

**“ENTERING THROUGH THE NARROW GATE” (MATT. 7:13): TOWARDS  
REINVIGORATING THE SPIRITUAL COMMITMENT OF THE NIGERIAN  
CATHOLIC KNIGHTS**

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**ABSTRACT**

The universal call to holiness demands that one gains his/her salvation through one's state of life. The state of life into which one finds himself/herself is naturally established through the family process that eventually culminates into the Church affiliation, and finally into the larger society. There are various states of life within the Catholic Church which is classified into the clergy, consecrated men and women and lay faithful. The clergy refers to the ordained ministers that exercise the ministerial priesthood. The lay faithful though they share in the common priesthood through baptism live out their Christian life in their various areas of work. Within the Catholic Church, they form statutory bodies like Catholic Women Organization, Catholic Men Organization, Catholic Youth Organization, and Holy Childhood Association; which are all enveloped in the Laity Council. There are other particular associations like the Catholic Knights and other sodalities that exist in the Church. This research is concerned with the Nigerian Catholic Knights who often times help in promoting the growth of the Church through their generous financial contributions in various church projects and more so, in carrying out charitable works. On the other hand there is need to get them reinvigorated in their spiritual commitment so that eloquent testimony to the faith with soar higher This ugly side of deficiency in proper witnessing often times stain the corporate image of the group. The research uses the qualitative methodology to sift out the causes of this lack of proper witnessing and ways of addressing it. The researcher makes some recommendations on ways of ensuring more spiritual commitment among the Catholic Knights in order to be more active promoters of the gospel message.

**Keywords:** Laity, Catholic Church, knighthood, spiritual commitment, evangelization.

**INTRODUCTION**

The human life is replete with making of choices. In the spiritual architecture of each individual, there is an obvious desire to choose the good but like St. Paul most often one does not do the good he/she wants but the evil he/she does not want (Rom. 7:19). As one begins his day he is faced with a barrage of activities or routine events seeking his/her attention. That calls for an inevitable choice-making. There is a choice of time to get up if the night is well spent; what to eat for breakfast if one is lucky to have options; which clothes and pair of shoes to put on, if one has an over-brimmed wardrobe and shoe rack; which car to use if one has many; what to eat for lunch and supper if one is privileged to complete the circle of meals for the day; and a plethora of other limitlessly related activities. The choice is surely more demanding if one has accumulated an excess of what he/she actually needs. It then becomes a time guzzling

exercise. That goes to say that one is lighter in task of choice making if one is guided by the virtue of temperance in his way of life. One is therefore encumbered by excess luggage in his earthly life if one is consumed by intemperance which could be sequel to an exaggerated desire to accumulate for the sake of accumulating; thereby giving credence to the Latin adage “*amor habendi, habendo crescit*” (The love of having increases by having).

In our spiritual life the same is applicable because it is our desires in the everydayness of our existence that go to impinge on our spiritual life. The pertinent questions then are: what effort could be made towards unloading the excess luggage that obstructs one’s entering through the narrow gate? Is it possible to invent gates designed according to one’s own idiosyncrasies? What effort should members of the different Orders of Knights do in order to be fit to enter through the narrow gate? There is therefore need for spiritual dietary. Such dietary requires making the right spiritual choices in life in order to be worthy to enter through the narrow gate. But does it really have to do with spiritual dietary? It does seem to do more with spiritual commitment in weathering the storms of spiritual challenges that if subdued could thrust one into realm of eternal life. This witnessing is to be done by the knights as part of the laity.

## **THE LAITY AND ITS INNER COMPONENTS**

The word laity comes from the Late Latin *laicus*, which is a transliteration of the Greek *laikos* (of the people; *λαϊκός*) from *laos* (people; *λαός*). According the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council, the term laity refers to “all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in the state of religious life specially approved by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are constituted among the People of God; they are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ; and they carry out for their own part the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world” (LG 31, Catechism of the Catholic Church, 897; *Christifideles Laici* 8). In fact, their activity is so necessary within the Church communities that without it the apostolate of the pastors is often unable to achieve its full effectiveness (AA. 10).

In the same vein, Pius XII (1946: 149) states that, “the Faithful, more precisely the lay faithful, find themselves on the front lines of the Church’s life; for them the Church is the animating principle for human society. Therefore, they in particular, ought to have an ever-clearer consciousness not only of belonging to the Church, but of being the Church, that is to say, the community of the faithful on earth under the leadership of the Pope, the head of all, and of the Bishops in communion with him. These are the Church ....

On the basis of that, the laity remains a formidable force in the life of the Church and in the spreading of the gospel among people of every tongue and nation. It is clear that “the church has not been really founded, and is not yet fully alive, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ among men, unless there is a laity worthy of the name working along with the hierarchy. For the Gospel cannot be deeply grounded in the abilities, life and work of any people without the active presence of laymen. Therefore, even at the very founding of a Church, great attention is to be paid to establishing a mature, Christian laity. For the lay faithful fully belong at one and the same time both to the People of God and to civil society. (Ad Gentes, 21)

The laity within the local church in Nigeria is formed into statutory bodies through which they live out their mission of bearing eloquent testimony to the gospel in the everydayness of their lives. Among them are: Catholic Men Organization (C.M.O), Catholic Women Organization (C.W.O), Catholic Youth Organization of Nigeria (C.Y.O.N), the Mary League Girls' Association (M.L.G.A) and the Holy Childhood Association (H.C.A). The knights and their ladies belong the CMO and CWO respectively. They make every effort towards the good of these bodies through the contributions in the growth of the parishes in particular and the diocese in general. However, serious effort must be made to avoid tendencies of protectionism and auto-referentiality. The knights' attitude of protecting their group or seeing themselves as reference point in terms of good conduct and financial wherewithal must be completely frowned at and totally thrown overboard for the greater good of the Church. They have to be regularly aware that, "in fulfilling this mission of the Church, the Christian laity exercises their apostolate both in the Church and in the world, in both the spiritual and the temporal orders" (AA n.5).

These two orders – spiritual and temporal – are encapsulated in the fields of the lay involvement in the mission of the Church as delineated in Vatican II's Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People: The mission of evangelization and sanctification; and the mission of renewing the temporal order.

### **The mission of evangelization and sanctification**

The mission is founded on Christ's mandate: "Go therefore and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe all that I have commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, to the close of the age" (Mtt.28,19-20). It is a divine mandate that is consolidated with divine assurance of God's companionship. In fact, "the apostolate of the Church and of all its members is primarily designed to manifest Christ's message by words and deeds and to communicate His grace to the world. This is done mainly through the ministry of the Word and the sacraments" (AA n.6). The lay faithful have the obligation to respond religiously and consistently to the demands of the sacraments received. By so doing, he or she participates in the salvific mission of the Church. "Through their baptism and confirmation all are commissioned to that apostolate by the Lord Himself. Moreover, by the sacraments, especially holy Eucharist, that charity toward God and man which is the soul of the apostolate is communicated and nourished" (LG. 33).

Therefore, the life of the laity has to radiate Christ in all its fullness. In this way, the name and love of Christ is proclaimed in a more concrete manner. In the words of John Paul II (2001), "those who have come into genuine contact with Christ cannot keep him for themselves; they must proclaim him. A new apostolic outreach is needed, which will be lived as the everyday commitment of Christian communities and groups" (Novo millennio ineunte, 40). In this regard, Paul VI (1975) maintained that, "there can be no true evangelization if the name, the teaching, the life, the promises, the kingdom and the mystery of Jesus of Nazareth the Son of God are not proclaimed" (Evangelii Nuntiandi, 22). It is this proclamation that transforms culture. The laity must evangelize every culture in which they find themselves. In fact, "evangelization of culture cannot take place without the full and active responsibility of the laity. It belongs to them to make the Church present in the world." (Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, Manual of the laity, n. 37). Following from this, since knights form part of the laity, Ogunu (2021) affirms that, "a knight is expected to be a good Christian and a good citizen, a true and faithful witness, witnessing by a life resplendent in faith, hope and charity

to the truths in which he believes, and witnessing in a practical manner through a brotherhood that is truly lived and through an honest and persevering effort for true and greater justice.”

### **The mission of renewing the temporal order**

The laity are expected to witness to their faith in the temporal order namely, “the good things of life and the prosperity of the family, culture, economic matters, the arts and professions, the laws of the political community, international relations, and other matters of this kind, as well as their development and progress, not only aid in the attainment of man’s ultimate goal but also possess their own intrinsic value.” (AA n. 7). They must be part of the system in order to purify it with the life of witnessing. Corruption cannot be eradicated if good men remain passive to the moral decadence that is staring them in the face. The lay faithful and particularly the knights must respond in a manner commensurate with their capacity or position. Therefore, “the laity are called in a special way to make the Church present and operative in those places and circumstances where only through them can it become the salt of the earth. Thus every layman, in virtue of the very gifts bestowed upon him, is at the same time a witness and a living instrument of the mission of the Church itself “according to the measure of Christ's bestowal” (LG 33).

### **CATHOLIC KNIGHTHOOD: UNRAVELLING ITS ORIGIN**

According to Okafor (2001) “the word Knight in English is equivalent to French Chevalier or German Ritter, which is a title of honour bestowed for variety of services, but originally in the European middle ages a formally professed cavalry man” (p. 60). It was traceable to the duties of household retainers who not only performed their mapped out functions but also fought in defence of their masters should such occasion arise. Ogunu (2021) opined that Knighthood attained a high practical value with the growth of the vassal-lord relationship in the feudal system in Europe during the Middle Ages. It is obvious that under the feudal system exchange of land for services was common. Part of such services was the provision of fighting knights who were charged with defending the lord from military attack. In the same Middle Ages there arose soldiers of the cross who took part in the war against the Muslims. Such soldiers were admitted into knighthood not minding the paucity of their qualifications in order to help in the Crusade. Summarily, Ogunu (2021) maintains that,

[D]uring the Crusades the great Orders of monastic knights sprang up. Prominent among these were the Knights Hospitallers of St. John of Jerusalem founded in 1113, the Knights Templars, organized in 1118 and the Teutonic Order of Knights, begun in 1190. These Orders of Knighthood were actually religious Orders which were at the same time military in character. As such, the knights took the three vows of poverty, chastity and obedience and shared the immunities of monks. They were directly under the Holy See.

However, although knighthood was not of ecclesiastical origin, it was rather adopted in the church as a way of rewarding those who have distinguished themselves in performing good services in Church and society. Consequently, a knight should be one that is marked by love of God and the Church and one who is zealous and committed in fidelity to the Church and in Christian witness. Shiweobi (1992) rightly adds that a knight is “a man who intends to place himself at the service of a noble and difficult cause, a pure and arduous ideal; fighting evil,

promoting good, defending the weak and the oppressed against injustice. Becoming a knight does not merely mean receiving title of honour, even though it is well deserved, it presupposes a solemn commitment” (p. 10).

Furthermore, it is important to note that for the purpose of this research, we have to consider two Orders of knights namely Papal Knights and those of diocesan Order. The Papal knighthood has no set method of nomination. The Holy See is free to nominate and award in any manner in which she sees fit. However, it is normally done through recommendation of Diocesan Bishops or Archbishops or Nuncios for special merit or service. If it is processed through the local Bishop, then the usual procedure is for that Bishop to nominate the candidate through the appropriate Apostolic Nuncio, who then forwards the recommendation to the Cardinal Secretary of State in Rome (<https://www.papalknights.org/syl.html>). Under the Papal orders of knighthood as presented by Mbaeri are: 1. Supreme Order of Christ; 2. Order of Pius IX; 3. Order of St. Gregory the Great; 4. Order of St. Sylvester; 5. Order of the Golden Militia or Spur; 6. Order of the Holy Sepulchre. The last may be conferred on clerics and women.

Whereas the papal knighthood remains the prerogative of the Holy See, the diocesan Order of Knights refers to those that are recruited based on an approved constitution and with the aim of uniting them together in the service of God and the Church. Such category of knights is found within the whole Catholic world under various names. Within the Catholic Church in Nigeria we have the Knights of St. Mulumba and Knights of St. John International. On that note, Amuh (2023: 113) without mincing words extolled the order of the Catholic Knighthood as a “sacred order where true and faithful witnessing to the Christian faith is expressed in their services to the Church as they live their married and civic responsibilities.

The 1979 inaugural conference of the International Alliance of Catholic knights acknowledges the indispensable services knights and ladies render to the Church. As lay faithful, they live the virtues of true witnesses of Christ in their defense of the Church. That International Alliance of Catholic Knights stipulated the aims of the individual Orders within the Alliance. Ogunu (2021) presented them as follows:

- To bring the message of Christ to all men
- To support in every way possible our Holy Father the Pope and all Bishops, Priests and Religious throughout the world.
- To use our individual and joint influence to eliminate injustice from society.
- To strengthen our individual and distinct Orders by corporate action.
- To unite our Brothers throughout the world in prayer.

In sum, Ohanehi (1989) highlights the fact that knights are ordinary men or women who feel called upon to come forward in the open to bear witness to Christ by the way they relate to others, by the way they react to leadership or followership at all times, in all circumstances, more so in times of adversity. In fact, Okafor (2002) maintains that “the knights if properly directed, remain veritable assets for the defence of the interest of the church and for the service of the Catholic Men Organization” (Synod Acta, 108).

## **SPIRITUAL COMMITMENT: MAKING RIGHT CHOICES**

There are several biblical evidences that reflect the necessity of choice at different phases of a spiritual journey. What calls to mind immediately is the context of the Old Testament where Moses urges the people of Israel to choose between life and death, prosperity and destruction, blessings and curses. However, in a fatherly disposition he advised them to choose life and live. (Deut. 30: 15-20). Further still, when Joshua that took over from Moses was coming to the end of his headship role, he manifested an acute spiritual leadership. There was a moment of choice making at Shechem which Joshua left as totally free for the people of Israel. However, regardless of what could be the decision of each and every one of them, he took the bold step of announcing his commitment and that of his family in serving God (Joshua 24:15).

On another note, in our commitment towards healthy living, attention is paid to the basic necessities of life. In the scale of the basic necessities of life, food proudly occupies the primary position. In fact,

Food is vital for sustaining life. Without proper nourishment, the human body becomes weak and cannot function properly. People must take care of their bodies through eating right and consuming key nutrients, so they not only live but thrive in healthiness. The same principle applies to one’s spiritual life. A proper diet of spiritual food is needed so that Christians do not become weak and weary, but rather thrive spiritually in their relationship with God. Regular nourishment for the soul is vital for the Christian life, just as physical food is for the body. (What is our spiritual food? In <https://www.gotquestions.org/spiritual-food.html>)

Such spiritual nourishment anchors on making relentless effort to do good and avoid evil always. It is a constant struggle. Furthermore, expatiating on the necessity of material food, an atheist German philosopher, Ludwig Feuerbach said that “Man is what he eats” meaning that in man there is no qualitative difference between matter and spirit, but that everything boils down to the organic and material component. Drawing from that, Cantalamessa (2022) observed and rightly too that an atheist, without knowing it, gave the best formulation of a Christian mystery. Thanks to the Eucharist, the Christian is truly what he eats! In the same token, Leo the Great (1997) wrote a long time ago that “our participation in the body and blood of Christ tends to make us become what we eat.” Using this principle of dietary founded on the philosophical materialism of Feuerbach that dissolves everything as matter or that what is not matter does not exist, Cantalamessa was able to analogously draw it into the deeper meaning of the sacrament of Eucharist. Sharing in the table of the Eucharist should make us one with Christ and living in unity with one another. That is the sense of the word Communion.

That calls for making right spiritual choices in our lives. It therefore abhors self-deceit or hide-and-seek with what touches our spiritual lives. Decisive decision is called for at each point in time. In the same vein, Leo the Great (1997a) questions thus:

Which of the faithful does not know what virtues he ought to cultivate, and what vices to fight against? Who is so partial or so unskilled a judge of his own conscience as not to know what ought to be removed, and what ought to be developed? Surely no one is so devoid of reason as not to understand the character of his mode of life, or not to know the secrets of his heart. Let him not then please himself in everything, nor judge himself according to the delights

of the flesh, but place his every habit in the scale of the Divine commands, where, some things being ordered to be done and others forbidden, he can examine himself in a true balance by weighing the actions of his life according to this standard. (Sermon 63)

It calls for serious examination of conscience and being always aware that all people, and particularly the knights, are called to holiness of life in this our earthly pilgrimage.

### **THE CATHOLIC KNIGHTHOOD: A TRACK TO HOLINESS**

The Fathers of the Second Vatican Council affirmed that “all the faithful of Christ of whatever rank or status, are called to the fullness of the Christian life and to the perfection of charity; by this holiness as such a more human manner of living is promoted in this earthly society” (Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium* 40). The principal goal for every Catholic Knight of whatever rank should be the salvation of his/her soul. To miss this target will be tantamount to running very well but outside the track. Holiness remains one though it is differently pursued in the various states of life. Holiness does not require any special rank in the Church; it rather calls for personal and sincere effort to live out the gospel message in our individual lives. This involves a constant struggle. For as Leo the Great affirms,

[N]o one is so holy that he ought not to be holier, nor so devout that he might not be devouter. For who, that is set in the uncertainty of this life, can be found either exempt from temptation, or free from fault? Who is there who would not wish for additions to his virtue, or removal of his vice? Seeing that adversity does us harm, and prosperity spoils us, and it is equally dangerous not to have what we want at all, and to have it in the fullest measure. (Sermon, 49, 1)

One has to bear eloquent witness in season and out of season. According to Augustine, one becomes “a futile preacher outwardly of God's word, who isn't also inwardly a listener. Nor are we, who have to preach the word of God to his various peoples, such strangers to common humanity and faithful reflection, that we are unaware of our own danger when we do so.” It demands constant vigilance. Francis (2018) gives a strong fatherly advice thus:

To be holy does not require being a bishop, a priest or a religious. We are frequently tempted to think that holiness is only for those who can withdraw from ordinary affairs to spend much time in prayer. That is not the case. We are all called to be holy by living our lives with love and by bearing witness in everything we do, wherever we find ourselves. Are you called to the consecrated life? Be holy by living out your commitment with joy. Are you married? Be holy by loving and caring for your husband or wife, as Christ does for the Church. Do you work for a living? Be holy by labouring with integrity and skill in the service of your brothers and sisters. Are you a parent or grandparent? Be holy by patiently teaching the little ones how to follow Jesus. Are you in a position of authority? Be holy by working for the common good and renouncing personal gain. (*Gaudete et exsultate*, 14)

And in addition, a Knight or Lady of the Order of the Knight of St. John International, St. Mulumba or papal knight has always to bear witness to the truth not minding whose ox is gored just as St. John the Baptist did. Remember always that it is not quantity that matters but quality. For, John XXIII (1959),

the sheer number of Christians means little if they lack virtue; that is, if, while enjoying the name of Catholic, they do not stand firm in their determination; if their spiritual life does not flourish and fails to produce wholesome fruits; if, after being reborn to divine grace, they do not excel in that spirit of vigorous and sensible youthfulness which is always ready to perform generous and useful deeds. Their profession of faith must not only be a statistic in a census, but must create a new man. (The prince of shepherds n. 29)

### **A KNIGHT: CALLED TO ENTER THROUGH THE NARROW GATE**

The Gospel periscope centres on the two ways namely the narrow road that leads to life, i.e., to the consummated kingdom and the broad road that leads to destruction. It is a definitive destruction, not merely in the sense of the extinction of physical existence, but rather of an eternal plunge into Hades and a hopeless destiny of death (Gaebelien, 1984). The narrow way is the Christian way marked with persecutions that need to be surmounted with perseverance. According to the Catechism of Catholic Church, “the way of Christ ‘leads to life’; a contrary way ‘leads to destruction’ (Mt 7:13). The Gospel parable of the two ways remains ever present in the catechesis of the Church; it shows the importance of moral decisions for our salvation” (n. 1696).

This way is not reserved for only a chosen few; rather everyone may enter life. Nobody is privileged instead the door remains narrow for all; “but it is “narrow” because it is demanding: it requires commitment, self-denial and the mortification of one’s selfishness” (Benedict XVI, 2007). There is no preferential treatment. “And do you know who is the first person we are sure entered paradise? Do you know who? A “ruffian”: one of the two who was crucified with Jesus. And he turned to Jesus saying: “Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom”. And He responded: “Today you will be with me in paradise” (Lk 23:42-43). God’s grace is offered to everyone; and many who are the least on this earth will be the first in heaven (cf. Mk 10:31)” (Francis, 2020). All in all, believing in Jesus is the only way.

All Knights and Ladies of every Order of Knighthood are called to make a choice of the right way. “How do I want a homeless man to treat me? What do I want my neighbors to say about and think about me? Am I treating others, speaking about others, and thinking about others the way I wish they would treat, speak, and think about me? Do I recognize Jesus in others? Am I willing to do anything it takes and leave anything I have to follow Jesus through the narrow gate?” (Garvey, 2024). Our individual responses to these questions and other related questions will indicate the degree of our individual commitment in our spiritual life.

### **CONCLUSION**

Through his suffering, death and resurrection, Jesus purchased for us the universal salvation. The condition for entering upon this universal salvation and gaining heavenly life is also one and universal. It entails following and imitating him who is the “way, the truth and life” (Jn. 14:6), taking up one’s cross daily and following in His footsteps and engaging in life of service to others. Our life is an ongoing spiritual journey in pursuit of holiness. It is not entirely

accomplished at any point in time while in this mortal frame. Therefore, it is a quest that doesn't go on holidays. It is a struggle through which we navigate all through life.

It is always necessary to bear in mind that as we swim in the boundless ocean of life, we must be ready to encounter thorns and thistles, "weeds and wheat" (Matt. 13:24-30). It is amidst such towering challenges that one's spiritual commitment blossoms unimaginable. It is good to remember that the Church is made up of saints and sinners. All the same, within the church every ingredient necessary for growth in holiness is found in abundance namely Scripture, Sacraments, lively communities and evident witnessing to the gospel. Therefore, one can say that *ejuna kpulu isi wọlụ onwe ya nri* (a blind snail has deprived itself of food). There is no need of dillydallying in the matters that pertain to our spiritual life. On the contrary, in the words of the Roman Poet Horace, it is a matter of *Carpe diem* (Seize the day)—punctuated with acute urgency. What can be done today should not be postponed for tomorrow. The time is now. One needs to be always careful not to take the Lord's patience for granted and thereby continually postpone a serious evaluation of one's own life. He constantly assures us of His grace and knows us in and out. It is left for Christians especially the knights to take advantage of His graciousness. It is only through such spiritual commitment that we can joyfully enter through the narrow gate.

## **RECOMMENDATIONS**

1. Knights should always be ready ever ready to live out their faith in season and out of season.
2. In this era of widespread neopaganism, knights should always be above board in the practice of their Christian faith and avoid all forms of syncretism.
3. Knights of the Church need to always be fully involved in party politics with the aim of making the Church present in the Nigerian political sphere.
4. They should always be exemplary in living out the virtues of married life.
5. They should be defenders of truth and promoters of justice especially for the less privileged in their various communities.

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