that care for prisoners and dependants of prisoners through Society of St. Vincent de Paul
- Speak up for the dignity of prisoners e.g. overcrowding and dehumanizing conditions for prisoners and guards alike.
- Support programmes of restorative justice to help former prisoners integrate back into society e.g. Job training and employment
- Welcome former prisoners into our parish communities with a commitment to walking the journey of reintegration with them and helping them not to give up hope.
- Visit and care for persons who live in isolation, imprisoned by the circumstances of life e.g. the homebound elderly members; the residents of the homes for the aged and the physically handicapped

Visiting those in prison certainly does not mean being “soft on crime”. On the contrary, there are some crimes so horrible that their perpetrators must be completely and irrevocably quarantined, put behind bars for a long time or even for life, for the protection of society and to deter other criminals from daring to commit such evil acts in the future. With some violent criminals, society has little choice but to “lock them up and throw away the key”.

Throw away the key, indeed — but not the *person*. Punishment deters and quarantines and gives the criminal the opportunity to do penance, but friendship and prayer have the capacity to reform and to heal. A true work of mercy is done by Christians who befriend those in

correctional institutions in the name of Jesus Christ, thereby affirming their human dignity as persons made in God's image.

Visiting the Sick

Visiting the sick has to do with all the services rendered to the sick and the dying till the person breathes his or her last. It also extends to the aged in old people's home. It is not just a corporal work of mercy. It is an integral apostolate of the Church given by Jesus Christ himself when he tied healing to the proclamation of the Kingdom of God (cf. Mat 10:7-8). He himself healed the sick and asked the disciples being sent out on a mission to do the same. The priest's word of greeting at a sick call includes an admonition from the Letter of St. James 5:14-15, *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call the elders of the Church to pray for him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord. And the prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise him up. Even if he has committed sins, he will be forgiven.* This passage tells us the indispensable position the sick occupied among the early Christians. The same position still remains today. The sick are still members of our Church even when they cannot attend our assembly. It is then left for the assembly to visit the sick. Every activity of the baptized carried out in faith carries this ecclesial effect. Thus, a prayer programme organised at the sick bed of one of us by a group of lay people has already pitched the tent of the Church there. This is also the same, when an individual carries out the same function.

The Church must carry out this healing apostolate all the time. In his book *From Crisis to Kairos*, Orobator, a Nigerian Jesuit gives, among others, three images of the Church in terms of healing apostolate. They are thus, a welcoming community, a community of hope, and a reconciling community. Rinaldo Ronzani shares the same view with Orobator on the Church as a welcoming community. He notes that, "the negative effects of illness place us in situation of liminality as we are cut off from the community, our relationships are disrupted... Inner isolation and loneliness seem to take over as we are unable to continue to live our life as before". People with deadly diseases are often discriminated because of fear and prejudice and it is this stigma that kills most of the time. It is thus the duty of the welcoming Church to reassure them that the mother Church carries them in her bosom. The ecclesial identity of presence therefore should be felt where the sick are. Laying on of hands and anointing are also healing. The sick feel the healing touch of God of grace in their broken body. Also, the Church as a community of hope should know that some illnesses go with depression. Therefore, the patients and family members need a message of hope. We have to console them and let them know that God has not abandoned them. Finally, as a community of reconciliation, the Church makes sure that the patient reconciles with God for his past mistakes, reconciles with those who must have been responsible for his illness and as well reconciles with himself. Without this integral reconciliation, holistic healing of mind and body will not take place.

Our attitude towards the sick should be that of love and respect. No matter the quality of life, no matter how broken the body is due to illness, the inherent dignity of the patient as one created in the image and likeness of God is always there. The body of the sick is the body of Jesus. As the bread is broken for the world, so is the body of the sick broken by illness. Jesus Christ suffers in the sick. When we attend to them, we attend to Jesus Christ. This is a gospel truth.

Care for the sick – Visit family members and friends who are ill. Pray for the sick individually by name. Make meals for people who are facing difficult situations, perhaps due to the care of a sick loved one.

Of course, there are some people who are “sick” not from physical illness but from social isolation. One thinks especially of the elderly in our communities who, whether at home or in long-term care facilities, live in geographical isolation from their loved ones. “Visiting the sick” in our world can mean reaching out to the friendless in our local nursing homes: those who are “sick at heart” from being lonely and forgotten and who are regularly deprived of the basic human need called “friendship”. This corporal work of mercy is relatively easy to do. It takes no extensive background reading in economics and no training in political activism to accomplish. The socially isolated elderly are usually not far away. They often live just around the corner from us, or they are members of our own parish. Simply volunteer with the Meals-on-Wheels program and you will find them. Parish priests can tell parishioners who to visit in the parish.

Visiting the housebound elderly and the chronically and terminally ill is no easy task. Trying to do it on a regular basis can take us right out of our “comfort zones” because it confronts us with real human lives for which, in earthly terms, there seems to be so little hope. Such people often live in squalor and with the constant stench of sickness or the wince of chronic pain. But our mere presence, as someone willing to be a friend and a listening ear, can mean much more to them than we can imagine, and along the way they will be giving a precious gift to us as well: the gift of growth in the virtue of compassion.

Burying the Dead

“To bury the dead” is usually listed as the last of the Corporal Works of Mercy. There are two reasons for this. The first is obvious: the final act of respect we can show to anyone is by burying his mortal remains. All the other corporal works of mercy are shown to the living. The second reason is that this is the only Corporal Work of Mercy not mentioned by our Lord in His parable of the Judgement (cf. Mt. 25:34-40). Rather, the Church added this work of mercy out of the respect owed to the human body as “God's temple” (1 Cor. 3:16) and out of consideration for the bereaved.

No doubt most of us make sure that our relatives and friends have a proper funeral service. But we also need to be aware of the needs of those who are grieving: struggling to “bury their dead” emotionally. Grieving can be a long and arduous process; shedding tears at a funeral rarely completes it. We need to help one another to truly bury our lost loved ones by letting go of them, entrusting them to the hands of our merciful Creator and Saviour. That takes friendship — a patient friendship that keeps on visiting the bereaved, keeps on helping them dry their tears, even when the grieving process takes many months or even years. This is a precious work of mercy: to help one another emotionally “bury the dead”, entrusting them finally to the merciful Heart of the Redeemer.

As often as possible, we should attend wakes and funerals, pray the Divine Mercy Chaplet and Rosary with and for people who are near death, visit cemeteries and offer prayers and Masses for those who have died.

The Spiritual Works of Mercy

In addition to the corporal works of mercy described in the preceding section, we are also obliged to perform Spiritual Works of Mercy. These include the following:

- To admonish the sinner (correct those who need correction) – Speak up, with charity, against sinful and unjust practices. Love the sinner, but hate the sin.
- To instruct the ignorant (teach the faith to others) – Hand on the faith to children and grandchildren as well as the youth through instruction and witness. Volunteer to teach those preparing for Baptism and Confirmation at your parish. Encourage others to listen to Catholic programming on radio and television and to read Catholic publications.
- To counsel the doubtful (give advice to those who need it) – Have a heart for those who are struggling, confused or depressed. Help those looking for jobs and facing big decisions.
- To comfort the sorrowful (give comfort to those who suffer) – Call or visit friends in difficult situations or who may be lonely. Write an encouraging note to someone in need of support.
- To bear wrongs patiently (be patient with others) – Practice loving patience with family members, co-workers and others.
- To forgive all injuries (to forgive others who hurt you.) – Pray for all those who have hurt you. Invite estranged family members to gatherings. Don't speak ill of others.
- To pray for the living and the dead (to pray for everyone who needs our prayers) – Keep a list of people who need prayers close at hand. Have Masses celebrated for those in need or departed friends and family. Obtain an indulgence this year for family members or friends who have died.

According to Pope Francis, a jubilee year that does not open people's wallets to share what they have with others is not a true jubilee. “This Pope isn't inventing that”, he insisted. “It's in the Bible”. At his weekly general audience Ash Wednesday (2016) in St Peter's Square, Pope Francis spoke about the description of a jubilee year in the Book of Leviticus. The religious feast also had serious social implications, he said, because it proclaimed a forgiveness of debts, the freedom of indentured servants and special generosity toward the poor and the stranger. “It was a kind of ‘general amnesty’, which permitted everyone to return to their original situation with the cancellation of every debt, restitution of land and the possibility of enjoying once again the freedom proper to members of the people of God”, he said. For God's chosen people, who are called to holiness, the Pope said, the jubilee prescriptions help “to combat poverty and inequality, guaranteeing a dignified life for all and a fair distribution of the land on which to live and draw sustenance”.

During the Catholic Church's jubilee year, each Christian should think about what they have, he said, and “if they have too many things”, they should “give some to someone who has nothing; 10 percent or 50 percent. The Holy Spirit will inspire you”. Pope Francis told the crowd gathered in St Peter's Square that “a jubilee is for conversion so that our hearts become bigger, more generous, more (like) a child of God, with more love”. “I'll tell you something”,

he said, “if this jubilee doesn't reach our pockets, it's not a real jubilee. Do you understand? This is in the Bible... this Pope isn't inventing that. It's in the Bible”. “The biblical message is very clear: courageously open yourselves to sharing; this is mercy”, the Pope said. “If we want mercy from God, let us begin by being merciful ourselves”.

A biblical jubilee is about sharing and solidarity, Pope Francis said. “The biblical jubilee was a ‘jubilee of mercy’ because it was lived with a sincere search of the good of one's needy brothers and sisters”. The laws governing God's people in the Bible, he said, also had other means for encouraging people to help others experience God's mercy. One of those things was the command to tithe a tenth of one's earnings to the temple and to widows and orphans or to give a portion of the first fruits of one's harvest. In addition, he said, the Bible had harsh words for those who charged high interest rates when loaning to the poor. In many countries, he added, usury is still a huge problem and families lose everything and end up on the streets. “Please, let us pray that in this jubilee the Lord would remove from all our hearts this desire to have more”, he said.

Blessed Sr. Lucia, one of the seers of Our Lady of Fatima observed in her book titled “*Calls from the Message of Fatima*” that “We have no charity if we cannot sacrifice ourselves for the benefit of our neighbours who are poor and need our help, our assistance in their difficulty, our alms and our comfort”.

Conclusion

From the foregoing, it can be seen that mercy is love that seeks to forgive, console, assist, and care for others in time of need. Mercy is an act of love done without expecting anything in return; it is done for love itself. Our Lord gave of Himself on Holy Thursday when He instituted the Most Blessed Sacrament; the Eucharist perpetuates these acts of self-giving daily on altars throughout the world. Jesus made it clear in Sacred Scripture that love of God and neighbour is the greatest commandment.

As Christians, we are called to be merciful to others in the same way God the Father is merciful to us. In a word, we are to love our neighbour as God has loved us.

Our Lord explained to St. Faustina that faith alone would not suffice. “There must also be acts of mercy”, He told her. “Even the strongest faith will be of no use without works” (Diary 742).

“I am giving you three ways of exercising mercy toward your neighbour”, says Our Lord: the first—by deed, the second—by word, the third—by prayer. In these three degrees is contained the fullness of mercy, and it is an unquestionable proof of love for Me. By this means a soul glorifies and pays reverence to My mercy. (Diary 742).

These, then, must become our fundamental ways of expressing trust in the mercy of God. By deeds of mercy, we show others how to be merciful; by our words of encouragement and advice, in preaching, teaching, and writing, we let others know of God's mercy; by prayer, we implore mercy for sinners and glorify the mercy of the Lord.

God is pleased by every act of mercy, because in the brother or sister that we assist, we recognize the face of God which no one can see (cf. Jn 1:18). As stated by Pope Francis in his

homily during the Canonisation of Mother Theresa of Calcutta, “Each time we bend down to the needs of our brothers and sisters, we give Jesus something to eat and drink; we clothe, we help, and we visit the Son of God (cf. Mt 25:40)”.

Consecrated persons are called to be a concrete and prophetic sign of God's closeness to His people. All forms of consecrated life, each according to its characteristics, are called to be in a permanent state of mission, sharing “The joys and the hopes, the griefs and the anxieties of the men of this age, especially those who are poor or in any way afflicted” (*Gaudium et Spes*, 1). Jesus sends all consecrated men and women, in the name of the merciful God, with the same mission that he has received. They are therefore sent as a world that encourages, a hand that lifts up, a compassionate embrace for all those who suffer, a defense of all those whose lives are threatened.

The Consecrated Life, like the Good Samaritan, goes out to the highways and byways and takes upon itself the sufferings of his brothers and sisters. It makes itself present to immigrants and refugees, in marginal barrios and in abandoned places, curing and teaching, accompanying processes of reconciliation and defending rights and dignity. In this paper, I have tried to show how these can be done to the glory of God and for our eternal salvation.

GROOMING YOUNG PEOPLE FOR MINISTRY: FAMILY AND SOCIETAL INFLUENCE

Sr. Cecilia OMEIFE, EHJ¹⁵⁸

Abstract

Children, as we know, are very impressionable, so they deserve to be presented with what is virtuous and true during their formative years. The family and the larger society owe it a duty to influence young people positively while preparing them for their mission on earth. The truth taught to the child begins and is completed by introducing the child to God right from infancy. Parents must themselves be first of all those who uphold Christian values by their very lives so they can impact positively on the child who is now ready to be launched into the larger society. Growing up and interacting with his siblings, the young person is able to learn and acquire virtues such as: forgiveness, compassion, honesty, respect and piety and are able to uphold these as values. This learned behaviour is a positive contributory factor that can launch young person into ministry whatever state of life they choose or are called to. Society is both teacher and beneficiary of good formation of young minds and character, because it is these that in turn build and develops society. The peace and development a society enjoys is the fruit of society's investment in its citizens' moral, social and spiritual welfare particularly the training and welfare investment in its young population. Grooming young people for ministry is a worthwhile enterprise because family, church and society are the better for it to the glory of God.

Introduction

The concern for young people participating in the evangelical ministry of the church in response to Christ's mandate to the church to evangelize the whole world is borne out of the conviction that all – young and old alike, are invited to participate in the church's mission to evangelize the whole world. Making disciples of all nations is not in any way limited to the adult world. The church baptizes infants, making them members of the church (the Body of Christ) and Christ's disciples, therefore, children have the right to be introduced to the Christian life by their parents and all who are responsible for the formation of children so that they in turn begin to learn to share the Good News with others, starting with their peer. We cannot leave young people out of the Christian Ministry of evangelization – a mandate Jesus gave to his Church and he expects every member of his body (the Church) to be a part of it; Jesus himself said: *“Let the children come to me, and do not prevent them; for the kingdom of heaven belongs to such as these”* (Mt. 19:14). The Catechism of the Catholic Church teaches that *“the role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute, the right and the duty of parents to educate their children is primordial and inalienable ... showing themselves obedient to the will of the Father in Heaven. Parents educate their children to fulfil God's law.”*¹⁵⁹

This teaching of the Church applies to both the content of the faith, which is the light under which all other knowledge is taught, and to the moral formation of children. The duty of parents and faith Formators of young people, as laid out in Pius XI's Encyclical on the Christian Education of Youth, *“consists essentially in preparing man/woman for what he/she must be and for what he/she must do here below, in order to attain the sublime end for which he/she was created. It is clear that there can be no true education which is not wholly directed to the human*

person's last end, and that in the present order of providence, since God has revealed Himself to us in the Person of His Only Begotten Son, who alone is 'the Way, the Truth and the Life', there can be no ideally perfect education (for Christians) which is not Christian Education." This therefore suggests that holistic formation and adequate information is crucial to preparing young people to participate zealously and courageously in the ministry of spreading the good news.

Ministry

Talking about ministry, our attention is immediately drawn to the priesthood and consecrated life; rightly so, because these states of life are specifically and uniquely offered to and assumed by persons called to share in the church's mission of evangelization by proclaiming the Gospel. Other states of life such as marriage and single life, even professional life also offer opportunities for evangelization and preparation for ministry. Ministry means service and it defines mission. We have established from the foregoing that Christian ministry of evangelization has no age definitions. From speechless infants to exuberant youth, witnessing to Christ can be achieved. In the Scriptures, Daniel is presented to us as an example of a young person who was nurtured in the ways of God and lived it out with great conviction and courage. Young people do not hide what they know; they always want to showcase their knowledge and potentials. In the same vein, the gospel is to be spread like the fire that Christ has come to cast on the earth and wish it were blazing already. We can trust the firebrand enthusiasm of young people to help with the spread the gospel. The ministry of evangelization is fruitful and successful when convictions are built with the help of role models who themselves live with conviction the gospel values they profess. Children, as we know, are very impressionable, so great caution should be applied when we present values and discipline to them during their formative years. This is particularly very important, because innocent and trustful as they are, children look up to us as persons they want to emulate; they trust the strength of our moral judgement to support them in accomplishing their beautiful life's ambitions so they deserve to be presented with what is virtuous and true. The family and the larger society owe it a duty to influence young people positively while preparing them for their mission on earth, this is because they have the right to be exposed to the truth and taught to live it with courage (cfr. *Mt. 10: 7-8*). It is the responsibility of the family and the larger society to model an authentic way of life for young people this will help to achieve positive influencing. We shall now explore how the family and society influence the readiness of young people for ministry.

A. Family influence

God wants us all to be the leaven in the dough of society; in the same way, he wants us to do this when we are properly prepared. The job of parents and teachers in this exercise is to prepare their children to be ready for the service to which God will call them. Here then, the need for furnishing the children with authentic truth must of necessity be fully implemented, so that they may speak "in season and out of season" of the faith they have imbibed. To do this properly, children need to be given both the information and the intellectual formation which will enable them to answer the assaults on their religious practices and understanding that will inevitably occur. Their ability to tackle such assaults will strengthen their convictions, and make it possible for them to evangelize the world when the time for that comes.¹⁶⁰ The family plays this role in several ways that we shall now examine.

Family as First school of evangelization

The family must educate the children for life in such a way that each one may fully perform his or her role according to the vocation received by God.¹⁶¹ Christian families offer a special contribution to the missionary cause of the Church by fostering missionary vocations among their sons and daughters and more generally, by training their children from childhood to recognize God's love for all people.¹⁶² We must believe that children understand when we speak to them, all we need to do is to trust that they are listening to us when we speak to them about the need for their participation in talking about their Christian faith by teaching and sharing it with others especially among their peers, by so doing we build their sense of responsibility and confidence and help them to joyfully take up the challenge to evangelize.

Family as Teacher of Values

When parents live with conviction the good values they teach their children, young persons imbibe these values, making it their very personal life forming principles to such a point that they now become staunch witnesses themselves. Convinced of what they now know to be good values, they take it with them wherever they go. Though they may feel embarrassed and disappointed, they are not deterred by the bad example of people from whom they expect the 'golden' behaviour. Within the family, there are two major key players as far as the family influence is concerned; they are parents and siblings. It is important to acknowledge also that grand-parents play very important roles in directing the child's developmental inclinations towards the good, the true and the beautiful; and also, may be stronger influence in supporting and nurturing vocation to the priesthood and consecrated life, especially since children generally adore their grand-parents particularly grand-mothers. Grannies have the tested and trusted experience that help them appreciate the potentials of their grand-children and they actually have a keen understanding of their interesting questions, genuine confusions and beautiful aspirations, they enter into dialogue much more readily with their grand-children than do parents with their children. Many of us owe our generous response to embrace our vocation to the influence of our grand-parents who made us develop a strong sense of commitment toward God and towards the things of God. Our grand-parents taught us piety and the fear of the Lord with great ease, good rapport and utmost gentility. We seem to have an 'automatic' level playing ground where even parental discipline coming from them is heartily welcomed.

Having said this, let us take a closer look at the relationship and influence of parents and siblings on the missionary vocation of young persons.

Parent's Factor

Parents provide the home, which is the basic nursery for the child, and they are expected to give nurturance to a child's potential and direct it along the path of personal growth, such directives will not only develop the child, but also contribute to the overall good of society. Expectations are to be matched with what efforts are made to build the child's personality and character. Parents should be exemplary. They must lead the child out from ignorance to the Truth, providing them with education that not only acquires knowledge, but one which helps them cultivate virtue and opens their mind to the reception of truth. When this is done, the young person is able to establish personal guiding principles for himself. "The parent's ministry of evangelization and catechesis ought to play a part in their children's lives during adolescence and

youth, when children as often happens, challenge or even reject the Christian faith received in earlier years”¹⁶³

The truth taught to the child begins and is completed by introducing the child to God right from infancy.

Inculcating religious values in a child sets the pace for training and discipline in the right direction. Parents must themselves be first and foremost those who uphold Christian values by their very lives, because their lives well lived, is the truth the child needs to know to help him build his own convictions and guiding principles, and from the home, the child is ready to be launched into the larger society. That is why “Parents should initiate their children at an early age into the mysteries of the faith of which they are the ‘first heralds’ for their children. They should associate them from their tenderest years with the life of the Church. A wholesome family life can foster interior dispositions that are a genuine preparation for a living faith and remain a support for it throughout one’s life.”¹⁶⁴ “Parents should welcome and respect with joy and thanksgiving the Lord’s call to one of their children to follow him in virginity for the sake of the Kingdom in the consecrated life or in priestly ministry.”¹⁶⁵

Parents have the duty to raise their children with keen appreciation and attention to each child’s unique nature and temperament and this goes a long way to affect how the children in the family relate to and influence each other, we realise also that siblings’ influence on each other is as important as the relationship between parents and children so we take a look at siblings’ influence on each other with particular reference to how each child develops a mature and healthy social relationship that is required for a fruitful endeavour in evangelization.

Sibling’s Factor

The first experience of community for a young person is the family. Apart from our parents, we have our brothers and sisters together with whom we are raised. Our siblings have particular influence on each one of us, because more often than not, we spend more time with our siblings during our formative childhood years than with our parents. “Connections with our siblings may be the only intimate connections that last. Sibling relationships continue for better or for worse. Your brother will always be your brother and your sister will always be your sister.”¹⁶⁶

In an ideal setting where siblings grow up together and must necessarily acquire and practice certain virtues if they are properly guided and supported, relating with his siblings and peers, a child develops his ability to live his life with consideration for others. “Siblings can add so much to life. For instance, they teach one another important social skills. If the family unit is healthy, brothers and sisters create opportunities to learn to get along with others. Siblings learn how to use power, to give and take, to communicate and to get along with someone different from themselves. They learn just how far they can go in dealing with someone and what they can get away with. All of this is preparation for adult life.”¹⁶⁷

When properly guided and mentored, siblings are able to learn and acquire virtues such as forgiveness, compassion, honesty, respect and piety and are able to uphold these as values. This learned behaviour is a positive contributory factor to launching young persons into ministry whatever state of life they choose or are called to and this further enriches the general society into which these young persons bring their potentials harnessed from their home of nurture.

The society in turn has the capacity to influence young persons, it either helps them sustain already learned behaviour or deviate from it, and thus it is expedient that societal influence is given consideration.

B. Societal Influence

The family, being the first setting where the child learns social interaction, prepares the child to be launched into the larger society as its integral member and an essential contributor to its growth. It is in this connection that the society plays the role of both teacher and beneficiary of good formation of young minds and character, because it is these that in turn builds and develops society. Order and discipline in society is not achieved in isolation of proper formation of the character of young people. The peace a society enjoys is the fruit of society's investment in its citizens' moral, social and spiritual welfare, particularly the training and welfare investment in its young population. For instance, in our Nigerian society, the training of a child used to be considered the duty of the community; each person's child is everyone's child. This duty used to be discharged with a great sense of commitment and responsibility, but this is seen to be disappearing from our so-called modern culture; to the extent that correcting another person's child has become a thing considered unwarranted interference, yet we all in some way or the other must pay the price for unruly youth behaviour. Nonetheless, if the society expects good and holy men and women to minister to them as consecrated persons and clergy, the society must understand that it is its primary duty to train young people well. What is required are the first basic lessons in obedience, chastity, generosity, sacrifice and a life of prayer, because every young person is an ambassador of his family and the society he comes from.

The church has always been at the forefront of reminding and educating parents about their role in the proper upbringing of their children, she has never relented in this effort because she recognizes her role in building citizens for heaven and it starts with grooming young people for ministry.

Role of the Church-as-Family of God (Ecclesial Community) in grooming young people for ministry

The church cannot afford to be unconcerned about what happens in society or where society is headed with its self-destructive philosophies. She is an integral part of society as much as the spiritual forms an important aspect of the holistic nature of the human person. It behoves the church community therefore to form and also enhance the ongoing formation of the whole human person, directing his growth towards eternal life. This formation starts from even before a child is born. The adult persons coming together as man and wife to form a family is prepared by the church to see themselves as collaborators with God in his divine act of creation. The church anticipates the birth of a child as much as does the expectant parents. When the child is born, he is received by both parents and church community as not only God's gift to the family and the church, but as a new member with innate potentials, rights and subsequently, duties towards the biological, social and ecclesial community. It is for this same reason that the church baptizes infants trusting that parents will help them grow in the faith into which they have been baptized and when they grow up, will themselves hand on the faith with a sense of responsibility and commitment towards the advancement of God's Kingdom.

Necessity for ongoing formation of young persons

Ongoing formation of the individual is a participation in the recreation of the individual and renewal of society, the church achieves this through catechesis and the exemplary life of its clergy and consecrated persons whom the people look up to as role models. They are particularly

referenced to young people as persons who should be admired and imitated. Priests and consecrated persons are inserted into the society as leaven so that by their word and example they may present the gospel and its values as a way of life that should be followed. Young persons these days want to be taught a way of life that is authentic and true, and they want to live this life radically. They do not want mediocrity, they do not want their potential for growth to be limited, and neither are they hoping to meet with disappointments. They simply want to go all the way to living fully the life presented to them as the way to live. Young people dare to believe that they can 'do all things.' They see themselves as the revolution the world needs, so that things will be as they ought to be. Needless to say, that the world is facing moral and spiritual poverty of severe magnitude; this is in addition to the material poverty that is globally prevalent. Our Nigerian society has its own share of this poverty and we seem to be giving up on the young as our 'bright future.' Come to think of it! How much attention and character formation have we given to the young members of our society? It appears they are left to determine for themselves what way of life is the best.

Now, concerning the high rate of crime and kidnapping in our society; who is to blame? Material poverty seems to be the main reason proffered. While we can argue that material poverty has a role to play, we cannot deny the fact that moral decadence and spiritual poverty are major factors engendering the high rate of crime among young persons in our society today. If the government of our nation decide to neglect their duty to provide an enabling environment for the holistic formation and growth of young persons; the Nigerian Church cannot afford to shy away from its responsibility of grooming young people for ministry. The poor must see in us a sign of hope. We ought to do everything we can to alleviate the poverty of the people. While it is the duty of government to provide food, shelter and other basic social amenities for its citizens, we cannot afford to fail in our own responsibility to enrich young persons in other important areas of their lives – sound spiritual and moral character. This is why we think that material poverty is not sufficient to turn a person into a notorious criminal, but spiritual and moral poverty can, even in the midst of material wealth.

When the fear of the Lord ceases to exist or to rule the lives of people, we can expect the worse. Young Persons suffer these, largely because the adult community and all who should know have swept the fear of God under the carpet. Those of us who should be living and modelling a life of simplicity now live ostentatious lives and the poor live beside us and are watching! Before their very eyes, we use what we do not really need and we waste what others could benefit from; 'deprived' of their rights, the poor get angry and plan 'vengeance' and when they begin to unleash this, we all suffer – good and bad alike. Young persons are more vulnerable to becoming a dangerous threat to the security of society because they are the ones that feel neglected with respect to social security. It is necessary that every civil policy drawn should always take into consideration Youth development and empowerment; this will ensure that they always have a fertile ground to release their innate potentials.

Launching young people into ministry

Young people are the best for evangelizing themselves, but they have to be properly groomed and their potentials nurtured for ministry. Working with young people has armed me with great faith and hope in their potential as ambassadors for Christ. Young people are not essentially 'rebels,' they have potential energies ready to erupt! Properly channelled, their energies become a ready tool for effective evangelization.

Let us quickly examine the various developmental stages of a young person considering its importance in grooming young people for ministry.

Infants: Young people are prepared right from infancy for the ministry that is the fruit of their Christian vocation. Infancy is the stage in the life of the young person when he learns the basic rudiments of the faith from his parents and family environment. The child learns to see God as a loving and provident Father in heaven to whom the child learns to turn his heart. The child learns to say short simple prayers as dialogue with this hidden God whose word he will soon begin to hear. It is a work of prime importance. It demands great love and profound respect for the child who has a right to a simple and true presentation of the Christian faith.¹⁶⁸

Children: the school-age young person begins to be taught the Christian life in such a way as to prepare him to become inserted into the life of the Church. The child is prepared for the celebration of the sacraments through catechesis which communicates to the child the joy of being a witness to Christ in ordinary life.¹⁶⁹ At this stage, when properly mentored, the child learns to speak the truth. He learns not to lie and to avoid other vices commonly found among children and they influence their peer to toe the same path.

Adolescents: it is the time of discovering oneself and one's own inner world, the time of generous plans, the time when the feelings of love awaken with the biological impulses of sexuality, the time of desire to be together, the time of a particular intense joy connected with the exhilarating discovery of life.¹⁷⁰

Required at this stage is a catechesis capable of leading the adolescent to re-examine his life and to engage in dialogue, a catechesis that presents Christ as a Friend, Guide and Model, capable of being admired and imitated.¹⁷¹

The Young: this is the moment of great decisions. Although the young may enjoy the support of the members of their family and their friends, they have to rely on themselves and their own conscience and must ever more frequently and decisively assume responsibility for their destiny.¹⁷²

Catechesis then takes on considerable importance, since it is the time when the Gospel can be presented, understood and accepted as capable of giving meaning to life and thus of inspiring attitudes that would have no other explanations, such as self-sacrifice, detachment, forbearance, justice, commitment, reconciliation, a sense of the Absolute and the unseen. All these are traits that distinguish a young person from his or her companions as a disciple of Jesus Christ.¹⁷³

Catechesis thus prepares the young person for the important Christian commitments of adult life. For example, it is certain that many vocations to the priesthood and religious life have their origin during a well-impacted catechesis in infancy and adolescent. From infancy until the threshold of maturity, catechesis is thus permanent school of the faith and follows the major stages of life, like a beacon lighting the path of the child, the adolescent and the young person.¹⁷⁴

Challenges

The society in which we live, to a large extent often neglects its duty to train and empower young people and this constitutes one of the several challenges to grooming young people for ministry as outlined below:

- Some parents are not good character formators, either because they were not well formed themselves or they never internalized good formation.

- There are too many distractions these days that parents need to work extremely hard to make sure their children are not lost in the midst of these distractions
- These young ones are confronted by multifaceted challenges especially challenges to their faith as Catholics
- Growing moral decadence in the society, wrong use of the internet and social media, all pose very important challenge to good character formation
- Education these days, stress academic excellence at the expense of spiritual and good moral formation
- Too much reliance by parents on school and catechism classes for the training of their children
- A good number of Parents spend so much time running around to be able to fend for their families, hence the inadequate/low quality time spent with children at home leading to increased number of miscreants among the young population.

Coping with the challenges

We cannot give up; there will always be more ways than one to solving a problem. The prevailing challenges must be faced with courage and the determination to win the battle against juvenile moral decadence, as such, all hands must be on deck to help children and young people build up their own personal principles and groom them for ministry. In scripture, God tells us that we should train up a child in the way he will go, and when he is old he will not depart from it. We must see the overwhelming importance of our role as educators of our children, both in terms of their intellectual and their moral formation, and give ourselves wholeheartedly to this task. This will not provide us with a life of easy luxury, but it will provide us with a life work deserving of the expenditure of all our gifts.

1. We must give them good conscience formation since they are in a society that is fast losing sensitivity of conscience
2. They want to hear something said to them – something practical and practicable
3. There is need to engage them frequently in maturity drilling conversations, this will help them nurture a morally sound, spiritually edifying and intellectually sound argument and judgement.
4. We need to make sure they are not just regurgitating what they hear on TV, Films, and Radio etc.
5. They should be taught to consider prayer time as sacred and precious
6. We should help them to learn how to say and value private prayers and devotions. They should be encouraged to have their own private altars for their personal and private prayers.
7. Difficult children could be God's way of telling us that we are not perfect, so we ought to be highly dependent on him. It trains us in acquiring the virtue of patience, while we keep teaching and training until God allows our efforts to yield fruit.

Conclusion

The work of handing on the faith to children, in the sense of facilitating its expression and growth, helps the whole family in its evangelization mission. They naturally begin to spread the faith to all around them, even outside of the family circle. Children who grew up in missionary families often become missionaries themselves; growing up in warm and friendly families, they learn to relate to the world in this way, without giving up their faith or their convictions.¹⁷⁵

The greatest legacy the older generation can leave to the younger generation, is the good example of their lives, only then that they can have the courage to say ‘we are handing over heritage to younger ones’, because they trust the generation they have formed in good life just as Christ taught his disciples by the example of his life, and was not afraid to commission them to continue his work on earth. “The family is thus an agent of pastoral activity through its explicit proclamation of the Gospel and its legacy of varied forms of witness, namely solidarity with the poor, openness to a diversity of people, the protection of creation, moral and material solidarity with other families, including those most in need, commitment to the promotion of the common good and the transformation of unjust social structures, beginning in the territory in which the family lives, through the practice of the corporal and spiritual works of mercy.”¹⁷⁶ Young people will always honour noble heritage; and as we have seen, there is need to always furnish children’s minds and hearts with *the true, the good and the beautiful*, therefore every effort at every level that is put into grooming young people for ministry is a worthwhile enterprise because family, church and society are the better for it to the glory of God.

Endnotes

CONSECRATED LIFE MATTERS

THE VALUE AND ROLE OF CONSCIENCE AND DISCERNMENT IN THE DECISION-MAKING PROCESS IN A RELIGIOUS COMMUNITY-AS-FAMILY

Sr. MaryAnn Arthur Osaroejii¹⁷⁷

ABSTRACT

The article conveys the invaluable part that our conscience as well as discernment plays in decision-making in religious communities and in individual lives in general. Our conscience as Christians and as religious must be very much active and alive, if we are to be functional in every area of life and if we are to uphold our dignity.

We can keep our conscience alive when we unite our spirit with God's spirit through the process of discernment. Through discernment, we will know the right thing to do or the best decision to make since at the moments of discernment, God's will is spoken to our hearts through our consciences.

The article also presents that decision making is a process that is all-encompassing. It involves our daily lives and every living person at one point or the other, makes decisions on what he/she wants. Even though everyone, especially adults, have the right to decide, the members of religious Communities do not exercise such right completely since they are bound by the vow of obedience to listen and accept the will of God through their Superiors, Hence the Superiors, who are responsible for decision-making in the communities, should make the truth their focal point and this can only be possible when they are discerning, as St. Paul puts it. The Constitutions and the examples of our Founders should be our yardstick for judgment.

When a religious community abides by the promptings of the Holy Spirit, it becomes a family of God.

INTRODUCTION

The human conscience is a viable tool for the transmission of God's message and intentions.

It is so because the conscience is the invisible person, I will say the image behind the mirror.

It is invisible because it is the human spirit and since God is spirit and Immortal, he speaks to us through the spirit and we can only be in connection with him when we are in our good spirit.

Every human person is of 3 make- ups, the body, which is also known as the flesh, the Soul and the spirit. The body is the physical part of man that can be seen and touched. The body is like a cloth the inward man wears. It is the part of man which relates with the earth through the five (5) senses. The bodily activities are fueled by the blood circulation from the heart and coordinated by the Brain. And that is why when the brain is damaged; a person begins to behave in an abnormal way; making un-coordinated speeches and acting below expectation.

The soul refers to the mental faculty of man which consists of his intellect, his emotions and his reasoning or will. It is not physical. With the soul, man interacts with the mental realm.

The Spirit is the part of man that is able to contact God and can know God's will. With the spirit, man interacts with the spiritual world.

Today most people have developed their minds that, they can understand the letters of the "bible" not the spirit. But Jesus says; "the words that I speak to you are spirit and they are life" (Jn. 6:63b); so you must be spiritually discerned to understand it. It is in the spirit that our conscience dwells. Our spirit (conscience) is always atoned to God and his words while our soul (mind) tends towards the flesh.

The Holy Spirit takes up the role of our own spirit (conscience) when we truly and fully lay down our lives. However, when one is not fully mature in God, there is an in-balance, in that, though the spirit attempts to play his role, we struggle to function as regular beings. Thus we are most likely going to hear two voices. But as one grows in the Lord, learns to live by grace and feeds on the word of God, then him or her will more and more be able to subject the flesh to the things of God. Members of the religious community family are human persons with Body, Soul and spirit and by implication are conscience people who are even better opportune to be discerning. The religious should be ambassadors of this truth.

When we live in the spirit, we give absolute control of ourselves to the spirit of God (living by grace) and then, most of the inner voices we hear are those of the Holy Spirit. He will inspire us, teach us, remind us, correct us and rebuke us when we do wrong. When a religious is spiritually discerned, her decisions are born out of the irreplaceable designs and will of God. The decisions made in any religious community should ordinarily be concrete, concrete in the sense that the decisions are in no way influenced by our human sentiments. Rather, they should be based on truth suggested by our good consciences and the Holy Spirit through a proper discernment.

Our conscience is our Moral strength, our sense of right and wrong. The English Dictionary defines it as “a motivation deriving logically from ethical or moral principles that govern a person’s thought and action. It is conformity to one’s own sense of right conduct, it is a feeling of shame when you do something Immoral”.

Our conscience is associated with the good in us. For instance when we were much younger, we learned from our Catechism teachers, that there are two voices speaking in us; the good voice from God and the bad voice from the devil. And our parents also, in a bid to bring us to the awareness of making the right decision, will explain that the voice of God in us is the good voice that speaks very gently to our hearts, telling us not to do the wrong things. And the bad voice from the devil is often forceful and tends to dominate the good voice, always telling us the contrary.

As an adult now and as one who has embraced the religious life, I will say from my experience that my conscience represents the divine person in me. It is a voice, the voice that speaks within. A voice that speaks God’s will to my heart and spurs me to act accordingly.

The conscience is that voice that abides to the natural laws which are derived from the law and commands of God.

It is our conscience that keeps our spirit attentive that we could recognize the presence of the Holy Spirit in us and the image of God in others. So that respecting God's image in others, we invariably honour and give glory to God. As Pope Francis puts it "working with the conscience means, listening to the truth, to the good. Listening to God". Thus we become those striving towards the perfection that God wants of us and not only that, we will become ambassadors of Justice and truth.

Our conscience brings us to the awareness of the super natural person, working with, for and in us, so that we do not think we are in total control of our being. Rather, that we are answerable to a Master. It brings to the door steps of our hearts, our own vulnerability, and thus we do not see ourselves as God or superior over others but strive at every yielding, to the spot where we are found wanting, to be reconciled back to the one whose grace is sufficient for us.

The conscience allows us to know the will of God through the Holy Spirit whispering softly to our hearts through the process of discernment.

WHAT IS DISCERNMENT

Discernment and conscience are closely related. While our conscience notifies us of a good course or the right thing to do, discernment enables an objective confirmation of that truth. A well discerned decision is that borne out of a clear heart. When a heart is clear, it means there are no junks in there. The heart is free of every form of bias, and that the heart has being taken possession of by the Holy Spirit.

Moments of discernment are times when we seek the truth from God. And during these times, we must pray intensely and be ready to submit our will to the will of God which the Holy spirit may present to us.

Discernment means involving God in a dialogue about an issue. It could be a personal discernment process which we often do as individuals, for example, discerning our religious vocation. It could also be about a family issue, community or congregational matters which may involve more people but the important thing remains that, the individual members of the family, community or congregation should go in to prayer with the same intension at heart. Thus they are united at heart with the particular purpose. The Holy Spirit can easily speak same truth to our different hearts when we are not divided but truly united. Let us take for instance, the family of Zachariah (Luke 1:59-67). When his wife Elizabeth muttered a name for their son “John” and Zachariah wrote the same name, even though they had not communicated to each other and Zachariah could neither speak nor hear. But by the power of the spirit, they got the same inspiration. The spirit working in us is never a spirit of confusion.

Most often we make mistakes or regret certain decisions we have taken because we do not involve God through prayer. Some other times because we must have fixed a particular answer in our heart as to what we want and, even when the truth is pointed out, we do not accept. That is why, to discern well, one must deviate from the personal good to the good of the community, so that he or she can freely promote the truth no matter how hurting or painful it may be.

St. Paul in (1Thessalonians 5:21-22) teaches that it is the responsibility of all Christians to be discerning, when he says “But examine everything carefully, hold fast to that which is good, abstain from every form of evil”. In (1Jn. 4:1) the Apostle John gives this warning: “do not

believe every spirit, but test the spirit to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world”.

The religious are considered by others as models and great teachers of the good news both by their words and deeds. It becomes irresistible that we must live up to these expectations that fate has brought us. Notwithstanding, people who encounter us should feel safe, respected and appreciated, both members of our community and those outside the community. Our religious communities should be like an ideal family where God’s Presence is felt, and not a museum or hot oven as some communities today have become. The members of such communities live as total strangers not trusting themselves or as if it were a survival of the fittest. Every member in a religious community should be treated the same as others and the constitutions of each religious community should be the yardstick for our evaluations. We should make the truth as inspired by the Holy Spirit our focal point so that we do not deviate or become compromising both as members and as leaders in the community.

The key to living an uncompromising life lies in one’s ability to exercise discernment in every area of life. For example, failure to distinguish between truth and error leaves the religious person subject to false teaching which can lead to unbiblical mindsets.

Unfortunately, discernment is an area where most people stumble. They exhibit little ability to measure the things they are taught against the infallible standard of God’s word, and they unwittingly engage in all kinds of unbiblical decision making. Discernment intersects the life of the religious at every point and God’s words provide us with the needed discernment about the issues of life. It is important, therefore, to have a sound knowledge and understanding of the scriptures if we are to make concrete decisions. Not

only concerning ourselves but most importantly, if we are in the position to make decisions on other people or on matters that affect the larger community

There is no other person with whom we collaborate with during discernment, but God and so when God is involved in such process, He takes the upper hand and every other knowledge or persons, or abilities, or suggestions are subject to him. He inspires every outcome or result of the discernment. But this can take place only when there is an absolute acknowledgement of the power of that voice within.

Sometimes we dominate the reality of the presence of God, by yielding to our strong passions, emotions and desires. Discernment can never be completely done all by ourselves. No, God must be involved and that requires that we immerse ourselves in prayer. In this kind of prayer, we must project the attitude of listening. We should listen more than asking or talking. The scenario should be like that of a child asking the father for a favour. She only presents her request and then listens to hear what the father has to say; trusting that whatever the father says is good.

In discerning, clarity of intention is very important, so that we take our situations to prayer exactly the way they are because nothing can be hidden from God. To do this more effectively, one must have a clear knowledge of the issue with which he or she is going into prayer, so that the decision taken is not based on mere speculation. There should be an objective examination of the issue, to avoid a biased judgment.

It is important to bear in mind also that the one with whom we are dialoguing in prayer is not a human person. He is divine and his ways are not our ways. We can only move in conformity with his ways, if we have abandoned ourselves and are now living in the spirit. Living in the spirit entails that we no longer do the things we want to do but what

God wants us to do. And then we can make good decisions that will build our religious communities rather than destroy them.

DECISION-MAKING AS IT RELATES TO OUR RELIGIOUS COMMUNITIES

Decision making is a process that is unavoidable in our everyday lives as human persons, as a group and as a community. We certainly, must make decisions that cover our daily activities, weekly, monthly as well as annual programs. That is why for organizations or communities, there are authorities set up, that serve also as decision makers.

In the religious community family, those who make decisions are the superiors of different levels and their counselors. These people make plans from gathered facts and take decisions that affect both the individual members of the community and the community as a whole.

Decision making involves identification of a fact and gathering of information. Every adult person has the right to decide what he or she wants and is also expected to take responsibility of his or her decision. We can decide to eat whatever we want to eat, to go wherever we wish to go, to mingle with those we want to mingle with, to take up a particular profession that best soothes us, to get married to a person who appeals to us and even to take up a religious vocation.

In the religious communities, there could be the need to decide on a particular project to embark on, a particular sister to place on a particular apostolate, who to admit into the Novitiate or who to approve for first or final profession. There could also be the problem of deciding if a sister leaves or remains in the congregation or community.

We should arrange these items in the order of priority so that we take more care on the very sensitive ones. People who live outside the religious community make decisions for themselves while members of religious communities go by the biddings of their constitutions as directed by their superiors. This is because in professing the vow of obedience, they willingly give up the right to hold on to their own will.

A religious community is a family of people coming from different nationalities, but finding their common root in Christ Jesus. The difference in language, colour, race, cultural belief and value, age, gifts, talents and personal preferences, become the unifying factors and elements of building up the community. In the community, fraternal love is shared among members. Every member of the community is gifted in one area of the apostolate, but all work towards achieving the one goal of the founders and foundresses. When a young lady or man who desires to serve God as a religious is admitted, he or she is introduced into the life and spirit of the community as exemplified by the founder or foundress of such community. The decisions made about every member of the community should be based on the above.

This is because our founding Mothers and Fathers lived a life of truth and practical charity and were inspired by the Holy Spirit. To discern well, there must be a subject, and this subject must be known and clearly understood; we must resign from our own judgment and lean wholly on God (Proverbs 3:5-6).

With our conscience and discernment, we become rational in our reasoning, We make valuable decisions that can accommodate every individual differences, decision that has focus.

A person who is discerning must be still at heart because it is in the quietness of our hearts that God speaks to us.

Decision-making out of a well discerned conscience results in:

Building of trust: the members of the community become more trusting, believing everything to be the will of God.

There is the feeling of satisfaction; everyone is happy with the decision

Such decisions lead to building up the community; it promotes peace and encourages coexistence.

God takes a suitable position in our hearts and in our communities since He worked with us all the while.

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**HOW MEMBERS OF THE RELIGIOUS FAMILY CAN HELP THEIR SUPERIOR
ACHIEVE THE MISSION OF HEALING AND CARING IN THE COMMUNITY –
A THEOLOGICAL REFLECTION**

Sr. Margaret Fagbamigbe, SSMA

Director: School of Pastoral and Religious Education
Dominican Institute,
Samonda, Ibadan.
magfagbamigbe@gmail.com

Abstract

This article is approached from the revelatory starting point with sequential thinking. The aim is to demonstrate that the mission of healing and caring is a feat of communal enterprise and a personal responsibility; pointing out some attitudes which the members of the community must espouse in order to help the superior fulfill his/her role as a leader. It is recommended that the members exercise the virtue of patience and sue for peace; live in fraternal love by striving for mercy and compassion; supporting one another to do good; obeying the rules; seeking forgiveness; and displaying mercy out of compassion for those in need just like the Heavenly Father. The ‘elderly ones in the community must act appropriately and not jeopardize the smooth running of administration because of undue competition so that they could attain the mission of caring and healing which everyone desires.

Introduction

Religious life is a state of tending towards perfection. The religious person received the call, a precious gift from the Lord, and in response to that loving call such a religious lives a stable way of life in professing the counsels. By this life, the religious signifies the love of God to our world today and signifies the type of life that is to come. According to Clare Adams¹⁷⁸, “Religious life is living a distinctive, unique, life-style embraced by men and women through a life dedication to God for a transcendent end.”

Consecrated life is, thus, a way of following Christ in a singular mind of renouncing every other thing of this world in order to love Christ above all other things.¹⁷⁹ A consecrated person lives a special way of life designed and intended to bind the self to God

through the evangelical counsels by a sacred promise. By taking this bond, one is totally dedicated to God by an act of ultimate love. The inclusive mission of such consecrated persons consists in making Christ present to the world through the personal witness of their lives.¹⁸⁰ This means that the members of religious community are called from different walks of life and have come together to pursue a common goal.¹⁸¹

In this way of living, it is necessary that members have a leader who is legitimately put in the position of authority, a work which St. Paul characterized as an excellent physical exertion.¹⁸²

The person in this office is recognized as a representative of God. Members of the community are trained to obey the governing authorities, because there is no authority except from God and so whatever authority exists has been appointed by God. Therefore, anyone who disobeys an authority is rebelling against God's ordinance; and rebels must expect to receive the condemnation they deserve.¹⁸³

Since God has brought the members together in order to concretely live out their baptismal promises in full, everyone must do their best to preserve the unity which the spirit gives them by the means of the peace that bids them together from the time when they profess one faith and share one hope in the Lord.¹⁸⁴ Therefore, they must bear one another's burden. If one member is praised, all share the glory and if one is rebuked, all share in the defeat.¹⁸⁵

The members are called to witness God's love to one another first and by that bringing healing to one another. Achieving the mission of healing and caring is an accomplishment of every member of the community, the little and the great, young and old members. Nevertheless, there is only one person who is called and chosen to lead at a point in time; such a person needs the support of every one in order to perform his/her duty faithfully. The members of the community must promote some friendly attitudes that can facilitate the

peaceful coexistence of the members and make the community a joy and a happy home on earth.

What is this mission of healing and caring?

When someone is on mission, this indicates such a person is sent to achieve a purpose. Consecrated persons are on special mission which must be carried out in line with each institute's own specific rules, charism and constitution. Concisely, each person is on a mission to care, to heal and to participate in the saving mission of Christ.

To care for someone or something is to give attention, to maintain and provide for upkeep of that person or something. When we look at the biblical theology for this word we get the word '*Mercy*.' Mercy is the quality of care for another, willingness to make effort, even at great sacrifice, to ease another's pain, readiness to forgive, eagerness to help.¹⁸⁶

The word 'Mercy' has three Hebrew roots: *hesed, rahamim, and hen*.¹⁸⁷ We shall only look briefly at the root as *hesed and rahamim* because *he* means favour or grace and this is strictly the attribute of God. Grace or favour is a merit, a gratuitous gift bestowed upon a person even when such a person does not deserve it.

1. The mission of caring:

- 1.1. Hesed:* this word refers to the kind of love which is mutual and dependable.
 - i.* This type of love is common between husband and wife as we see in Abraham and Sarah.¹⁸⁸
 - ii.* This is also a type of bond which exists among people who share deep affiliation like deep friendship as we see this between David and Jonathan.¹⁸⁹

This word 'mercy' demands action between the parties involved. This is a kind of covenantal love between Israel, and by extension, between us and God. It is also the same kind of love

incumbent upon us to show to one another, it is a love meant to be shared between human to human. This type of love is enduring and it is communal.

1.2. The second root of the word ‘mercy’ is *rahamim*. This is related to the word ‘womb’ which means compassion.

- i. *Rahamim* designates ‘womb love’ which is the type of love a mother or a father has for the child.¹⁹⁰
- ii. This ‘womb love’ also represents the type of love brothers and sisters share since the siblings came from the same womb.¹⁹¹

The compassion for the other person is felt in the center of one’s body and this mercy results in action. This love is frequently predicated of Yahweh who has mother-love or father love for Israel. This ‘womb love’ of Yahweh leads to forgiveness for the wayward children.¹⁹² Nevertheless, we are called to be merciful like our heavenly Father and do so perfectly in imitation of the heavenly Father.¹⁹³

It is said that water of baptism is thicker than blood. In view of that, the members of the community are one family, brothers and sisters, and are enjoined to show mercy to one another as members of the same family.

2. The mission of healing

“Blessed are the merciful for God will be merciful to them.”¹⁹⁴

Juliana Casey affirms:

Mercy is that loving kindness and faithful service we owe one another as members of God’s people. Those who know God are called to be merciful to one another. This is true for leaders of the people. They are measured by quality and constancy of their mercy, especially to those most in need. They are rebuked for their lack of mercy, for the burdens they lay upon the people. The superior one, the powerful one does a good deed or forgives the debt of the inferior one.¹⁹⁵

In general, then, Juliana Casey is reiterating that mercy is the disposition to help those in need of help simply because they are lacking one thing or the other. This virtue is therefore a life-giving action. Mercy is God's attribute but this quality of God is demonstrated in the people, God's people, who reach out to save someone in need. ¹⁹⁶With Jesus' eyes of mercy, the lame walked, the blind had the sight restored and the sick were healed.¹⁹⁷ The fulcrum of this attribute and virtue of mercy is love. With passion of love, Jesus forgives and heals. His love has been poured into our hearts and urges everyone to act in kindness and tenderness to heal and save. We are called to be sensitive to the cry of others. God the Father has shown us this loving kindness by sending his Son to heal and save us. We must replicate this act of compassion to God's people, made in his image and likeness and engage in acts that save and heal; by this we are cooperating with God in renewing the face of the earth.

Therefore, each consecrated person is on the mission of showing mercy and care to one another in the community. But because the community requires a supreme authority who represents God for the community at a point in time, it behooves such a leader to take the mantle of leadership of mercy and healing to the greatest height and do so exceptionally without prejudice.

Nonetheless, our focus is to decipher the responsibilities of the members on ways of steering the mission of mercy and caring and helping the superior realize this accomplishment.

How the members of the community can help the Superior achieve the mission.

The members of the community can help the superior in the following ways but the list is not exhaustive:

1. **Called to love:** the members of the community might need to recall that they are called to love, not only God but also their neighbour as they love themselves. This is the number one duty which they owe God and their neighbour. God made us to and

for love. We demonstrate this love in friendship and in self-giving. We are called to love everyone including the superior and this love is reciprocal precisely because *nemo dat quod non habet*. The members must love their superior without any bias. When he/she receives love from the members of the community, he/she will be more disposed to carry the mission of healing and caring and any other leadership mission entrusted to him/her. If he/she is given love and affection in abundance, then out of the abundance, this will spill over to those members of the community who are wounded and in need of love, care and healing. But if he/she is starved of love, then many hearts and bodies will go cold and some might probably go into extinction.

The Second Vatican Council asserts that respect and love ought to be extended also to those who think or act differently than we do in social, political and even religious matters. In fact, the more deeply we come to understand their ways of thinking through courtesy and love, the more easily will we be able to enter into dialogue with them.¹⁹⁸

2. **Be merciful and forgive:** we are called in a very special way to be merciful like the Heavenly Father. When we feel offended by the superior we must toe the path of genuine and humble dialogue. We must learn to forgive the superior and let go any grievances in good time. If the members hold grudges against the superior, there is the possibility that the community will be divided and a house divided against itself cannot stand; then such a community cannot achieve its mission of healing and caring. In case a member feels offended, such a member must take proactive steps, clarifies issues with the superior and give way for the spirit to heal the memory. Only then can the community pursue the mission of healing and caring.

3. Give way for the superior to work: some members actually think that they know more than the superior; some do not even have regard for the superior probably because they have other expectations. The fact remains that the mantle of leadership goes round. Each one must be patient and support the current leader. The wise, the prudent and the learned must come together and give a good backing to the superior and settle any form of arguments amicably.¹⁹⁹ The members must rid themselves of jealousy, bickering, insulting language and hypocrisy. If there are things that should be done or things are not moving as fast as the 'elites' thought fit; rather than having a separate camp, they will do well to shield the war of words and make good proposals capable of moving the community to a greater height.

4. No quarrels and profane arguments: St. Paul warned devoted Christians against these vices.²⁰⁰ When there is no peace but quarreling and arguments over petty things, the work of God will be impeded and the members will be stunted in their spiritual growth. Some members are fault finders and will not see any good thing in the superior. At the root of this quarrel and argument is competitive spirit and rivalry which are destructive in character. Rivalry will negate the good of the superior rather than extolling the excellence. This begins gradually from slander to malicious contentions and could sometimes lead to open warfare. If we want to embrace the mission of caring and healing, members must lay down the pride/ego and see God in the superior.

5. Obedience to the rules :

The mission of caring and healing can also be achieved by simple obedience to the common rules. God resists the proud and favour the humble.²⁰¹ Obedience and humble submission to the rules and commands of the authority will help the superior

archive the mission of caring and healing. Humans owe obedience to God through obedience to legitimate authorities because they are organs of God intended for the proper ordering of human society.²⁰²

Leo XIII teaches that power comes from God and as such, whoever resists the authority purchase to themselves damnation. The faithful are to be subjected to the authority for conscience's sake and render to all people their dues, tribute to whom is due, custom to whom is due, honour to whom honour is due, fear to whom to fear. There is order in heaven, there is order in the church and so must there be order in the society. The rulers are urged to use the power conceded to them to save and not to destroy. In a case where the state is rashly and tyrannical, the teaching does not allow an insurrection on authority lest the public order is disrupted and greater harm is inflicted on the people. When there is problem, the Christians should be patient and pray to God.²⁰³

Furthermore, the Encyclical on *Pacem et Terris* maintains that authority cannot be established except by the diligent observance of the divinely recognized order in the universe and the humanity must appreciate this order and device the means for harnessing those forces for their own benefit. The Pontiff observed that God created the world out of nothing and subjected the universe under human's feet. Without the presence of some people who are vested with legal authority to preserve its institutions and to do everything to protect the interests of all its members, human society can never be well-ordered or prosperous. Those in authority derive their authority from God and thus have God for its author, have God for its origin and end. Those in authority have the mandate to govern in accordance with right reason.²⁰⁴ The members must trust the work of God in the superior.

6. **Prayer:** we cannot rule out the position of prayer. Whatever we want from the Lord, we should ask.²⁰⁵ The members must pray for their superior because it is a great task to lead the male or the female. The members must commit the path of the superior to the Lord.²⁰⁶
7. **Gratitude:** it may look ambiguous but expressing gratitude to the superior do wonders. When the members communicate appreciation to the superior, this singular act heals some of the wounds of the superior and this is a way of caring for the superior. The fact is that whatever care and attention that are given to the superior will definitely have riveting and reverting effects on the community at large.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The mission of healing and caring can be achieved with mutual cooperation and with individual efforts. There are many ways to achieve this task but the following can help the members of the communities.

1. The members must support one another and the superior in a special way. Whenever there are issues to be discussed, it is not for the members to disgrace or condemn the superior in private or in public. If there are mistakes needed to be pointed out; this could be done with pure intention and in fraternal correction so that at all times, we pursue peace and harmony in order to save our fellow.
2. In any community, there are 'elderly' ones. The elderly ones must act appropriately. They must aim at uniting the community and not jeopardize the smooth running of institute of the community because of rivalry. If they have submissions or interventions to make, this could be done with an open dialogue, with simplicity becoming of a religious.

3. The members must aim higher for the success of the superior in office. The downfall of the superior is a failure of every member; and everyone share in the glory and success of the superior.
4. Each one must pursue inner peace. When anyone is at peace with the self, he/she is most likely to be at peace with others and will cooperate peacefully in the right spirit with the leader.
5. Each member must frequently participate in the sacrament of reconciliation and go for annual retreat. The spiritual exercises are means of calling the erring members back to the fold.
6. The biblical injunction is very relevant; the sunset must not find any one in anger.²⁰⁷ If there are any conflicting issues between a member and the superior, it is better sorted out in time before the issue aggravates to warfare.
7. Anonymous letters are discouraged; this act wounds the weak members and casts doubt on the fate and faith of some members.
8. Some expectations cannot be met and we must recognize this fact. Money matters can cause a lot of havoc in communities. Therefore, we must be patient with the superior and know that God has not finished with anybody yet. God who calls and puts the superior in position of authority will make way for wherewithal of the community.

Conclusion

Achieving the mission of healing and caring in the community is a mutual help which is the basis for progressive community. The members will support the superior with prayer, love, understanding and acceptance. Whatever any member puts into the community has multiplying effect on every member. Each one must remember that leadership goes round in a circle. Individual must purge the self of biases and see authority as a call to service.

Pope Francis had stressed the importance of this virtue of mercy in the Bull for this year's Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy.²⁰⁸ He says mercy is linked to a compassionate heart; the art and the ability of reading the heart of those we come across in life and the attitude of responding to their deepest needs. Our God is a compassionate God, therefore, human beings created in the likeness of God must reflect the compassionate heart of God for this heart never gives up on anybody, forgives often, and rejection is overcome by kindness. Mercy, he says, is the ideal of our life and a test of our faith in Christ.

Our present world is enmeshed in cultural way and trained in a peculiar way to dominate and subdue the earth, to strike and annihilate, to spite and pull down. We as Christians are called to bear faithful witnesses and become ambassador and witnesses of mercy after the heart of the merciful Father in order to transform the world.²⁰⁹

We are called to nurture the world in kindness and gentleness in our dealings with one another for the measure we give is the measure we shall get in return.

ENDNOTES

CONSECRATED PERSONS AND PASTORAL CARE OF THE FAMILY

SR. LUCY SAMAWE GIDADO, OLF²¹⁰

Abstract

The Christian family, referred to as a domestic church”, the first and vital cell of the society, the first school of life and formation house for all vocations has received a lot of attention from the church of recent because of the challenges she is facing in carrying out a very important role in the education, formation and evangelization of her members. Consecrated persons who are part of the church share in the church’s concern for pastoral care for the family. Since 2015, a year Pope Francis dedicated to consecrated Persons, the Religious have taken time to deliberate, reflect and make a conscientious’ effort towards providing a systematic and effective pastoral care to families. In this paper we hope to articulate some key pastoral challenges the family is facing and practical ways in which Consecrated persons by virtue of the witness of their lives, charisms and life-transforming apostolates can offer pastoral care to families that is holistic, effective, God-centred, love – driven and value – based in our challenging and ever changing globalized world. Consecrated persons have all it takes to keep Christian families ‘alive’ in faith, hope and joy of love in marriage and family life.

INTRODUCTION

The family is one of the fascinating masterpieces in nature that is extremely familiar among all our social institutions. As a domestic and miniature church as well as the first and vital cell of the society, God established the family for the common good of its members and that of the society. However, within the family lies a paradox: a heaven on earth and a place of violence and abuse. As whatever we make out of the family goes, so goes the nature and inconsistencies we find in nature, be it in politics, morality or in religion are simply reflections of the state of our collective families. To address these in the society and in the church, we have to go back to the family which is a link to our past, and a bridge to our future blossoming.²¹¹ This is what the catholic church is out to

achieve as she intensifies her attention on the family and her vocation and mission of evangelization. In 2014 – 2015 the Roman Pontiff, Pope Francis called for two synods on the family. In these synods the numerous contributions and interventions of the Synod fathers which reflected the problems faced by families throughout the world as well as other legitimate concerns and honest

questions on the family were thoroughly discussed. At the end Pope Francis issued a post Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, “*Amoris laetitia*”, which put together the contributions of the two Synods on the family while adding other considerations as an aid to reflection, dialogue and pastoral practice, and as a help and encouragement to families in their daily commitments and challenges.² Alongside these developments in the church. Pope Francis dedicated the year, 2015 to Consecrated life. As consecrated persons we are part of the church that is concerned about the family. It is in this context that our Major Superiors of male and female Religious Congregations in Nigeria enjoined their members to reflect more deeply on our mission of giving adequate and systematic pastoral care to families.

Consecrated persons are members of the church who by profession of evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience make a total gift of themselves to God in love and for His service. Inspired by divine love and the charisms of their founding Institutes they give quality care and support to family, the “domestic Church” to empower her live her specific mission in the church and society.

In this paper, we will attempt to articulate the concept of Consecrated life and its replaceable place in the life of the church.

Secondly, we will discuss what constitutes the family and identify some key pastoral challenges that confront her and suggest some practical ways in which consecrated persons can offer pastoral care to families to stimulate holistic growth in all spheres of human existence leading to self-actualization and holiness of life.

2.1 CONSECRATED PERSONS AND PASTORAL CARE OF FAMILIES

Religious life is total self gift and total service to God: it is a special mode of consecration to the Lord³ In His apostolic exhortation, *Evangelica Testificatio* (Gospel witness) Pope Paul VI says the central objective of consecrated life is “the constant search for God” (No.3) in which the whole life is dedicated to God. The religious follow Christ, consecrating themselves totally to Him. More beautiful is the definition that describes the religious as those who

respond to the call of God to follow Christ more closely through the practice of evangelical counsels and who through a total life-long gift of themselves, live more and more for Christ and for His body which is the church.⁴

This teaching of Vatican II Council implies that consecration is the foundation of religious life and religious life is defined from the perspective of its purpose in being and not principally from the view point of the service that religious render. The primary reason for the consecration is close relationship with God (To first and foremost, belong totally to God and strive to be Christ-like i.e. holiness) and in a secondary manner its objective is apostolic action or mission. Consecrated life has its source and origin in the life and teachings of Christ. It is from God and has an irreplaceable place in the life of the Church.

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- 3. perfecta Caritatis 1.
 - 4. Ibid.

Consecrated persons are a great sign of God's (e.g. presence and kingdom in the world. They are called to have the same mind and 'tastes' that Jesus had and passion for God and for leading people to God (Philippians 2:5, John 4:34-'35)

Seeking God is the only reason that makes sense of religious life. Therefore the first and most essential purpose of consecrated life is to be committed God-seekers. Without a committed pursuit of God in contemplation, all kinds of good activities lose all purpose and relevance.⁵ A survey was conducted in one renowned Catholic country in the western world many years ago on the Laity's expectations of Consecrated persons. The Laity were asked, "what do you expect of consecrated persons"? Their answer was simple. Over 85% of respondents said, "we expect consecrated persons to point to God. We expect them to be prophets of their times pointing to God, holiness and eternal realities".

The foregoing highlights the fact that what consecrated persons are called to be and do is to witness to God by actualizing His kingdom of love, justice, peace, truth, reconciliation, compassion in the world whether they are "being" or "doing"

People expect the religious not to be simply efficient administrators or competent professionals but first of all "spiritual guides" who not only show the way but "walk the

talk.” They look for humble and happy religious with a deep spirituality rather than just achievers, specialists or professionals⁶

Pastoral care of people is a very significant aspect of the consecrated persons’ living of their prophetic role in the church’s mission of evangelization. Their founders and foundresses shared in Jesus’ own compassion when he saw the crowds who were like sheep without a shepherd. Like Jesus who compassionately spoke his gracious word, healed the sick, gave bread to the hungry and offered his own life in sacrifice, so their founders and foundresses sought in different ways to be at the service of all those to whom the spirit sent them. They did so by their prayers of intercession, their preaching of the Gospel, their works of catechesis, education, their service to the poor and the infirm---. The creativity of charity is boundless, it is able to find

5) Kaitholil George, Consecrated life, Challenges and Opportunities P. 172- 173

6) Ibid, P 173

countless new ways of bringing the newness of the gospel to every culture and every corner of the society.⁷

The love of consecrated celibates should include an intense apostolic spirit. That love should be manifested in lively desire, prayer and activity for the good of fellow humans. On account of their deep communion with Christ, they, like Christ, spend themselves for the benefit of others. They set aside their abilities, time, talents, work, the sweetness and goodness of their hearts all for the service of others. Their love is rich, lively, kind, merciful, heartfelt and ever ready to share in the joys and sorrows of fellow human beings. The religious who love for the love of God make divine love visible and experiential in the midst of the society. Their words, their messages, the way they comfort the sorrowing and wipe the tears of those in pain are Gods gifts and ways of expressing divine love ⁸. By the quality of their prophetic life and committed involvement in a variety of Apostolic fields namely: education, health care, social and Pastoral services consecrated persons offer integral pastoral care that caters for the needs of the human family in various aspects of their existence. As Consecrated persons what makes their teaching, nursing, counseling, social services etc

different from their lay counterparts is the pastoral approach (mystical and prophetic dimension) they bring to their ministries. They minister to the totality of the human person. Their pastoral approach to ministry promotes the redemptive presence of God which makes love, forgiveness, reconciliation, healing, good Christian marriage and family life, collaboration in ministry possible in the church and society. Mother Teresa of Calcutta in her pastoral care for the poor of the poorest in India asked one of the sick persons she served with so much love, “do you know Jesus?” In his response he made this remarkable statement, “I don’t know him but I know you.” Mother Teresa took care of not only his bodily needs but the spiritual and psychological needs as well. She was able to meet his greatest need, hunger for love which made him whole. The love he received opened his eyes to see Jesus in Mother Teresa. This is what motivated Pope Francis to charge Consecrated Persons to wake up the sleeping world⁹ to the challenges of God’s ways godly truths and living.

⁷. Pope Francis, *witness of Joy*, Apostolic letter to all consecrated persons --- 2015:10

⁸. Kaitholil George, *Challenges and opportunities*, p. 23

⁹. Pope Francis, *Witness of Joy*.

Today more than ever there is a greater awareness of the need for catechizing and forming people called to vocation of marriage for their delicate and fundamental mission in the church and society. For this reason pastoral ministry to marriage and family life has always been to the church a main concern. All recent church statements on marriage and family life have directed Bishops and all pastors of souls to promote the sacred character of the married state and of catholic family living. It is not only the sacredness of marriage that is at stake, the advancement in holiness of the Christian Spouses and their children must be promoted. Thus the richness of God’s love will be made manifest in their lives and they can successfully bear witness to the world of the fruitful love that exists between God and His people, between Christ, the Lord and the company of those redeemed by His blood. ¹⁰ ²¹² Speaking to the Bishops of the world in 1968, Pope Paul VI, said “we implore you to give a lead to your priests who assist you in the sacred ministry and to the faithful of your dioceses in devoting yourselves with all zeal to safe guarding the holiness of marriage, the better, to guide married life to its full human and Christian perfection. Look upon this mission as the most important work and responsibility committed to you”¹¹

Pope John Paul II emphasized the need for effective training of priests, religious and lay people for improved pastoral care for marriage and the family. He said *a shared progress (in marriage) demands reflection, instruction and suitable education on the part of priests, religious and lay people engaged in family pastoral work: they will be able to assist married people in their human and spiritual progress.* “*Familiaris consortio* 34-VI)

In His apostolic exhortation on the family, *Familiaris Consortio*, the Holy Father Pope John Paul II placed the utmost emphasis on the pastoral care of marriage and the family. He stressed three main phases of marriage preparation and established appropriate criteria for each. The Pope also enjoined on the Episcopal conferences of the whole world to develop a preparatory course and enrichment courses for marriage and the family living structuring them in such a way that those preparing for marriage and those already married will receive not only intellectual understanding but also a real motivation to enter actively into the church community as conjugal witnesses to holiness ¹²

In talking about the importance and need for effective pastoral care of families, Pope Francis in “*Amoris Laetitia*”, a post-synodal exhortation on the family called for “a more adequate formation --- of Priests, Catechists and other Pastoral workers. ” this will enable them offer rich and adequate pastoral care to those called to vocation of marriage and family life and will enable them to deal with the complex problems currently facing families. ¹³

So far the church has stressed the need for pastoral care for marriage and family if the family is to effectively carry out her onerous and delicate mission in the church and society. The total and progressive nature of the pastoral care families require must take on a collaborative nature that involves all pastoral agents in the church namely, Bishops, Priests, religious men and women, other pastors of souls and the families themselves.

The contribution that can be made to the apostolate of the family by men and women, religious and consecrated persons in general finds its primary, fundamental and original expression precisely in their consecration to God.¹⁴ This is a simple way of saying that consecrated persons’ pastoral care for Gods people is the heart of their calling. Their life of celibacy embraced for the sake of the kingdom of God makes them ever more available to dedicate themselves to the service of God and to works of the apostolate. Their presence, words and activities lift people’s face towards God and His kingdom and bring so much life,

peace and consolation to them especially those in difficulties. Hence the possibility for men and women, religious and members of secular institutes and other institutes of perfection, either individually or in groups to develop their service should families with particular solicitude for children. They can also visit families and look after the sick; they can foster relationships of respect and charity towards one parent families or families that are in difficulties or are separated; they can offer their own work of teaching and counseling in the preparation of young people for marriage, and in helping couples towards truly responsible parenthood; they can open their own houses for simple and cordial hospitality, so that families can find there the sense of God's presence and gain a taste for prayer and recollection, and see the practical examples of lives lived in charity and fraternal joy as members of the larger family of God.¹⁵

¹³ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia*, Post – Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the family, 2016 P. 139, n 202

¹⁴ Pope St. John Paul II - *Familiaris Consortio* No. 74

¹⁵ Ibid

Pope St. John Paul II concluded the section on pastoral care for families by religious with a passionate appeal to Superiors of Religious congregations saying:

I would like to add a most pressing exhortation to the head of institutes of consecrated life to consider always with substantial respect for the proper and original charism of each one the apostolate of the family as one of the priority tasks, rendered even more urgent by the present state of the world.¹⁶

3.1 THE CONCEPT OF FAMILY

The family is described by Akubue (2002) as a group of persons united by ties of marriage, blood or adoption and consists of a single household. It is the smallest unit of the community, the primary, smallest, closest and warmest social institution. The family can be nuclear or extended.

The traditional African family is generally understood as the extended family as opposed to the western concept of a nuclear family (father, mother and children). The extended African family includes grandparents and what the western world calls uncles, aunts, nieces, nephews, cousins etc.

The Catholic Church understands the family as an irreplaceable and precious unit of social living. God is author of marriage from which the family springs. The “conjugal partnership” of Adam and Eve, created by the Almighty God, is the beginning and basis of human society, the first and vital cell of society. It is in the family that “new citizens of the human society are born.¹⁷ It is also in the family that the formation and quality of each member of the society is promoted and nourished

¹⁶. Ibid

¹⁷. Lumen Gentium No. 11

In his Apostolic Exhortation, (*Familiaris Consortio*, 42) on the family, Pope St. John Paul II stressed the vital role of the family when he said, “the family has vital and organic links with society, since it is its’ foundation and nourishes it continually through its role of service of life, it is from the family that citizens come to birth and it is within the family that they find the first school of social virtues that are the animating principles of existence and development of the society itself.” The family, ‘the heart’ of church and society is far more than a legal, social and economic unit. It is the first church, a place where evangelization begins. It is where members are given the basic orientation about who they are what they should be and do. In other words it is where God is introduced; faith, Gospel, cultural, social and spiritual values are taught and transmitted and members are made saints. The family’s role is so vital in the education, formation and evangelization of its members that the second Vatican council fathers describe the family as the “domestic church”

The Catechism of the Catholic Church states that “A man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children form a family --- in creating man and woman, God instituted the human family and endowed it with its fundamental constitution ¹⁸ ”. Pope Francis in his Apostolic Exhortation on the family, *Amoris Laetitia* states that, the marriage encounter relieves man’s solitude, gives rise to new birth and to the family. Significantly, Adam who is also the man of every time and place, together with his wife, started a new family.¹⁹ ”

¹⁸ Catechism of the Catholic Church 1992:471

¹⁹ Pope Francis *Amoris Laetitia*

The family is the true measure of the greatness of a nation” so said St. Pope John Paul II. Not the size of the army, nor the gross national income, nothing but the quality of family life.²⁰ From the above sound teachings of the church on the family, it is clear that the family is a divine community made of husband, wife, children and other relations open to life and love²¹. The family is the “first school of life” and formation house, “the heart” of church and society, the power” house of love where members are called to encounter divine love and live out their vocation of love by sharing the gospel of love with all God’s children.

3.2 CHALLENGES FACING CHRISTIAN FAMILIES TODAY

One of the major concerns of the church in the world today is Christian marriage, family life and how the church can adequately and effectively provide pastoral care to couples to assist them live their vocation of marriage and family life to the full in our ever changing and fast growing society. The following are some of the key outstanding pastoral challenges families face today:

3.3 Poor Catechesis:

Experience has shown that many Catholics are poorly catechesized and as a result are weak in practicing the faith in the family. Majority of adult Catholics in Nigeria learnt the Christian doctrine through the question and answer approach and rote memorization. The effect of this on the faith they profess as adults today are enormous. The aftermath of this mal-formed, faith, deficient faith and a weakening faith.²²

In addition to poor catechesis many families today have very little knowledge of the church’s teachings on marriage and family life. Many young people marry without God’s purposes in marriage and acquiring skills for developing strong, marital relationships. When the Church organizes seminars, workshops or retreats or provides “know your faith” ford to enlighten Couples or young people on the above vital issues, very few will avail of such opportunities.

²⁰ Pope St. John Paul II: in *The power to heal*, Peter Byrne. C. Ss. R. 2007:38

²¹ Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria, Abuja 2015

²² Rowland O. Monica SSH, *Challenges to Faith- Forming in the family: the African experience in the family and the new evangelization*, Cath. Publication 2016: P.407

3.4 POOR AND INADEQUATE FORMATION IN CHRISTIANS FAMILIES

Many parents have a poor concept of formation and as a result they cannot give what they do not possess. Poor parent-child relationship, poor mentoring in the homes, family togetherness, and failure in family members performing their responsibilities in the home are outshoots of poor formation in the family. Many parents are hardly home. They are too busy to be home to carry out their apostolate of presence, example, friendship, teaching and mentoring to the extent that today house helps, drivers, television stars, footballers, artists, actors etc become role models for their children and youth instead of parents and saints.

3.5 POOR MARRIAGE PREPARATION

Poor marriage preparation is one of the key formation challenges in families today. Most of the problems that marriages and families experience are traceable to the time before marriage²³. Many prospective spouses often make the mistake of rushing into marriage. They do not take pre-marriage classes seriously; hence they go into marriage unprepared.

John Burk, SMA a renowned author on Christian marriage aptly captured this reality well when he said, every one prepares for the wedding but very few prepare for the marriage.

Scarcity of marriage formators and natural family planning instructors is another key challenge families face in the area of marriage preparation. The church needs to train more of these formators to help give effective formation to those called to the vocation of marriage.

3.6 “CULTURE OF LIFE”

Promoting the “culture of life” in a society that promotes “culture of death” in the name of population control and family planning is a big challenge to many families. While some families do all they can to promote the sanctity of marriage and culture of life by saying no to abortion, contraceptives and artificial means of birth control, some families see nothing wrong with these practices.

²³ Ossai Jude, *OSA Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization*. Paper Presented at Jos Archdiocesan General Assembly 24th - 28 August, 2015

3.7 RELIGIOSITY/CRISIS OF FAITH

The family as “domestic church” is the primary place of evangelization and parents are considered the first teachers and evangelizers of their children. All members are expected to encourage and support one another to journey together and grow in faith and spirituality. Unfortunately, the secular nature of our modern society characterized by endless or crowded activities and social functions makes it difficult for families to live a prayerful life that promotes meaningful encounter with God and balanced spirituality. This is what often leads to crisis of faith in the family.

Religiosity is another challenge that easily leads to spiritual paralysis. Some families are prone to spending long hours in prayer, observing vigils, attending meetings of numerous church organizations and yet their spirituality is skin-deep. There is a gap between faith and life in such families. Religiosity and crisis of faith are challenges that could easily frozen the faith of families leaving them spiritually lukewarm. Such families should receive the sacraments without encouraging Christ or having inner conversion or transformation.

3.8 POOR SEXUALITY EDUCATION

Very little or lack of sexuality education can lead to misuse or abuse of sexuality in the family or society. Today stories of incest, homosexuality, lesbianism, same-sex unions, prostitution etc have suddenly become the order of the day.

There are other challenges such as loneliness, less demonstration of love and care, childlessness, breakdown in communication, absence of social outings, infidelity, poverty, ill health, effects of war and insurgency, cultural differences that tear families apart and rob them of the joy of loving and nurturing marital and family relationships. Other challenges which seem to throw many families into crisis are increase in divorce, individualism, negative effect of social media and globalization, unemployment, moral decadence, gradual erosion of some of our good traditional family values, migration to large and impersonal

cities in search of work and wealth and use of artificial family planning methods that endanger conjugal love, matrimonial intimacy and unity.

3.3 CANONICALLY IRREGULAR “UNIONS” AND “MARRIAGES”

By canonical irregularities we refer to different forms of “marriage” and “unions” that are not in conformity with the canonical regulation of the church. Such unions and marriages include cohabitation, defacto unions, persons separated or divorced or divorced and re-married ²⁴ etc.

4.1 PRACTICAL WAYS IN WHICH CONSECRATED PERSONS CAN OFFER PASTORAL CARE TO FAMILIES

The most effective and urgent pastoral care consecrated persons can offer families is in the areas of education, catechesis and formative accompaniment. What those called to the vocation of marriage and family life need is adequate, effective and systematic formation for life. Such a formation begins at birth but the mistake many families make is to wait until three months to the time when their adult children are about to wed before they frantically scout for crash pre-marriage course or programmes to help prepare them for marriage. Such families would even go to the extent of pressurizing marriage formators to use “hit and run” approach in catechizing their children for such an important life commitment their children are called to. The truth about poor preparation for marriage is that many young people go into marriage today ill-prepared as discussed earlier on. This explains the high rate of divorce, lack of happiness and fulfillment, poor marital relationship characterized by selfishness, arrogance, unforgiveness, anger, secrecy, poor communication, impatience, lack of demonstration of affection, resentment, hurts etc associated with Christian marriage today.

A lot of Christian young men and women go into marriage without knowing clearly God’s purpose for Christian marriage as stated in Gen 2:18-24 – unitive purpose (companionship and friendship) and Gen 1:27-28 – Procreative purpose (procreation).

²⁴. Ibid

Worse still many of such young people do not acquire skills for building healthy and nurturing relationship in marriage that will enable them live marriage in Christ and promote the reign of God in marriage and family life.

Consecrated persons can provide a qualitative education, catechesis and formation to children, youth and parents that is God-centred, love- driven and value based. When this is done on the initial and ongoing formation levels, it will lead to deeper knowledge and living of the catholic faith, growth at all levels of human existence, self – actualization, greater commitment to living of marital vocation and one’s responsibilities in the family, church and society. Many spouses will live marriage and family life from the heart with inner conversion or transformation as its end result.

4.2. SCHOOL APOSTOLATE

Schools run by consecrated persons be made nursery for all vocations. As agents of evangelization they should give holistic education and formation that will equip and empower pupils and students to establish and maintain a worshipping , trusting and submitting relationship with God through Christ and healthy relationships with humans. Consecrated persons should “give them a kind of education that forms not only the mind but more importantly the heart.” The heart of education is the education of the heart ²⁵

Formation for the various vocations must begin and continue in the home/ family and all through life. The schools, church and society can build on that later.

²⁵ *Our Daily Bread*, Jan 14TH, 2001 Edition.

4.3 INITIAL FORMATION PROGRAMMES:

Consecrated persons should participate actively in organizing initial formation programmes such as marriage preparation programmes at parish levels to help equip the young with theology and spirituality of marriage and family life, and skills for building strong and nurturing relationship in marriage. Through such programmes young people going into marriage can be helped to keep their love and passion for each other alive.

As stated by Pope Francis, the young in the early years of marriage be helped to see marriage as a lifelong project and themselves as “unfinished” products, needing to grow, a work in progress. He further said, the greatest mission of two people in love and marriage should be to help one become respectively, more a Man and more a woman. They should be patiently and in a spirit of understanding keep “forming ” one another at every stage of the marriage. This would help them to build a solid foundation for marriage and family life and a mature union and a future of the marriage together. ²⁶

4.4 MARRIAGE ENRICHMENT PROGRAMMES – (service and maintenance of Christian marriage)

Today there is a good number of couples who are married for many years and have not had opportunities for “servicing” their marriages regularly. The marriage or families of such couples could apparently appear to be physically together and alive but in reality they could be emotionally and spiritually, crippling or dying.

Programmes for servicing of marriage are in great demand today. Programmes such as “Couples dates/ dinner nights”, “show me your spouse”, “regrateable discoveries after I do” etc have led marry a couple to renewal of love in marriage and family life. Such programmes provide opportunities for ongoing formation of couples – couples are helped to discover themselves and the joy of early years of their marriage; service their marriage, grow in deeper understanding of their vocation of marriage as well as celebrate Marriage and family life. When these programmes are organized by consecrated persons in collaboration with priests and marriage formators whether at parish or Diocesan levels can easily turn Christian homes into healing homes or heaven on earth.

²⁶ Pope Francis, *Amoris Laetitia* 2016, no 217,218,220,221

4.5 FORMATIVE ACCOMPANIMENT

Formative accompaniment is a very vital aspect of formation consecrated persons can offer families. A lot of couples get hurt, confused, feel used or betrayed, frightened, discouraged, lonely, not loved enough or not given enough attention to the extent of losing a sense of the presence of God in their lives and marriages. Such persons need consecrated persons to listen to them share their pains, hurts, doubts, woes, confusion, and help them process these hurting experiences and live through them gracefully. This is where spiritual direction and counseling services are handy for such troubled spouses especially when they are given on regular basis. In some extreme or deep psychological cases the service of a Psychotherapist could be employed to help spouses with serious emotional and psychological needs.

4.6 TRAINING OF MARRIAGE FORMATORS AND NATURAL FAMILY PLANNING INSTRUCTORS

Training of marriage formators and Natural family planning instructors is an area of great need for effective pastoral care for families in Nigeria today. There is need for more consecrated persons to be trained in this area to enable them function comfortably and effectively. The few that have been trained are doing well and their pastoral efforts are yielding positive results already in some Dioceses in Nigeria.

Other formative programmes such as retreats, workshops and seminars on marriage and family life can go a long way in strengthening families and helping them to remain strongly bonded and blended.

4.7 HOME VISITATION

Home visitation is one of the effective means consecrated persons use to bring home to families joy, divine mercy and healing. Lay people are always happy to be visited by Consecrated persons and Priests especially in moments of need. They often feel loved, cared for and accepted by the Church as a result of such visits. Home visitation is the only sure way of getting to know families. Special effort should always be made by Consecrated persons to visit especially the sick, aged and lonely families.

4.8. RELIGIOUS SUPERIORS AND FAMILY APOSTOLATE

This article is a wake up call to Superiors of religious congregations to respond to the loud cry for family apostolate to rescue the collapse of marry Christian families. They should consciously help their members to come to terms with the need for involvement of religious in family apostolate.

Superiors should invest interest, time, personal and resources into family apostolate to give adequate, efficient and total pastoral care to families. They should ensure that formation in pastoral ministry is given to their members both at initial and ongoing levels. Opportunities could be given to some of their members to avail of the new evangelization training in Issele uku diocese or other programmes offered elsewhere, for instance the OLF Sisters' family alive training in Jos, Nigeria etc.

CONCLUSION

Pope St. John Paul II, addressing African families, underlined the fact that no group plays so decisive a part in the future of the world as the family. The family, the first place of worship, self actualization, encountering love and spreading the gospel of love, a suitable place for grooming good citizens and saints is today being plagued by challenges and problems that weaken her in carrying out her role effectively and optimally in the church and society. The church calls on all agents of Evangelization especially Consecrated persons to give urgent attention to pastoral care of the family. Pope Francis calls on religious in particular to wake up the sleeping world. Religious by virtue of their religious consecration, charisms, institutions talents and educational qualifications have all it takes to wake up families in faith, love knowledge and joy of the gospel of marriage and family life. It is my prayer that consecrated persons will respond to this call with a new passion for family apostolate. They should open the doors of their hearts and communities to welcome families, teach, form and accompany them as friends, teachers, formators, prophets, spiritual directors / guides to God, wholeness and holiness.

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FAITH AND CULTURAL VALUES: INTEGRATION IN THE CONSECRATED LIFE

Charity Imoeko, SSH²¹³
Nigeria Conference of Women Religious Secretariat, Iva Valley, Enugu

ABSTRACT

The necessity and beauty of inculturation can never be overemphasized as it appears to pose a challenge on the essentials and the values of our root and on the significance and impact of our mission. Culture as a way of life brings out a practical aspect of our Christian life. In this paper, we shall see how integrally our cultural values cannot be exempted from our Christian values. More so, the role of Consecrated persons in integrating authentic cultural values into every aspect of their witnessing to the Gospel values.

*To this end, this paper will reflect the meaning of the word ‘Culture’. It will also consider the integral understanding on how it primarily appears as an awareness on our own identity despite its diversity. It will also reflect the meaning of **Consecrated life**; and how through the beauty of our diverse cultures, our Gospel witnessing will be in the limelight while not compromising our Christian faith. However, the role of Consecrated persons in achieving the aforementioned through self witnessing is highly important. Based on this, it will correlate culture with our mission as Consecrated men and women and with our community life.*

“Faith that does not become culture is not wholly embraced, fully thought, or faithfully lived.” (John Paul II)

“The consecrated life itself is the bearer of Gospel values and, where it is authentically lived; it can make an innovative contribution in meeting the challenges of inculturation.” (John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, n.80).

INTRODUCTION

The first Special Synod of Bishops on Africa in 1994, in its Proposition 3, noted the dichotomy between certain African practices and the Faith. Confirming African Bishops, Pope John Paul II’s post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa* (1995), seeks to overcome this dichotomy by recommending inculturation, in order to advance an in-depth

and deep-rooted evangelization. Pope Benedict XVI in his post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, in paragraph 38, stated that the Church's initiatives for the positive appreciation, and safeguarding of African cultures are well known and should be continued; it asks the Church to emphasize and be committed to the transmission of positive African cultural values. In relation to the two preceding Apostolic Exhortations, the theme of culture is very relevant to Consecrated life in our contemporary time. Today, we find ourselves in a culturally pluralistic world, but not undermining the fact that our culture plays a very important role in bringing home our various Charisms, we are expected to live out the values of our various cultures in spirit and purpose of our Founders. More so, in our Gospel witnessing, we are not so much concerned with our diverse ethnicity but on how through the beauty of our diversity, the Gospel message can penetrate the hearts of all to whom we witness in our mission.

Inculturation, therefore, goes a long way to show how authentically we can incarnate the Consecrated life in the world since by our calling as Consecrated persons, we are already incarnating the Gospel into a particular way of life. Our life ought to portray putting things in perspective and showing the relevance of inculturation. For no doubt, it consists of taking cultures seriously, one's own as well as those of others. We must also know how to discern and assess these cultures honestly and critically, beginning with one's own. Our own culture is not the standard for other cultures. For the Holy Father, Pope Benedict XVI, says that 'the positive values in African cultures are endowed by God'.

In the same vein, this paper will point out several significant ways of inculturating the Gospel values, regarding some important areas of Consecrated Life. The focal points in this paper will be the meaning and understanding of culture, the meaning of Consecrated

life, and who are Consecrated persons as well as their role in bringing to limelight the incarnation of our culture in their Gospel witnessing.

CULTURE: OUR WAY OF LIFE

The word *culture*, evidently, has various definitions as it relates to the subject matter. Here we shall mention but a few of them. “Culture is our way of life. It is the behaviours, beliefs and characteristics of a particular social, ethnical age group. It also can be said to be the total range of activities and ideas of a group of people with shared traditions, which are transmitted by members of the group. It is the sum of attitudes, customs and beliefs that distinguishes one group of people from another. Culture is transmitted through language, material objects, rituals, institutions and arts from one generation to the next.”²¹⁴

WHAT IS OUR UNDERSTANDING OF ‘CULTURE’

Given the various definitions of culture, and what it entails, it is better to review it as it relates to our subject matter. With this, we can say from a well understood form that:

Culture defines the social forces within a community involving its conventions for behaviour, ranging from food preparation techniques, to forms of entertainment that keep the community together like music or dancing, to dating rituals, and so on.²¹⁵ Culture develops through human interaction and is created and maintained via human communication.²¹⁶ Culture is everything that people have, do, and think as members of the society²¹⁷. In addition, it is perceived as an “organized system of meanings which members of that culture attribute to the persons and objects which make the culture”.²¹⁸ “Culture is an emerging phenomenon evolving out of shared cognitions that themselves arrive out of individual interactions with both the social and physical environment”²¹⁹. According to

Gaudium et Spes, culture refers to all those things which go to the refining and development of man's diverse mental and physical endowments.²²⁰

Culture, though often fragmented by the process of colonization, is the primary reference point for the construction of black and indigenous identity. In these cases, the category of identity does not simply indicate a function or a role but rather a process of construction of meaning that is based on a cultural attribute or, even more, based on a group of attributes that are interrelated and which prevail over other sources of meaning.²²¹

WHO ARE CONSECRATED PERSONS?

Meaning of consecrated life

“Life Consecrated through profession of the evangelical Counsels is a stable form of living in which the faithful follow Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, and are totally dedicated to God who is supremely loved. By a new and special title, they are dedicated to seek the perfection of charity in the service of God's kingdom, for the honour of God, the building up of the Church and the salvation of the world. They are a splendid sign in the Church, as they foretell the heavenly glory. By vows or other sacred bonds, in accordance with the laws of their institutes, they profess the evangelical counsels of Chastity, Poverty and Obedience”.²²² The Consecrated life is a life of ‘love’. It is a call to love in its entirety.

Religious are men and women consecrated to God, who, by being in union with the divine, nurture in them, through an on-going process of conversion and submission, their commitment to God's plans for themselves and for their fellow human beings. Through the life of their evangelical vows, they try to live the self-giving of Jesus to the Father, for the

salvation of the world. God is the focus of who they are, and who they wish to be and what they wish to do. Their foremost desire is to reflect God in their life, through words, action and inter-relationships. They give preference to a God-perspective through all their activities in the world. As a result, their religious life confirms what is good, and challenges whatever is evil in the society. Through their works of charity and justice, they sow the seeds of God's kingdom. By being in union with God they are called to reincarnate God in the hearts of people, through their cultural and social milieu, thus helping them recognise and experience, the life-giving presence of God in their midst.²²³

WHAT IS INCULTURATION?

Inculturation is the term that Catholic church and theologians have used in recent decades to denote a process of engagement between the Christian Gospel and a particular culture. The usage of the term is intended conceptually both to safeguard the integrity of the Gospel and to encourage appreciation and sensitivity to various cultural contexts.

"Inculturation was seen by the African Bishops from the perspective of Incarnation, and not Adaptation. They saw that it was involved in the very process of God-becoming-man"²²⁴ It includes two dimensions: "the intimate transformation of authentic cultural values through their integration in Christianity and the insertion of Christianity in the various human cultures". It is an urgent priority in the life of the Church, for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa. It is "a requirement for evangelization, a path towards full evangelization".²²⁵ Inculturation includes 'the whole life of the Church and the whole process of evangelization, that is, theology, liturgy, the Church's life and structures'.²²⁶ Inculturation is a movement towards full evangelization. It seeks to dispose people to receive Jesus Christ in an integral manner. It touches them on the personal, cultural, economic and political levels so that they

can live a holy life in total union with God the Father, through the action of the Holy Spirit".²²⁷

Upon Pope St. John Paul II visit to Nigeria in March 1998, he called on the Nigerian church hierarchy to ensure that inculturation is given its proper place in evangelisation. He encouraged the Nigerian Bishops to do all they can – in the areas of liturgy, theology and administration -- "so that your people will feel more and more at home in the Church, and the Church more and more at home in your people."²²⁸ Just as "the word became flesh and dwelt among us" (Jn1; 14), so too the Good News, the Word of Jesus Christ proclaim to the nations, must take root in the life-situation of the hearers of the Word. Precisely, the insertion of the Gospel message into cultures, the incarnation of the Son of God, was complete and concrete because it was also an incarnation in a particular culture. Every culture needs to be transformed by Gospel values in the light of the paschal mystery".²²⁹ Through inculturation, the Church makes the Gospel incarnate in different cultures and at the same time introduces peoples, together with their cultures, into her own community. She transmits to them her own values, at the same time taking the good elements that already exist in them and renewing them from within.²³⁰

It is by looking at the Mystery of the Incarnation and of the Redemption that the values and counter-values of cultures are to be discerned. Just as the Word of God became like us in everything but sin, so too the inculturation of the Good News takes on all authentic human values, purifying them from sin and restoring to them their full meaning.²³¹ Since it questions the Churches fidelity to the Gospel and Apostolic tradition amidst the constant evolution of culture, "the Church, for her part, becomes a more intelligible sign of what she is and a more effective instrument of mission".²³² The process is thus a profound and all-embracing one, it is indeed a difficult and delicate task which involves the Christian

message and also the Church's reflection and practice. But at the same time, it must in no way compromise the distinctiveness and integrity of the Christian faith.

INCULTURATION OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Inculturation as seen from the various angles of evangelisation, which entails incarnating the Gospel value into our culture and vice versa, has a resemblance in the Consecrated life which draws its relevance by incarnating the Gospel into a particular way of life. For to evangelize is to proclaim by word and witness of life the Good News of Jesus Christ, crucified, died and risen, the Way, the Truth and the Life. "At the origins, we see the hand of God who, in His Spirit, calls certain individuals to follow Christ more closely, to translate the Gospel into a particular way of life, to read the signs of the time with the eye of faith and to respond creatively to the needs of the Church".²³³

Therefore, as consecrated African persons chosen from diverse cultural background with the mandate of Christ to 'Go therefore and make disciples of all nations' (Mt 28:19), our active mission is to enhance the growth of the Church in Africa "since by Christ's will, the Church is by her nature missionary, it follows that the Church in Africa is itself called to play an active role in God's plan of salvation. For the Church in Africa is a missionary Church and a mission Church"²³⁴ and therefore as Consecrated persons and evangelizers, we must proclaim the hope of life rooted in the Paschal Mystery.

"The mystery of our Christian faith provides an outstanding incentive and encouragement to fulfil the role and discover the full sense of commitment by which human culture becomes important in man's total vocation".²³⁵ The inculturation of consecrated life must "aim to provide Consecrated persons not only with technical expertise in passing on more clearly the content of the faith but also with a profound personal conviction enabling

them to bear effective witness to it in daily life. Their call to proclaim the Gospel will therefore seek to act with total docility to the Spirit, who "today, just as at the beginning of the Church, acts in every evangelizer who allows himself to be possessed and led by him".²³⁶

Inculturation refers to the "incarnation of Christian life and of the Christian message in a particular cultural context, in such a way that this experience not only finds expression through elements proper to the culture in question, but becomes a principle that animates, directs and unifies the cultures, transforming it and remaking it so as to bring about "a new creation"²³⁷: inculturation, consequently, calls consecrated persons to live a fully integrated life of the beautiful values of their culture in resemblance of the Christian values. "Faith, hope and charity must influence the actions of these true followers of Christ in every activity, situation and responsibility. Since "evangelizing means bringing the Good News into all the strata of humanity, and through its influence transforming humanity from within and making it new", Consecrated African persons must be formed to live the social implications of the Gospel in such a way that their witness will become a prophetic challenge to whatever hinders the true good of the men and women of Africa and of every other continent"²³⁸

Indeed, Christ took flesh in his people's culture and therefore brings to each historical culture the gift of purification and fullness. All the central values and expressions that can be oriented to Christ foster what is genuinely human. The action of God, through his Spirit, is forever given to the interior elements of all cultures. Culture has reappeared with fundamental values of reference. Giving culture a value and making culture a way in which one is able to give witness to the original following of Jesus are practices that enable

Consecrated persons to recover the universal spirit of the Gospel.²³⁹ ‘Whenever there is a question of human life, nature and culture are intimately linked’²⁴⁰ “The difference between the cultural and the natural in man is: "That which is cultural in a person, is that which varies from one group of peoples to another. What is natural in a person is that which is common to all peoples. The natural is universal; the cultural is what varies" “Culture is the expansion of human nature; "The more we delve into human nature, the more human nature blossoms, be it at the expense of a few sacrifices" . This assertion comes to affirm this Christian nature, this way/culture of the men and women who have chosen to follow Christ”.²⁴¹

However, we see how much Consecrated life as a culture, supposes a difference from the surrounding cultures. Christ's culture asks of us to love beyond limitations. This type of culture being the sign of a person who chooses to withdraw from the ways of the world, imposing on themselves to make war against nature, and becomes the source of the highest human values, calls the consecrated person to bear authentic witness to the redemptive love of Christ. “For without culture or holiness, which are always gift of a very few, a man may renounce wealth or any other external thing, but he cannot renounce self-indulgence. Culture is the sanctity of the intellect”.²⁴²

Indeed, the mission of Christ in this world was to enhance a person's dignity, and as children of God, to give them the fullness of life, even at the cost of great sacrifice, that of the cross. By this salvation, Christ has elevated mankind to the highest level of vitality, thus has begun, the highest culture, eternal culture and divine culture. Men and women, who have chosen to consecrate their lives to God, ought to be in perpetual tension that is, striving toward higher values. In this world, where the atmosphere of culture is the unbridled

searching for power, possessions and sexuality, the culture of Consecrated life, promotes service, solidarity and brotherhood. Religious culture in this context ought to be the beacon that attracts and points out continuously, the way of higher values and those of the true development of human beings.²⁴³

ROLE OF RELIGIOUS IN BRINGING OUR FAITH TO BECOME OUR CULTURE

‘Faith as we know is a supernatural gift of God which enables us to believe without doubt whatever God has revealed’.²⁴⁴ “Religion defines how the community members interpret their role in the universe, with this teaching based on the local culture, different religions rise out of different cultures. Similarly, when members of one religion convert members of a foreign culture often the resulting religion in that area is affected by the host culture”.²⁴⁵ “The synthesis between culture and faith is not only a demand of culture but also of faith”, because “a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived”. The Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops considered inculturation a priority and an urgent task in the life of Africa's particular Churches. Only in this way can the Gospel be firmly implanted in the Continent's Christian communities.”²⁴⁶

Our understanding of Consecrated life, confines us to a general understanding of culture. By culture we mean, the social heritage — the institutions, customs, conventions, values, skills, arts, modes of living of a group of people, identifying themselves as members of a closely bound community, and sharing with each other, a deep-rooted affinity and loyalty. Culture is not static; its dynamism lies in the fact that, each generation, while learning from the past has to respond to the existential needs of their time. We speak of the culture of a particular community in the light of what could be observed, as a general pattern

of thinking and living-out, of the majority of its people. Consecrated persons are called to deepen the contemplative dimension of their lives; to give substance, and a Gospel depth to an already existing understanding of the divine presence, healing and guidance.²⁴⁷

"Our world, in which any trace of God seems to have been lost from sight, feels the urgent need of giving a strong prophetic witness on the part of consecrated persons".²⁴⁸ This is the link which attaches us to the material culture of a people, a culture which, without doubt, follows us everywhere. Consecrated life considered also in its cultural aspect, leads us to examine the methodology of transmission and of the integration of that culture, all the more, we have seen that culture does not have biological phenomena, but rather, learning.²⁴⁹

Above all, it is necessary to remember that culture, like human being needs to be converted in spirit and truth (Jn 4:24) and that the passage from African values to those of the Consecrated life will always demand qualitative jump and should transcend the assumed values. 'Conversion implies a break with one's former cultural and religious practices, and also with one's former social ties. [Moreover], missionary practices were not merely a proclamation of God's saving love in Jesus Christ, but also simultaneously transmitted Western civilization as well as European worldviews, customs, lifestyle, organization and even dress, language and names'.²⁵⁰

Seemingly, missionaries brought formal Western education, medical care and agricultural methods, to name but a few. In relation to cultural concerns, there is the importance of creating a shared cultural cognition, which could lead to cultural awareness and competence. In this view, the Catholic Church introduced inculturation so as to foster dialogue by listening to both Christian and African cultures and to engrain aspects of African culture in liturgical practices and in all other areas of Christianity

Examination of cultural elements that can be engrained in Consecrated life and practices is necessary. First, while the majority of indigenous institutes in Africa have retained the “Western” religious habit, some female institutes have adapted a dyed African-made fabric, and others wear simple dress. When temporary vowed religious are taking perpetual vows, some institutes integrate cultural rituals. These rituals especially in female institutes are conducted to incorporate and elevate a woman’s role in the society to become a counsellor and a leader, so that others can confide in her. This practice can be an area for inculturation — for incorporation of Christian and African values practices — as it entwines Consecrated persons with their culture and communities. Most female Religious institutes assume roles in their communities as teachers, nurses, and social and pastoral care agents. In these roles, they continue their responsibility as enshrined and practiced by the African woman to be a counsellor, infuser of morals, healer, adviser and educator. Particularly, in these examples, religious women engrain elements of African identity in their practices, while remaining in harmony with the Church’s teaching and in faithfulness to their religious consecration.²⁵¹

The Synod Fathers rightly affirmed that “a serious concern for a true and balance inculturation is necessary in order to avoid cultural confusion and alienation in our fast evolving society”. Pope John Paul II posed a challenge during the African Synod, namely, to look inward, our African cultures, and to reject a way of living which does not correspond to the best of our African traditions, and our Christian faith: “Today, I urge you to look inside yourselves. Look to the riches of your own traditions, look to the faith which we are celebrating in this assembly. Here you will find genuine freedom, here you will find Christ who will lead you to the truth”.²⁵²

With these in mind, there are several approaches to this effect that Consecrated Persons can cultivate in order to bring about the actualization of this africanization²⁵³ or inculturation in Consecrated life.

INCULTURATED FORMATION

A fundamental responsibility is seen in the concern for vocations to the Priesthood and Consecrated life. “It is necessary to discern them wisely, to provide competent directors and to oversee the quality of the formation offered. The fulfilment of the hope for the flowering of African missionary vocations depends on the attention given to the solution of this problem, a flowering that is required if the Gospel is to be proclaimed in every part of the continent and beyond”.²⁵⁴

In order to bring about a well inculturated witnessing of the Gospel, the integration of cultural values ought to play a vital role in the initial formation of Consecrated women and men. An inculturated formation motivates the candidates to express their cultural values through liturgy and other moments of community life. It is necessary to allow the candidates to have an experience of the common Charism of the founders without setting aside their own cultural values. This will enable them to enrich the charism from their own experience. Many problems in formation occur because of a lack of sensitivity to important and particular elements of culture. Inculturated formation from the perspective of pluralism occurs in those formation environments where there is no predominance of one culture but a true diversity of cultures. In these cases, inculturated formation process is also necessary.

Sensitivity to the distinct cultures of the particular candidates is very important. In the first place, we must realize that just as the past formation in the tradition of Consecrated

life was marked by discipline and uniformity of action, so now creativity and awareness of the cultural differences are necessary in an inculturated formation in multi-cultural environments. At times in the same community a 'No' spoken to one candidate has different connotations from the same 'No' that is said to another candidate. The reactions reveal different cultures. The inattentive formator is tempted to treat everyone in the same way, when in reality, the candidates are quite different. Experiences in the houses of formation, where there exists a diversity of cultures, show that the charism of the institute has a certain bonding function. It is in this environment that the individuals, though they maintain their differences, will find a common point of connection. An inculturated formation is a path with a double meaning; that is, it concerns the formation that is directed toward the candidates, but also involves their formation in the charism and the culture of the tradition that gives shape to the institute as a whole. It can be said that the charism forms a certain culture, that is, a certain way of being and acting that includes one's own identity. In formation, basic human maturity must be attained before one goes to live and work in a different cultural milieu.²⁵⁵

RECOGNITION OF OUR PLURALISM

There are several reasons why the issue of culture and inculturation are relevant today. "We live in a pluralistic world, and we are more sensitive than ever to differences due to ethnicity, culture, religion, gender, and generations. The acceptance of pluralism makes our way of thinking and acting difficult." Even though we all recognize that we live in our one and only pluralistic world, that doesn't mean that contradictions and conflicts will fade away.

“The Church has existed through the centuries in varying circumstances and has utilized the resources of different cultures in its preaching to spread and explain the message of Christ, to examine and understand it more deeply, and to express it more perfectly in the liturgy and in various aspects of the life of the faithful. The Church is faithful to its traditions and is at the same time conscious of its universal mission. It can then, enter into communion with different forms of culture, thereby enriching both itself and the cultures themselves”.²⁵⁶

History continues to weigh on cultures – for example colonialism still calls for concerted efforts to achieve reconciliation (and redemption from on high). Until this happens, the ghosts of inflexible and overarching notions of what culture is all about will continue to haunt us. As far as dominant cultures are concerned, there is need for profound conversion to overcome erroneously constructed dualisms that affirm: the West is better than the East, the North than the South and the masculine than the feminine. Likewise, disadvantaged cultures are tempted to overstate the gallantry of their own ethnicity and race. Contradictorily, this amounts to the poorest peoples sometimes depending unimaginatively and unquestioningly on those who are rich.

In the Church, especially with regard to liturgy, we know that the reality of inculturation dates back as far as New Testament times.²⁵⁷ The Second Vatican Council has reformed the liturgy and brought back the vernacular. “For this reason, the Church calls to mind that culture must be subordinated to the integral development of the human person, to the good of the community and of the whole of mankind. Therefore, one must aim at encouraging the human spirit to develop its faculties of wonder, of understanding of contemplation, of forming personal judgment and cultivating a religious, moral and social

sense. Culture, since it flows from man's rational and social nature, has continual needs of rightful freedom of development and a legitimate possibility of autonomy according to its own principles. Quite rightly, it demands respect and enjoys certain inviolability, provided, of course, that the rights of the individual and the community, both particular and universal, are safeguarded within the limits of the common good".²⁵⁸

But today, in spite of radical changes in this world, it is plain to see that many of our shepherds waver when faced with what is required for inculturation. Many people are won over by fundamentalist groups that feature lively singing, preaching by members of the congregation, and healing rites as an integral part of their celebrations. In the consecrated life these days, the topic of culture is also a very important one. As mentioned already, we find ourselves in a culturally pluralistic world. Today, inculturation means incarnating the consecrated life in this world. There are many signs of vitality in this area, as well as a great readiness to dialogue with people of every culture. Some consecrated men and women, getting involved in oppressive and violent situations, where the yearning for freedom inherent in every human being is strongly opposed, have even suffered martyrdom. Cultural openness has resulted in profound demographic changes in institutes of the consecrated life. Often vocations come less from the countries where institutes were founded and more from cultures where they have inserted themselves. Culturally, many Orders and Congregations have now gone from having single centers to multiple ones. We should recognize that the consecrated life has some notable blind spots in the field of inculturation. When our style of life becomes secular and consumerist, when the media has an excessive influence on us, the tension between the Gospel and culture tends to weaken. We no longer inculturate the message of Jesus, we are simply acculturated by our surroundings. The same lack of inculturation occurs when we don't live within our means and depend too much on

economic resources from outside. Comforts can lessen our enthusiasm for launching new adventures in intercultural dialogue.²⁵⁹

CULTIVATION OF THE LANGUAGE OF LOVE

The challenge of dialogue is fundamentally the challenge of transforming relationships between individuals, nations and peoples in religious, political, economic, social and cultural life. It is the challenge of Christ's love for all, a love that the disciple must reproduce in his own life: "by this all men will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another" (Jn 13:35)²⁶⁰

"To follow the process of inculturation 'which entails, discernment, courage, dialogue, and the challenge of the Gospel', is a vital question for consecrated life and a proof of its authenticity" as it faces the future.²⁶¹ "In this way, all the individuals and social groups of a particular people will be able to attain a full development of their cultural life in harmony with their capabilities and their traditions. We must do everything possible to make all persons aware of their right to culture and their duty to develop themselves culturally and to help their fellows".²⁶²

The Church in Africa is aware that it has to become for all, through the witness borne by its own sons and daughters, a place of true reconciliation. Forgiven and mutually reconciled, these sons and daughters will thus be able to bring to the world the forgiveness and reconciliation which Christ our peace (cf. Eph 2:14) offers to humanity through his Church. Otherwise, the world will look more and more like battlefield, where only selfish interests count and the law of force prevails, the law which fatally distances humanity from the hoped-for civilization of love.²⁶³

In view of the danger of ethnocentrism that dwells in each human being, it is necessary to affirm the dignity of every culture. At the same time, however, we must admit that not everything that we label *cultural* is automatically good. In any given culture there are subcultures of life and death. Therefore, we need to avoid justifying human weaknesses, denying the reality of the struggle between good and evil, and claiming that cultural issues are quite simple and uncomplicated. Inculturation requires new expressions and lots of room for freedom that many times does not exist and must be achieved. We also need a common language of convenience so we can communicate among the different cultures.

More so, we urgently need to learn the language of mutual understanding and find out more about what makes us similar rather than different. Today, it is essential to get in touch with other cultures. It can be beneficial to personally experience a powerful culture shock. To reach this point, however, people need first of all to be well-rooted in their own world. It is good to remember that people experience intercultural and interreligious dialogue very differently in different settings. It is not the same if we Christians are held in high regard or looked down upon, if we are a majority or a minority, if we enjoy extensive religious freedom or endure barely concealed persecution.

We must welcome the notion of putting things in perspective. The secret behind inculturation, no doubt consists of taking cultures seriously, one's own as well as those of other. But one must also know how to assess these cultures honestly, beginning with one's own. Our own culture is not the standard for other cultures. A learned man once said to a Priest on mission that 'wherever you go and whatsoever people you meet, and something seems strange to you there, consider that the only strange thing is you.' We need to put what

is ours in perspective and become very open to the culture to which we are sent. To do that, a whole mystical theology is needed. But we must not idealize the culture to which we are going. No culture can be the ultimate norm. This leads us to recognize that the Gospel is the only rule of thumb. It has a freshness we never realized it possessed. We must continue the dynamics of the Incarnation and Easter. Interplay among cultures makes us humble. It puts everything in perspective for us. It pulls the ground from under our feet and refers us to the only one who is absolute: God. More than that, it opens up the mystery of God for us. True inculturation makes us participants in the mystery of the Incarnation and the Paschal mystery. In our case, this means leaving behind our “heaven” where we felt secured and relaxed, then agreeing to become strangers, and, as far as we can, make ourselves similar to those of another’s culture and to the point of their acceptance of us. A new culture more imbued with the Gospel can only be born from the utter destruction of our cultural ego. We should speak a language that everyone can understand. Although you might think this requires a terminology based on advanced theology. Everything works out fine if we start using the only language that is universal and common to all cultures. Everyone understands the language of love.²⁶⁴

INCULTURATION IN OUR MISSION

“Our mission as consecrated men and women fortifies the fidelity of the Church”. This may apply to different areas such as the life of prayer, witness, and communion. “Consecrated persons are asked to be true experts of communion.”²⁶⁵ That is, taking things a step further. One may ask, could this mission also include inculturating the Gospel? Institutes of the consecrated life often have a privileged position in the sphere of cultural undertakings, whether through our missionary work or our very community life. Even the worlds of masculinity and femininity have their own inculturations in the

consecrated life. It is said that the consecrated life has made room in the Church for providing for a wonderful equality between men and women. From all these, does a mission materialize for us to strengthen the fidelity of the Church in its constant striving to inculcate the Gospel? Just as it is asking us to be experts in communion, perhaps the Church is awaiting our contribution in the area of inculturation and intercultural communion. The wealth of intercultural experience that characterizes the consecrated life carries with it a greater responsibility for the Church and the self-same world to which we are sent. What follows are recommendations for living inculturation in the consecrated life in the areas of mission and community. The mission of the Consecrated Life in relation to cultures is that every vocation is bound up with a mission.

As consecrated men and women deeply involved in an intercultural world, we are keenly aware of the fact that true evangelization cannot exist if the values of the Christian message do not enter into a culture. The Gospel remains very abstract if it does not become inculturated and, in other words, does not become incarnated. To bring about inculturation, mere words are inadequate. An integral thorough evangelization is needed. One that incorporates actions, symbols, and the witness of life. Here, the vows take on a clear-cut missionary meaning. Our vows can be looked upon as an alternative model of life in which the use we make of goods, human relationships, and the exercise of power receives its inspiration from the very life of Jesus. By our vows, we offer the world an alternative culture which we are already living. From this perspective, our dialogue with cultures goes to the heart of the mission of the consecrated life. Much patience is required in this mission because the processes of inculturation advance slowly. "When we are journeying with peoples and their cultures, only a profound experience of God will provide us with the patience to wait the time of God in history. Only with this determination shall we know how

to also be present at those cultural frontiers where Christ's presence is most needed." Nowadays, this mission of the consecrated life to inculturate the Gospel is being expressed in several new ways. A spirituality of incarnation commits us to experience cultural transformation from the inside out, beginning on the ground floor. Inserted communities in population centers represent one of its expressions. Another great missionary adventure taking place is interreligious dialogue. Without dialogue among cultures and religions, there will be no peace, no openness, and no possibility to proclaim the Gospel in the world. Neither will the wealth of new ways to express the mystery of Christ be revealed. It is essential for every mission to transcend borders.²⁶⁶

INCULTURATION IN COMMUNION/COMMUNITY LIVING

"African culture has an acute sense of solidarity and community life. In Africa, it is unthinkable to celebrate a feast without the participation of the whole village. Indeed, community life in the African society expresses the extended family."²⁶⁷

In this regard the Message of the first African Synod emphasizes that the Living God, Creator of heaven and earth and the Lord of history, is the Father of the one great human family to which we all belong. As such, he wants us to bear witness to him through our respect for the values and religious traditions of each person, working together for human progress and development at all levels.²⁶⁸ Our liturgical worship and practices should bring home the richness of the cultures to which we belong, it should give witness to our own subcultures as consecrated men and women, with varied ways of praying and celebrating.

"Intercultural living fosters inculturation (and vice-versa)."²⁶⁹ That is, living in intercultural communities prepares the way for inculturation when it comes to the mission.

In other words, it is better if the challenge of incarnating the message of Christ in a certain place is first lived in the community itself. This experience felt in our very bones makes us more sensitive and realistic at the same time. In this way a cultural critique often comes about that is positive and evangelical: one culture appraises itself in light of another and one refines the other. Several people also noted that intercultural living does not always take place as well as it should in community.

Shall we have the requisite drive to dedicate ourselves to this? Possibility would be to first place ourselves in the hands of God who created every culture and took delight in their great variety. That is where we have to start. Then, in each culture the mystery of the incarnation must happen again: The Word of God must again put on flesh and blood.

Cultures are evangelized only by means of painful sacrifices and sometimes martyrdom. One of the attractive features of the consecrated life is that we do not bring about the entire work of inculturation through our outside activities, apostolate, only. Very often, we experience this effort – i.e., the strive at practical inculturation --, and we can promote it in our own homes and religious communities. In doing so, we overcome the danger of dichotomy or even schizophrenic attitude in our way of life, and, on the other hand, we proclaim with joy and passion the Gospel to every people and culture with more than just words. This applies to the vows especially when we live them as the proclamation of an alternative culture, which demands a renewed formation of candidates, and other areas of consecrated life that calls more for a witness of life. This is our way of fortifying the Church-as-Family and proclaiming the Reign of God.²⁷⁰

CONCLUSION

While it is necessary to make efforts in view of generous evangelization of culture, our consecration to God must take into account the socio-cultural context where it is lived.²⁷¹ This is an indispensable condition in order that it could be seen as witness.²⁷² We encourage every consecration to God, to be based above all, on the supernatural, universal values and on fundamentals common to all the religious. The africanisation of religious life must extend to all genres of vocations to consecrated life. Pope St. John Paul II and African Bishops themselves have passionately called for the inculturation of consecrated life in Africa.²⁷³ In line with this, Consecrated persons must wake up to this challenge of owning up to the life and living it as Africans. This can be achieved by imbibing in their own lives and communities all that is good, true and beautiful in the African cultures that can better enrich the Consecrated life.

Religious life has relevance in the cultural setting. As shown in this paper, the religious has much to learn from the culture as well as much to contribute in the process of real transformation and conversion to a Gospel life. Cultures are dynamic by nature and are open 'to the influence of other cultures and traditions. In order to be effective and prophetic in their mission, all religious congregations need to examine themselves. Vatican Council II and the post-Conciliar teachings of the Church has given us the guidelines: go back to the roots of your congregations and examine its essentials and charisms; discarding the non-essentials which we have picked up on the way throughout the years. More so, we have to re-examine the elements that obscure our Gospel witnessing. In what way are we influencing the political, economic and social realities of the world? Where have they influenced us in our attitudes towards the local culture, mission and theology? How much do our understanding of and the practices/customs in Community life, or the conception and living of the vows, or the vision and style of administration (governance) in our

religious Institutes reflect a clear sensitivity to authentic cultural values, say in Nigeria?. Have we, consecrated persons, made sufficient efforts to identify, appreciate and integrate these cultural values?. Unless we examine and allow these issues to challenge our community life, and indeed other aspects of Consecrated life, we will not be ready to learn and be enriched from the local culture, nor will we purify and elevate the local culture. Let us be converted in a personal way to the Gospel first and be ready to be sent to establish the kingdom of God by living according to the demands of the Gospels.²⁷⁴

In all, possible ways of achieving inculturation in the consecrated life is to find encouragement from our successes in inculturation. Our years of religious experiences should be able to convince us that faith and consecrated life has to be inculturated well,²⁷⁵ first in our religious communities, the society in which we live as well as our country at large. As St. John Paul II frequently observed, faith must become culture, since “a faith that does not become culture is not fully accepted, not entirely thought out, not faithfully lived”²⁷⁶

ENDNOTES

INTERVIEW - EXPERIENCE - WITNESS – REPORT

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.

EHJ Novitiate Community,²⁷⁷
Ibonwon - Lagos

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”²⁷⁸, 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.²⁷⁹

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.”²⁸⁰

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.²⁸¹

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".²⁸²

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"²⁸³

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!"²⁸⁴

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."²⁸⁵ 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 - Authenticity
 - Punctuality - Consistency
 - Sincerity - 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 GREAT JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY

Fr. Ignatius Makoji, MDM²⁸⁶

(Superior General, Congregation of Missionaries of Divine Mercy, Nigeria)

ABSTRACT

The Church is at the service of men and women in their earthly undertaking. Hence, she claims no other authority than that of ministering to human persons with the help of God, in a spirit of charity and faithful service geared towards eternal salvation (cf. Austin Flannery (ed.), Vatican Council II, Venite Seorsum, p.586). Consequently, the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the men of our time, especially of those who are poor or afflicted in any way, are the joy and hope, the grief and anguish of the followers of Christ as well. Nothing that is genuinely human, fails to find an echo in their hearts and that is why Christians cherish a feeling of deep solidarity with the human race and its history (cf. Vatican Council II, Gaudium et Spes, n. 1). In other words, all Christians by the example of their lives and the witness of the word, wherever they live, have an obligation to manifest the new man which they put on in baptism and to reveal

the power of the Holy Spirit by whom they were strengthened at confirmation, so that others, seeing their good works might glorify the Father (Vatican II, Ad Gentes Divinius, n.11). This therefore, becomes a clarion call to all and sundry to live out Deeds of Mercy!

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Overtime and in recent years, the church through her yearly calendar has maintained the tradition of projecting its expectation and the religious direction for the spiritual life of her children. The calendar serves as a guide that enables the church and her faithful to navigate properly towards the will of the Father, grow in particular virtue and pray as a community. Thus in the record, the church's faithful have experienced from the various calendar years of the church, the year of St Paul, the year of the Rosary, the year of the Holy Eucharist, the year of the Priest, the year of the Religious etc. Indeed in a most intense spiritual way the faithful have benefitted from the fruits of these calendar years and exercises proclaimed by the church.

Following this tradition, Pope Francis in the BULL OF INDICATION OF THE EXTRAORDINARY JUBILEE OF MERCY, *Misericordiae Vultus* (MV) declared the calendar year 2016, *the Jubilee year of Mercy*. This holy year, opened on 8 December 2015, the Solemnity of the Immaculate Conception recalls God's action from the very beginning of the history of mankind and calls the faithful to gaze even more attentively on mercy so as to become a more effective sign of the Father's action in the world. (MV 3)

The extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy according to the Pope is an opportunity for "the Church to make more evident its mission of being a witness of the Divine Mercy, after Christ, the face of the Father's mercy made living and visible by his deeds, his actions, and his entire person (MV 2). A symbolic element of the *extraordinary Jubilee year of mercy* is the opening of the Holy Door which becomes a *Door of Mercy* through which anyone who enters will experience the love of God who consoles, pardons, and instils hope.

The Jubilee year of Mercy is for the faithful an encounter with the mercy of God in a special way, and an opportunity to become channels and conduits bearing the mercy of God to others through concrete assistance. For the church, it is a year to send "Missionaries of Mercy" throughout the world to forgive even the gravest sins". It is also an avenue to re-awaken in us the need to carry on with the works of mercy which seem to have been drowned in the waters of egoism and cynicism. It is therefore on this note that this article borders on the Holy Year of Mercy from the viewpoint of the Corporal/Spiritual Works of Mercy so that wherever there are Christians, everyone will find an oasis of mercy.

2.0 THE WORLD TODAY AND A MERCIFUL GOD

The declaration of the jubilee year of mercy is timely and indeed a prompt call placed to a wretched and misery stricken world for an appreciation of the Mercy of God. For even though, every generation attempts to improve the standard of human living, attend to the needs of their immediate society and seeks to develop the world; even though we live in a world that is so sophisticated that it seems sufficient in so many ways; even though, our world is one of scientific breakthroughs and explosions that sometimes go beyond our sense of wonder and imagination; even though we have a world of technological advancements that leaves us in utter amazement and fascination, a world that seems to echo “all things are possible”, we are still suffering pain and wickedness.

Thus, amidst all the glamour and pageantry, the needs of humanity remain insatiable. Man’s thirst is still unquenchable; his hunger continues to crave for satisfaction and these leaves him restless and restive; he has no peace. This is so because there is something fundamental that is lacking, a space that needs to be filled, and the reason for this is because that which is most important has been relegated. The “what” that makes the “Being” of mankind is sacrificed on the altar of “having”. The essence of our relationship with God and one another has been overtaken and humanity is left with pain, misery, anguish, agony and wickedness engineered by man against man.

St Pope John Paul II in his encyclical *Dives in Misericordia*, laments over this and called it: “the lack of mercy in the technological world”; and this is so because we rarely experience mercy in our individual human relationships. People speak of nuclear might, economic strength, capitalism and political agenda, but mercy is never mentioned. We live by aggressive violence in our hearts, and this manifests in the inhuman tenets we witness every day. Beside our affluent society are millions of homeless and hungry people deprived of basic human needs and dignity. Condescending pity is given them, but little of compassionate mercy.

Switch on the television; go through the pages of the newspapers or visit the internet. What we see and read about are stories that send shivers down the spine leaving us to wonder if these acts are being perpetrated by men and women made in the image and likeness of a merciful God. And we ask: is this the world created by God? Is this the humanity created by a Merciful God?

Scripture tells us that when God created the world, Goodness, Love and visibly Mercy were the attributes that preceded his act of creation: he found everything good (Gen 1:31); in love he created man and in Mercy he shared all he had with him. Thus, from the beginning, it was on account of his mercy and love that God chose to create man in his own image and likeness (Cf. Gen 1:26); in the light of his mercy, God made man the custodian of creation: “So out of the ground the LORD God formed every animal of the field and every bird of the air, and brought them to the man to see what he would call them; and whatever the man called every living creature, that was its name”. God did not stop at that, in Genesis 1:28 God blessed them, and God said to them, "Be fruitful and multiply, and fill the earth and subdue it; and

have dominion over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the air and over every living thing that moves upon the earth." Thus, man became a co-creator with God.

We therefore bear no doubt that mankind has enjoyed the mercy of God but have failed in appreciating the Mercy of God. Humanity, a product of the mercy has strayed away from that mercy. Mankind has forgotten the prominence of mercy in our life and that the world needs mercy and that we are to model ourselves after Christ the Divine Mercy Incarnate.

The Jubilee year of Mercy in the words of Pope Francis is a time for us to constantly contemplate the mystery of mercy as a wellspring of joy, serenity, and peace. "Our salvation depends on it because Mercy reveals the very mystery of the Most Holy Trinity. Mercy is the ultimate and supreme act by which God comes to meet us. Mercy is the fundamental law that dwells in the heart of every person who looks sincerely into the eyes of his brothers and sisters on the path of life. Mercy is the bridge that connects God and man, opening our hearts to a hope of being loved forever despite our sinfulness.

3.0 JUSTICE AT THE SERVICE OF MERCY- THE MISSION OF THE CHURCH

Following Thomistic view, justice is defined as "the firm and constant will to give to each one his due" or "as the fulfilment of that to which our neighbour has a strict right" (Peschke,236)

However, *Mercy which entails compassion and forgiveness shown towards someone whom it is within one's power to punish or harm* is the very foundation of the Church's life. All of her pastoral activity should be caught up in the tenderness she makes present to believers; nothing in her preaching and in her witness to the world should lack mercy. The Church's very credibility is seen in how she shows mercy and compassion. The Church has an *endless desire to show mercy* (Evangelii Gaudium,24).

A glaring fact that stares us in the face is that the practice of mercy is waning in the wider culture. In some cases the word seems to have dropped out of use. However, *without a witness to mercy, life becomes fruitless and sterile, as if sequestered in a barren desert*. The time has come for the church to take up the joyful call to be merciful once more. It is time to return to the basics and to bear the weaknesses and struggles of our brothers and sisters. Mercy is the force that reawakens us to new life and instils in us the courage to look to the future with hope.

Saint John Paul II in his Encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, while decrying the precarious nature of human situation in today's world highlighted the fact that we have forgotten the theme of mercy in today's cultural milieu. In his words: "The present-day mentality, perhaps more than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy". The word and the concept of 'mercy' seem to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous

development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it (cf. *Gen 1:28*). This dominion over the earth, sometimes understood in a one-sided and superficial way, seems to have no room for mercy. But then, “*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*”(John Paul,13).

Therefore, since the Church’s first truth is the love of Christ, the Church makes herself a servant of this love and mediates it to all people: a love that forgives and expresses itself in the gift of oneself. Consequently, wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, “*wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy*”(Francis, paragraph 12). Hence, this Jubilee Year and beyond, is to be lived in the light of the Lord’s words: “Be merciful just as your Father is merciful” (*Lk 6:36*).

4.0 THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY VIS-À-VIS THE CORPORAL/SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY

The “great river of mercy”, as Pope Francis calls it in *Misericordiae Vultus*, “never runs dry” because there are always those who are willing to perform acts of mercy in their everyday lives. *In this Holy Year, we look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society: fringes which modern society itself creates.* How many uncertain and painful situations there are in the world today! How many are the wounds borne by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich! *During this Jubilee, the Church is called even more to heal these wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care.* Let us therefore, not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new! Let us ward off destructive cynicism thereby opening our eyes to see the misery of the world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so that they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! *May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism!*

It is the burning desire of the Church that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may 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. We are to invariably enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God’s mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as His disciples. Thus we must rediscover these *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 not forget 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, and pray for the living and the dead.

We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. *Mt 25:31-45*). Moreover, we will be asked if we have helped others to escape the doubt that made them fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness; if we have helped the ignorant to overcome their poor knowledge of the ordinances and ways of the father; if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted; if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer.

In the Gospel of Luke 4:18ff, we find another important element that will enriches our faith. Luke writes that Jesus, on the Sabbath, went back to Nazareth and, as was his custom, entered the synagogue. They called upon Him to read the Scripture and to comment on it. The passage was from the Book of Isaiah where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to those in captivity; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (*Is 61:1-2*). A "year of the Lord's favour" or "mercy": this is what the Lord proclaimed and we are experiencing now: A Year that brings to the fore the richness of Jesus' mission echoed in the words of the prophet: to bring words of consolation to the poor, to proclaim liberty to those bound by any form of slavery, to restore sight to those who can see no more because they are caught up in themselves, to restore dignity to all those from whom it has been robbed.

5.0 CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, we make bold to say that "mankind will not have peace until it turns to God's mercy" (*Diary*, ix) which must be dual faceted, in that as we receive mercy from God, we extend same to our neighbours and to sinners. It has always been the Father's desire that sinners approach His mercy without fear, for Christ tells us that "... the flames of mercy are burning me, clamouring to be spent; I want to pour them out upon theses souls" (*Diary*, 50). But then, God wants us to "Ask" for His Mercy, "Be" Merciful ourselves and have "Complete Trust" for without these, our Christian life will be counter-productive. Hence, just as Christ asked St. Maria Faustina, so He is asking us today: How long shall I put up with you and how long will you keep putting me off? (*Diary*, 9) It is therefore our prayer that each one of us may in this Year of Mercy and subsequently experience the power of the Blood and Water that poured out from the Heart of Jesus as a fount of mercy, and may each of us find confidence and trust in this ever-present mercy of God.

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Saint John Paul II in his Encyclical, *Dives in Misericordia*, while decrying the precarious nature of human situation in today's world highlighted the fact that we have forgotten the theme of mercy in today's cultural milieu. In his words: "The present-day mentality, perhaps more than that of people in the past, seems opposed to a God of mercy, and in fact tends to exclude from life and to remove from the human heart the very idea of mercy". The word and the concept of 'mercy' seem to cause uneasiness in man, who, thanks to the enormous development of science and technology, never before known in history, has become the master of the earth and has subdued and dominated it (cf. *Gen 1:28*). This dominion over the earth, sometimes understood in a one-sided and superficial way, seems to have no room for mercy. But then, "*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*"(John Paul,13).

Therefore, since the Church's first truth is the love of Christ, the Church makes herself a servant of this love and mediates it to all people: a love that forgives and expresses itself in the gift of oneself. Consequently, wherever the Church is present, the mercy of the Father must be evident. In our parishes, communities, associations and movements, "*wherever there are Christians, everyone should find an oasis of mercy*"(Francis, paragraph 12). Hence, this Jubilee Year and beyond, is to be lived in the light of the Lord's words: "Be merciful just as your Father is merciful" (*Lk 6:36*).

4.0 THE JUBILEE YEAR OF MERCY VIS-À-VIS THE CORPORAL/SPIRITUAL WORKS OF MERCY

The "great river of mercy", as Pope Francis calls it in *Misericordiae Vultus*, "never runs dry" because there are always those who are willing to perform acts of mercy in their everyday lives. *In this Holy Year, we look forward to the experience of opening our hearts to those living on the outermost fringes of society: fringes which modern society itself creates.* How many uncertain and painful situations there are in the world today! How many are the wounds borne by the flesh of those who have no voice because their cry is muffled and drowned out by the indifference of the rich! *During this Jubilee, the Church is called even more to heal these wounds, to assuage them with the oil of consolation, to bind them with mercy and cure them with solidarity and vigilant care.* Let us therefore, not fall into humiliating indifference or a monotonous routine that prevents us from discovering what is new! Let us ward off destructive cynicism thereby opening our eyes to see the misery of the

world, the wounds of our brothers and sisters who are denied their dignity, and let us recognize that we are compelled to heed their cry for help! May we reach out to them and support them so that they can feel the warmth of our presence, our friendship, and our fraternity! *May their cry become our own, and together may we break down the barriers of indifference that too often reign supreme and mask our hypocrisy and egoism!*

It is the burning desire of the Church that, during this Jubilee, the Christian people may 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. We are to invariably enter more deeply into the heart of the Gospel where the poor have a special experience of God's mercy. Jesus introduces us to these works of mercy in his preaching so that we can know whether or not we are living as His disciples. Thus we must rediscover these *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 not forget 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, and pray for the living and the dead.*

We cannot escape the Lord's words to us, and they will serve as the criteria upon which we will be judged: whether we have fed the hungry and given drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger and clothed the naked, or spent time with the sick and those in prison (cf. *Mt 25:31-45*). Moreover, we will be asked if we have helped others to escape the doubt that made them fall into despair and which is often a source of loneliness; if we have helped the ignorant to overcome their poor knowledge of the ordinances and ways of the father; if we have been close to the lonely and afflicted; if we have forgiven those who have offended us and have rejected all forms of anger and hate that lead to violence; and if we have commended our brothers and sisters to the Lord in prayer.

In the Gospel of Luke 4:18ff, we find another important element that will enriches our faith. Luke writes that Jesus, on the Sabbath, went back to Nazareth and, as was his custom, entered the synagogue. They called upon Him to read the Scripture and to comment on it. The passage was from the Book of Isaiah where it is written: "The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good tidings to the afflicted; he has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and freedom to those in captivity; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" (*Is 61:1-2*). A "year of the Lord's favour" or "mercy": this is what the Lord proclaimed and we are experiencing now: A Year that brings to the fore the richness of Jesus' mission echoed in the words of the prophet: to bring words of consolation to the poor, to proclaim liberty to those bound by any form of slavery, to restore sight to those who can see no more because they are caught up in themselves, to restore dignity to all those from whom it has been robbed.

5.0 CONCLUSION

From the foregoing, we make bold to say that “mankind will not have peace until it turns to God’s mercy” (*Diary*, ix) which must be dual faceted, in that as we receive mercy from God, we extend same to our neighbours and to sinners. It has always been the Father’s desire that sinners approach His mercy without fear, for Christ tells us that “... the flames of mercy are burning me, clamouring to be spent; I want to pour them out upon these souls” (*Diary*, 50). But then, God wants us to “Ask” for His Mercy, “Be” Merciful ourselves and have “Complete Trust” for without these, our Christian life will be counter-productive. Hence, just as Christ asked St. Maria Faustina, so He is asking us today: How long shall I put up with you and how long will you keep putting me off? (*Diary*, 9) It is therefore our prayer that each one of us may in this Year of Mercy and subsequently experience the power of the Blood and Water that poured out from the Heart of Jesus as a fount of mercy, and may each of us find confidence and trust in this ever-present mercy of God.

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BOOK REVIEW

Michael J. Milla (ed.) *Christ's New Homeland -Africa: Contribution to the Synod on the Family By African Pastors*, Ignatius Press, San Francisco, USA. 2015.184pp.

Reviewed by
Rev.Dr. Emeka Nwosuh, OP,
Dominican Institute, Ibadan, Nigeria

Christ's New Homeland – Africa: Contributions to the Synod on the Family by African Pastors is a collection of ten different essays by ten African prelates on questions or issues concerning marriage and family life, which were the major focus of both the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops held in Rome in 2014 and the XIV General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops held a year later (2015). This valuable piece of work nestles between these two Synods, which explains its dual character and function. On one hand, it takes a look at the outcome of the earlier Synod—the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops—and at the same time focuses its attention on the subsequent synod that was to take place. Much of the first gaze is concentrated on the *Relatio synodi* which was largely represented as the *Lineamenta* for the next synod assembly. The other gaze focuses on some specific pastoral concerns of the church in Africa which the authors hoped would receive some attention during the upcoming synod. Taking into cognizance this two-directional gaze of this book, it becomes much easier to understand and appreciate the differences in the tone, tenor, language and approach that one finds in this book.

On one hand, one notices the rasping and unrelenting criticisms which may appear shocking to persons that are very mindful of giving public offence and hence would rather opt for politically correct phraseologies. The first two articles particularly that of Robert Cardinal Sarah, the Prefect of the Congregation for Divine Worship and the Discipline of the Sacraments, makes no pretenses at all. One cannot miss out the combat mood of his article. But it is combat that is fought not by an appeal to emotions but rather with very deep, clear-sighted and almost irrefutable logic. His article clearly demonstrates a very keen mind that is able to untangle and expose, to the chagrin of his adversaries, the cryptic objectives and intentions that lie beneath subtle and presumably harmless phraseologies. Armed with a very sharp intellect, Cardinal Sarah dissects, piece by piece, the *Relatio synodi* of the Extraordinary synod thus exposing the hidden traps that unwary participants of the next Ordinary synod might fall into if they do not pay sufficient attention to the seemingly harmless expressions and ambiguous pastoral approaches that are inherent in the *Relatio synodi*. Cardinal Sarah unravels various instances of what may be described as cryptic subterfuges which he classifies under three headings: “a perplexing point”, “unacceptable, scandalous points”, and “a final surprise”. The emeritus Bishop of Conakry, Guinea is unapologetic that he represents a position that is clearly contradistinctive from that of the Older Churches. He concludes his essay by employing ingeniously, and somewhat

polemically, an expression once used by Pope Paul VI when he referred to Africa as Christ's new homeland. He appears to suggest that just as Africa once gave refuge to the fleeing family of Jesus some two millennia ago, so is she ready to offer the same hospitality to Jesus as some Herods in the Older churches attempt to snuff out his life through ambiguous or at best ambivalent pastoral practice dubbed mercy.

The essay following Cardinal Sarah's is that of Bishop Barthélemy Adoukonou who serves as the Secretary of the Pontifical Council for Culture at the Vatican Curia. He sets out to examine "An African Take on the *Instrumentum laboris*". Although lacking the polemical tone that one finds in Cardinal Sarah's essay, his, however, was no less analytical, critical and insightful. The *instrumentum laboris* was meant to serve as a guide for discussions towards preparing for the XIV Ordinary Assembly of the Synod of Bishops. This Ordinary Assembly was meant to continue and extend the discussions on the vocation and mission of the family earlier begun at the Extraordinary Synod of Bishops. It was perhaps for this reason that much of what was found in both the *Relatio synodi* and *Lineamenta* were also reproduced in the *Instrumentum laboris*. There was, however, an enrichment of the *Relatio synodi* with newly contributed materials, Bishop Adoukonou observed. He sets out to examine these new contributions. Much of Bishop Adoukonou's essay dwelt, however, on the persisting difficulties that the *instrumentum laboris* failed to take cognizance of. Bishop Adoukonou, therefore, sets out to critically analyze these difficulties. He examined the methodological limitation of the working document which proposes a "new pastoral sensitivity" while completely ignoring the "original sin of postmodernity" as particularly embodied in the decadent culture of the so-called affluent and developed countries of the West, namely a firm decision to construct a world that excludes God. "The Church in the West" Bishop Adoukonou surmises, "would understand then that she should not agree to think of her pastoral practice in terms of such an anthropology", that is, a "godless anthropology". Bishop Adoukonou offers a number of useful suggestions that could help clear up the ambiguities, ambivalences, distortions, and errors that are contained in the *Instrumentum laboris*. He concludes by underscoring the absolute indispensability of "the spirit of discernment that is enlightened by the mystery of the Cross, which, itself, discerns spirits". This discerning spirit is key to clearing up 'all the confusions and to dismiss any alleged "new pastoral sensitivity" whose Christian criteria for validity are unknown.'

The three essays contained in the Second Part of this book captioned "The Gospel of the Family", set out to examine and reaffirm core principles of Christian marriage as contained in both Scripture and the Tradition of the Church. Archbishop Denis Amuzu-Dzakpah of Lomé focuses his article on the importance of recent magisterial teaching on marriage and family. He briefly examines the contributions of the Second Vatican Council, the papal writings of Paul VI, John Paul II down to Pope Francis. Dwelling on the theme of the Indissolubility of Marriage, Philippe Cardinal Ouedraogo of the Metropolitan See of Ouagadougou highlights several factors that often constitute serious threats to this fundamental principle of marriage. The metropolitan Archbishop of Addis Abeba, Berhaneyesus D. Cardinal Souraphiel,

proposes ways of accompanying married couples so as to promote better understanding of marriage, and thus, ensure greater stability of marriages.

The Third Part of this book is dedicated to specific pastoral concerns within the Church in Africa. Under the common theme of “Pastoral Care of Families that are Hurting”, four Metropolitan Archbishops examined various issues that demand delicate responses which nonetheless must not compromise the authentic teaching about marriage. These essays have a particular flavor that could only have come from years of dedicated pastoral ministry. Issues examined in this section of the book include polygamy, mixed and interfaith marriages, etc. A common element in the four essays is the fact that none of the contributors advocated the sort of pastoral response championed by some of their Western counterpart. While acknowledging the pastoral difficulties of couples who find themselves in certain marital situations, these prelates remain resolutely committed to the traditional pastoral practice of the Church.

The essay by Jean-Pierre Cardinal Kutwa, Archbishop of Abidjan brings the book to a conclusion. His is an important contribution to the discussion as it sets out to argue why the State must be concerned and indeed involved in the question of family and marriage. Governmental policies, as the essay highlights can impact either positively or negatively on the institution of marriage and family. Hence, the State’s involvement on this question becomes not only useful but necessary.

The book, *Christ’s New Homeland—Africa* marks a very important contribution and one might say coming of age of African prelates. It is often observed that when it comes to major ecclesiastical gatherings such as Synods of Bishops or other important assemblies, or on burning questions of great importance, there is often a notable loud absence or silent presence of African voices. And when they appear to make some audible sound at all, they merely reecho the voices of others, particularly those of the churches in Europe. This book, however, represents a significant shift particularly as these African prelates, speaking on behalf of their other African brethren, have chosen not only to raise their voices loud and clear but to raise them in clear opposition to other voices including the voices of their financial benefactors in Europe particularly. One cannot but applaud the courage of these African prelates. Not fearing either losing the much needed financial support from the older churches or being marginalized and pushed farther to the periphery of the power structure of the universal church, these African prelates dared to raise their voices against the powerful voices of the bishops of the western churches.

But what is remarkable is that their raised voices were not filled with empty or noisy sounds. On the contrary, they were voices filled with articulate and intelligent sounds. The analytic, critical and incisive approach that is particularly found in the first two essays and in others as well lends credence to this. The book reveals an image of Pastors who are both intellectually sound, orthodox and yet pastorally sensitive to the challenges faced by members of their flock.

The assertiveness with which these prelates articulated their arguments and positions points to a growing consciousness of Africa's place and role in the life, mission and future of the Catholic Church. The conviction that the prelates of the Church in Africa are the future custodians of the orthodoxy and orthopraxis of the Church is almost palpable. Along this is the corresponding willingness to take up that mandate even at the cost of possibly losing favour with those older but richer churches which would rather prefer to see a change in the pastoral practices towards individuals and couples in certain irregular state.

On the flip side, one would expect a spread that sufficiently takes into consideration the diverse regions of Africa. Beside the Cardinal Archbishop of Addis Abeba, the rest of the contributors are all from the Francophone countries. There is, therefore, a noticeable lopsidedness. This lopsidedness is further accentuated by the fact that there no contributions from the Eastern and Southern part of Africa. In fact, one can easily conclude that the book is the effort of prelates of French West and Central Africa. In that case it raises the serious question as to how much the opinion expressed in these essays are representative of the hierarchy of the Church in Africa. What is even more surprising is that not even a single contribution came from Nigeria, which has a sizeable number of Bishops in the African continent. The fact that Francis Cardinal Arinze wrote the preface does not mitigate this deficiency.

I am not convinced that the essays in the third Part of the book sufficiently addressed some important pastoral questions with regard to marriage and family in Africa or at least in some African culture and societies particularly in those societies that still have strong attachment to their traditional culture even when they have embraced the Christian faith. One example would be the premium placed on children in most African societies. This value in some cultures appears to sometime relativize the importance of marriage. Again the inability of many local churches in Africa, Nigeria for example, to deal with the problematic of dual weddings, that is, traditional and church weddings, wasn't given any attention.

A major shortcoming of this book is the failure to raise the question and respond to the major challenge of hundreds of thousands of young ladies who, for a number of reasons, are constrained to live the state of unmarried life. So while the book, particularly the third Part, raises and discusses the pastoral concern and care extended to persons or couples in certain states or conditions, e.g. polygamy, divorce, single parenthood, divorced and remarried, etc., no awareness much less pastoral solicitude is shown towards hundreds of thousands of young ladies who did not willingly choose to live the state of unmarried life. But it is not only the prelates of the church in Africa who failed to recognize the enormous burden of this sizeable percentage of their flock but also the prelates of the universal church gathered at both the Extraordinary and Ordinary Assembly of the synods of Bishops equally failed to take into consideration this significant portion of their sheep thereby consigning them to the periphery of the Church's life and mission.

But in all, credit must be given to these African prelates who through their various contributions decided that the voice and opinions of the church in Africa must not only count but be given serious consideration. It is an important work which must be read alongside with other documents and writings that emerged from these two Synods and particularly alongside Pope Francis' recently published Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Amoris Laetitia*.

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² Rev. Fr. Richard OMOLADE is a Catholic Priest of the Archdiocese of Ibadan, where is the Coordinator for Religious Education. A lecturer at Ss. Peter and Paul, Major Seminary, Ibadan, he specializes in Biblical studies, Religious education and Educational Administration and Supervision. He is currently, the National Chairman of the *National Association of Catholic Diocesan Directors/Secretaries of Education (NACDDED)*. He enjoys poetry, reading and astronomy. Email: omoascend@yahoo.com. Tel: 08073153466 or 08168287538

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- ¹⁵⁷Professor Michael Alasa Ogunu is a Professor of Educational Administration and former Head of the Department of Educational Administration and Foundations in the Faculty of Education, University of Benin. He holds three Master's degrees in Educational Administration, Social Science and Business Administration, and a Ph.D in Educational Administration from Michigan State University, USA. Besides his academic and professional accomplishments, Prof. Ogunu has also distinguished himself as a prolific Catholic writer and a great defender of the Catholic faith. He has written over 1000 religious articles published in 40 Nigerian and foreign Catholic newspapers and magazines in Africa and Europe. He was formerly a member of the Education Committee of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria. Prof. Michael Ogunu is the first Nigerian lay member of the Carmelite Order, and National President of the Secular Order of Discalced Carmelites in Nigeria. He is also the Supreme Chancellor of the Order of the Knights of St. Mulumba Nigeria, Chairman of the Education Commission in the Archdiocese of Benin City, Member of the International Board of Trustees of the World Apostolate of Fatima, President of the Executive Board of the World Apostolate of Fatima in Africa and Coordinator of the Fatima Apostolate in Africa.
- ¹⁵⁸Rev. Sr. Cecilia Mary Ogochukwu OMEIFE, E.H.J., is a member of the Institute of the Sisters of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus. She has served in the medical, educational and pastoral apostolates of the Congregation. She is currently the Vicar General of the Congregation. Born in March 14, 1969, she made her Final Religious Profession on September 21, 1997. Sr. Cecilia is a Medical Practitioner. She finished from Jos University Teaching Hospital [JUTH], Plateau State, Nigeria, in 2007 and, since then, has practised as a General duty doctor. She has a Post-graduate diploma in Family Medicine from the National Postgraduate Medical College of Nigeria. She is also a trained Pastoral Counsellor, and has great passion for human, moral and spiritual development. She has been involved in Youth ministry at Parish level, and also with delivering motivational talks and spiritual reflections. Sr. Cecilia has published some books, including *Awakening the Eagle and the Oak in You*, and *Grace and Gratitude*.

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¹⁶²*Ibid.*, pg. 67

¹⁶³*Ibid.*, pg. 66

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¹⁷⁷ Rev. Sr. MaryAnn Arthur Osaroejii is a member of the Congregation of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ. A native of Ogale clan in Eleme Local Government Area of Rivers State, Nigeria, she studied Mass Communication in Madonna University Okija, Anambra State. Sr. MaryAnn is presently a Care-giver in the "Angel Guardian Home for the Less Privilege" in Mgebele, Oguta Local Government Area of Imo State (Nigeria).

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¹⁸¹ Cf. 1 Pet. 1:2ff; 1 Pet 2:9

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¹⁹³ Cf. Luke 6:36

¹⁹⁴ Matt. 5:7

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¹⁹⁶Luke 10:37.

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²⁰⁰ 2 Tim 2:14-26

²⁰¹ Cf. Luke 1:52-53

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²¹⁰ Rev. Sr. Lucy Samawe Gidado, OLF, a native of Sugu in Ganye Local Government Area of Adamawa State, Nigeria, is a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima. Haven obtained her grade II Teacher's Certificate from Madonna Women's Teachers college, Sugu, she subsequently obtained a degree in Theology from St. Patrick College, Maynooth, in Ireland. She is a teacher by profession and a trained formator and is passionate about formation. Highly gifted and experienced in Religious Life / Family life Formation Ministry, and she was a Formator of Postulants, and of Novices, in the Congregation of the Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima, Nigeria (for altogether 12 years). Sr Gidado was the Chairperson of Family Life

Commission of the Catholic Archdiocese of Jos, and the former Director of Female Catechists Formation Centre Kwall – Jos, and Superior General of Sisters of Our Lady of Fatima (1999 - 2009). Sr. Gidado is a deeply spiritual woman, a motivational writer, a teacher, Retreat giver/ Conference speaker. Sr Gidado has been involved in Family Life ministry for many years and is currently the Coordinator of her Congregation's *Family Alive Centre*, Sha'aka village, Jos, and the National Sister Adviser to the Ladies of St Mulumba, Nigeria.

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²¹³ Charity Imoeko, SSH, is a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. She presently works in the National Secretariat of *Nigeria Conference of Women Religious* (NCWR) in Iva Valley, Enugu, as the Assistant Executive Secretary.

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- Africanization “demands that one’s consecration to God be lived within a specifically African socio-cultural context and that it be seen by those around us as authentic love for God and for our neighbour.”
- Africanization “means integrating into it [*Religious Life*] those African cultural values which are in agreement with the Gospel. ‘The Church looks with great respect on traditional African moral and religious values’. (Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum*, n.14). You do not have therefore to renounce your cultural values but you should examine them carefully in order to discern what is good and true in them and then give them a new meaning by your religious life.” “Certain of them may be assimilated immediately: the natural feelings Africans have for the presence of God, their joy, readiness to share, hospitality fostered by the clan system, value placed on fecundity, etc. All this demands research and effort and you are aware of it.”
- Africanization implies that: “...you must remember that every culture, just like every man, needs to be converted in spirit and in truth (Jn 4:24) and that the passage from African values to the religious life will always demand a higher qualitative standard and must transcend the real values so far accepted.”
- “Your religious consecration must take account of the socio-cultural context within which we live (Vatican II, *Ad Gentes*, n.18; *Populorum Progressio*, n.40). This is an indispensable condition for our consecration to be seen as a witness (*Ad Gentes*, n.20; EN, n.69).”
- “This africanisation must extend to all various types of vocation”, not to only becoming brothers or sisters but also to becoming religious priests. “This africanisation (must) extend not only to institutes made up only of Africans but also those which have an international membership.”

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²⁵⁶ *Guadium et Spes* #58

²⁵⁷ Father Wilhelm Steckling, OMI, *Inculturating the Gospel and Consecrated Life: A reflection on USG-USIG in Rome*, January 18 2005

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²⁶¹ *Vita Consecrata* #80,90

²⁶² *Guadium Et Spes* # 60

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²⁷² *Ad Gentes*, #20; Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #69

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²⁷⁷ 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*.

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²⁸⁶ Rev. Fr. Ignatius Adejoh Makoji, MDM, is a Catholic Priest and the Superior General of the Congregation of the Missionaries of Divine Mercy (MDM), domiciled in the Catholic Diocese of Minna, Niger State. Born in the late 70’s to Mr. John Makoji and Late Mrs. Cecilia Makoji of blessed memory, he hails from Idah in Kogi L.G.A of Kogi State, Idah Diocese(Nigeria). Fr. Ignatius studied Philosophy at Ss. Peter and Paul, Bodija-Ibadan and Theology in Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu, Enugu State. He obtained B.A in Philosophy, B.A Religion and Cultural Studies and M.A in Pastoral Theology. He made his Final Religious Profession in 2012 and was ordained a Catholic Priest on 5th July, 2013 by Most Rev. Dr. Martin Igwemezie Uzoukwu, the Catholic Bishop of Minna Diocese and the Founder of MDM Congregation. Since after his Priestly Ordination, Fr. Ignatius has served in the following capacities: The Assistant Cathedral Administrator, St. Michael’s Cathedral, Minna, Bosso Road, from the year 2013 to 2014; the first Superior General, Missionaries of Divine Mercy Congregation, from 2013 till date; and the first Parochial Vicar of Divine Mercy Parish, Bakassi, Suleja (Minna Diocese), from the year 2014 till date.

²⁸⁷ Rev. Fr. Ignatius Adejoh Makoji, MDM, is a Catholic Priest and the Superior General of the Congregation of the Missionaries of Divine Mercy (MDM), domiciled in the Catholic Diocese of Minna, Niger State. Born in the late 70's to Mr. John Makoji and Late Mrs. Cecilia Makoji of blessed memory, he hails from Idah in Kogi L.G.A of Kogi State, Idah Diocese(Nigeria). Fr. Ignatius studied Philosophy at Ss. Peter and Paul, Bodija-Ibadan and Theology in Spiritan International School of Theology, Attakwu, Enugu State. He obtained B.A in Philosophy, B.A Religion and Cultural Studies and M.A in Pastoral Theology. He made his Final Religious Profession in 2012 and was ordained a Catholic Priest on 5th July, 2013 by Most Rev. Dr. Martin Igwemezie Uzoukwu, the Catholic Bishop of Minna Diocese and the Founder of MDM Congregation. Since after his Priestly Ordination, Fr. Ignatius has served in the following capacities: The Assistant Cathedral Administrator, St. Michael's Cathedral, Minna, Bosso Road, from the year 2013 to 2014; the first Superior General, Missionaries of Divine Mercy Congregation, from 2013 till date; and the first Parochial Vicar of Divine Mercy Parish, Bakassi, Suleja (Minna Diocese), from the year 2014 till date.