

Consecrated Persons as Agents of Pastoral Care of the Family

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Abstract

The teachings of the Church show with increasing clarity the profound connection between the evangelical demands of its mission and the obligation laid on all peoples to foster human advancement and to build a society worthy of humans. However, the profession of the evangelical counsels by Consecrated Persons establishes a close link between the religious and the Church; it is therefore not surprising that it is to them that a consistent and confident appeal is made for well-judged renewal that is open to the needs, problems and yearnings of people. With the particular focus of the Church on the family and the Consecrated Life this year, this piece focuses on how Consecrated Persons can contribute to the pastoral care of the family through the promotion of unity and fraternity, witnessing to charity, education and ministering to children and the sick. It further studies the pastoral challenges of the family in Africa and the efforts the church has made over the years in her pastoral care of the family. Therefore, this piece maintains that Consecrated Persons, because of the very nature of their consecration to God through the evangelical counsels are indispensable agents in the church's' pastoral care of the family.

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1. Introduction

Paul VI (1964) in his message delivered at the General Chapter of Religious Orders and Congregations, without undermining the need for devotion to the interior life of perfection, called on Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life to move with the apostolic zeal with which they have been inflamed beyond the boundaries of their own Institutes and be open to the great spiritual necessities of our time:

With respect to that portion of the apostolate which is entrusted to the care of the Religious, we wish to make some further observations. Religious Institutes should sedulously adapt the work proper to their apostolate to modern conditions and circumstances. The younger Religious, particularly, are to be instructed and educated properly in this matter, in such a way, however, that the apostolic zeal with which they must be inflamed, does not remain circumscribed exclusively by the boundaries of one's own Order but rather opens outwardly toward the great spiritual necessities of our times. (p.1).

Francis I (2013) in his address to the Union of Superior Generals in Rome also called on Consecrated persons to undertake an exodus out of their own selves:

We must go out through that door to seek and meet the people! Have the courage to go against the tide of this culture of efficiency, this culture of waste. Encountering and welcoming everyone, solidarity and fraternity: these are what make our society truly human. Be *servants of communion and of the culture of encounter!* I would like you to be almost obsessed about this. (p. 1).

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (2014) following the path of the Pope, Francis I, called on Consecrated persons to set out on a path of adoration and service. While there is an emphasis on the religious moving out, the destination for Paul VI (1964) is toward the great spiritual necessities of our time. In *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus*, the Roman Pontiffs John Paul II (1995) and Benedict XVI (2011), reflected on the challenges of the African family. With the announcement of an Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on topics related to the family for October 2014, and the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops coming up in October 2015 and the pronouncement of 2015 as the Year of Consecrated Life, circumstances have arisen to study the role of Consecrated Persons in the pastoral care of the family.

2. The Challenges of the Family in Africa

Focusing on the African family, Betty and Khadiagala (2015) 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 forces.

John Paul II (1981) 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 mentality (pp. 12-13).

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 (2014) 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" (No.5).

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.

3. Consecrated Persons in Perspective

Consecrated persons according to Kanu (2015) are the members of Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life. The Code of Canon Law (1983) teaches that they are lay persons or clerics who assume the evangelical counsels by means of a sacred bond, and become members of an institute of consecrated life according to the law of the church. They totally dedicate themselves to God with the goal of pursuing perfection in charity by faithfully embracing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. In this sense, consecrated persons respond freely to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to follow Christ the poor, the celibate, the obedient son, more closely, thus becoming in this life a sign of the life to come. *Lumen Gentium* (1964) maintains that: "The evangelical counsels of chastity dedicated to God, poverty and obedience are based upon the words and examples of the Lord. They were further commanded by the Apostles and Fathers of the Church, as well as by the doctors and pastors of souls" (No. 43).

These counsels in the contention of Fleming (1990), are referred to as evangelical because the religious vows are central to the life of Jesus and his message and also because religious consecration is founded on baptismal consecration. The consecrated life is also traceable to the post-apostolic church, especially to those early Christians who dedicated themselves to a gospel-oriented life-style, to a radical following of Jesus Christ. The first person in this line according to Nwachukwu (2010) was Anthony of Egypt. He was followed by a line of disciples, until it became an institution in the Church.

Very significant is the idea of consecration. It is derived from the word 'holy' or 'holiness'. In Hebrew it is *qadosh* and in Greek *hagios*; these are translated

to mean 'to consecrate' (cf. Leviticus 15:31; Ezekiel 14:7). In Numbers 6:5-7, 12, the Nazirites were referred to as consecrated because of their vows to God. This makes the person holy, a consecration that separates the person from others. Thus the word consecration implies a setting apart or a separation. This separation for Mayers (1987) does not in any way imply superiority, or complete severance from those the consecrated are called to serve. *Lumen Gentium* (1964) says, "The state which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, though it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the church, nevertheless, undeniably belongs to the life and holiness of the church" (No. 44). The document continues, "The holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the counsels proposed in the gospel by the Lord to his disciples. An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state" (No. 42). Thus, *Perfectae Caritatis* (1965) exhorts consecrated persons thus,

Members of each institute should recall first of all that by professing the evangelical counsels they responded to a divine call so that by being not only dead to sin but also renouncing the world they may live for God alone. They have dedicated their entire lives to his service. This constitutes a special consecration, which is deeply rooted in that of Baptism and expresses it more fully (No. 5).

4. The Church and the Pastoral Care of the Family

A cursory glance at the historical evolution of the Church, reveals that throughout the centuries, the Church has maintained a constant teaching to guide marriage and family. In the Second Vatican Council document, *Gaudium et Spes* (1965), an entire chapter was devoted to the promotion of the dignity of marriage and the family. It defines marriage as a community of life and love, 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. *Lumen Gentium* (1964) 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 Christ. After the Second Vatican Council, the Church through different documents and in various ways has refined its teaching on marriage and the family. Paul VI (1958) established that there is an intimate bond between conjugal love and the generation of life. John Paul II (1992 and 1994), devoted special attention to the family.

More recently, Pope Benedict XVI, in his Encyclical *Deus Caritas Est*, took up the topic of 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" (no.11). Furthermore, in his Encyclical *Caritas in Veritate*, Benedict XVI (2005) emphasizes the importance of love as the principle of life in society. In his Encyclical *Lumen Fidei*, Francis I (2013), 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. (p. 1).

5. The Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria and the Family

The Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria in her communiqués issued annually since 1998 has frequently referred to the family in her treatment of various topics. In relation to vocation and formation of candidates for the Consecrated Life, the Conference avers that candidates can only be known within the context of their families. It therefore calls for contact between the families of candidates and the formators, which could also be a means of educating the family about the true meaning of religious vocation and discernment. In the area of the vow of poverty, which has been one of misunderstanding and conflict because of the demands of family members on the religious, educating the family would make the interpretation, acceptance and practice of the vow of poverty less problematic. The Conference strongly believes that the family should be involved in the promotion of reconciliation, justice and peace. It sees the family as an institution called to witness to reconciliation, justice and peace, and in this regard, consecrated persons through their various communities become living examples for Christian families to emulate. From the focus of the Conference on the family, there is the recognition of the centrality of the family in society; thus, the health of the society depends on the health of the family.

6. Consecrated Persons and the Pastoral Care of the Family

The Third Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops (2014) understands Christian marriage as a vocation and as such advocates that:

It must be undertaken with due preparation in a journey of faith with a proper process of discernment. Therefore, formation is needed to accompany the person and couple in such a way that the real-life experience of the entire ecclesial community can be added to the teaching of the contents of the faith. (no. 36).

It is in this regard that Consecrated Persons should, in cooperation with the dioceses and parishes, strive to implement pastoral initiatives in favour of marriage and family life.

Consecrated Persons, especially those who work in schools as educators, must appreciate the presence of parents in the educational community and try to establish a true relation of reciprocity with them. This is very important as parents are the first teachers of the child. Thus, the insertion of parents into the life of church institutions and making them aware of the educational task is very fundamental. When God's original plan for families is overshadowed in peoples' minds, society receives incalculable damage and the right of children to live in an environment of fully human love is infringed. On the contrary, when a family reflects God's plan, it becomes a workshop where love and true solidarity are experienced. The Consecrated Person's chance of contact with families, children and young people is a favourable occasion for examining with them meaningful questions regarding life, human love and the nature of families.

Men and women religious, either individually or in groups, have the responsibility of developing their service to families, with particular solicitude for children, especially if they are abandoned, unwanted, orphaned, poor or handicapped. 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 counselling 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.

The contribution that can be made to the apostolate of the family by Consecrated Persons in general finds its primary, fundamental and original

expression precisely in their consecration to God. By reason of their consecration, religious recall that wonderful marriage made by God, which will be fully manifested in the future age, and in which the Church has Christ for her only spouse, and they are witnesses to that universal charity which, through chastity embraced for the Kingdom of heaven, makes them ever more available to dedicate themselves generously to the service of God and to the works of the apostolate.

The promotion of Christian unity and fraternity in the family especially, is another domain of the apostolate of the Church that increasingly engages the pastoral attention of Consecrated Life. The Religious Institutes in Africa often bring together into the same community the members of diverse ethnic groups and tribes. Thus, John Paul II (1995) maintains that Consecrated Persons are to be witnesses of unity and fraternal life in community, and, as such, be models for married couples and the family.

7. Conclusion

The foregoing has studied the place of Consecrated Persons as agents of the pastoral care of the family. It further discussed the particular ways through which Consecrated Persons can impact family life pastorally. However, it is worthy of note that the Consecrated Persons' dedication to the pastoral care of the family has its requirements. Fundamentally, the Consecrated Person needs a missionary *conversion*. This means that, Consecrated Persons must try not to proclaim a message that is merely theoretical, with no connection to people's real problems. The message that can impact society must be rooted in concrete historical circumstances. Conversion needs to be seen in the language that Consecrated Persons use, in such a way that it might prove to be effectively meaningful. This is very fundamental as Paul VI (1974) observes that the modern man is more interested in listening to witnesses than to teachers, and when they listen to teachers, it is because they are witnesses. Secondly, the Word of God must be at the centre of the pastoral care of the family by Consecrated Persons. The *Word of God* is the source of life and spirituality for the family, which, interiorly fashions and forms the family. Therefore, continuous and deep study of the Sacred Scriptures must nourish the Religious Life so that the Word of God, lived and experienced may be communicated in a credible and complete way.

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