

Spiritual Direction for the Unmarried within the Nigerian Socio-cultural Context

Andrew Adaeqiza Otu

Abstract

This article seeks to study what should be the nature of spiritual direction for the unmarried within the Nigerian socio-cultural context. The unmarried meant are those who have attained the age of marriage, and desire to marry yet are not able to meet this desire. The article tried to study the situation of this unmarried people from Nigerian socio-cultural, as well as theological perspective. These provided a clear understanding of their situation from both perspectives and a clue to what should be the nature of spiritual direction for them. From the former, the unmarried feels out of place and suffers a lack of identity. But from the latter, they have a recognizable position before God. Having studied the meaning of spiritual direction in general, the article made some recommendations that helped in defining the nature of the spiritual direction needed. The proposed nature of spiritual direction for the unmarried is one that has good space for counselling while maintaining its goal of deepening their relationship with God or guiding souls to perfect union with God.

Keywords: unmarried, spiritual direction, counselling

Introduction

The group of the unmarried is very much on the increase today due to lots of reasons ranging from the misperception of marriage to the inability to find suitable partners and other unknown reasons. Being unmarried, especially for those who are up to the age of marriage, is largely perceived as abnormal due to the fact that nature creates the urge for companionship and for procreation. Consequently, rather than recognize being unmarried as a possible state of life like marriage, the priesthood and the consecrated religious life, it is largely treated in relation or in subordination to the married state. This attitude is witnessed even within the Church. While there is provision for preparing intending married couples and care for the married ones, candidates for the priesthood and the priests, candidates for the religious life and the religious (male and female); the unmarried are largely viewed as problem to be solved for which they are referred often to only counsellors and prayer houses. What this

implies is that rather than seeing their state as what can be embraced and move on with life both spiritually and temporally, they view it as a problem that must be solved. This in itself constitutes a problem in their spiritual journey. With this frame of mind, large numbers of the unmarried approach spiritual directors for spiritual direction that ordinarily is not problem solving but guidance on spiritual journey. The spiritual director often times is torn between being a spiritual director or pastoral or spiritual counsellor when in actual fact it should be for spiritual direction. When they are approached as spiritual director by the unmarried people with clear case of need for counselling, should they turn the unmarried away? If not, is the Spiritual director to abandon the primary task of spiritual direction for counselling? This article therefore intends to study the nature of spiritual direction that should be given to the group of the unmarried within the Nigerian socio-cultural context that has large number of the unmarried in need of counselling more than spiritual direction.

In this direction, the article will study the situation of the unmarried state within the Nigerian socio-cultural context especially the social, economic, psychological and religious/spiritual dimensions. It will then proceed to study Christian theological perspectives of the unmarried that include the biblical, patristic, magisterial, and contemporary theologians' teachings on the matter. With the vision gained through these aforementioned studies and study of spiritual direction, certain recommendations would be made for spiritual direction of the unmarried within the Nigerian socio-cultural context.

The Situation of the Unmarried within the Nigerian Context

The socio-cultural dimension of the unmarried state

The situation of many unmarried persons especially within most Nigerian societies is best described as belonging to no responsible class. For example, in some of Nigerian cultures like the Kahugu culture in the Northern part of Nigeria, man is nothing without a wife and a woman is nothing without a husband. They lack what is needed to prove their ability to be responsible since not married. They are not even trusted with their lives such that their parents take decisions on their matters. The siblings who are married enjoy more decisive positions especially in the society they belong, if they have shown ability to remain with their marriage partners despite challenges. The pain of the unmarried is that they are blamed for their state, even for the women that cannot go in search of marriage partner for themselves in most patriarchal societies. Sometimes, their situation is used to insult them at any slightest provocation. All these contribute to the reason many unmarried persons especially women are troubled socio-culturally.

The most unfortunate social problem they face, especially for the women, is that some men consider them as free ladies to be used for sexual satisfaction since they belong to no man. Consequently, in their desperation for husbands especially when time seems running against them, they easily fall into deceptive hands that use and dump them. While some of them may unwillingly fall into single parenthood due to this fact, the desire for children can lead some to choose single parenthood as suitable suitors are not forthcoming. The social consequence of this is the raising of children that lack balanced parental care which can lead to the increase of nuisance in the society.

Psychological dimension

The socio-cultural dimension contributes greatly to negative psychological situation of the unmarried. Not being considered a normal state to be, and as well suffers virtually all the blames, the unmarried stands the chances of suffering inferiority complex among others who are married. Some may even feel that there is something wrong with them for which no one seeks their hands in marriage. Suffering of anxiety may increase especially for women when they are biologically passing the childbearing age.

Since they easily fall into deceptive hands who only deceive them with promise of marriage to get them consent to sexual immoral acts, their tendency to lose trust in people increases. This may close them up not to even open up to people even to those who would have been of help through counselling and any other forms of support. Added to this fact is that as they lack companions, the emotional support needed to move on in life especially as at moments of crisis and serious decision-making coupled with the courage to execute them may also be lacking in their lives.

Religious/spiritual dimension

Within the Christian religion, a female unmarried interviewee said the situation of the unmarried is easily interpreted as the work of the devil or due to past sinful and immoral deeds of the unmarried. Africans believe that misfortunes are caused by one's sins. Therefore, rather than enjoy sympathy they are subjected to questions and rejections. They too may tend to question God for allowing such misfortune to happen especially if in conscience they cannot identify any sin they may have committed. This is more when people they know to have lived sinful past are getting married with much ease. Some are even tempted to regret their past efforts in avoiding sinful relationships through which some others succeeded.

Added to all these are the fact that even the religious structure has no defined class for them. In the Catholic Church, some move back and forth from Catholic Youth Organization to Catholic Women/Men organization. Similar to what

happens within the socio-cultural setting, the sense of belonging is often not well communicated to them. Their state is considered a failure in life that no one loves to identify with.

The spiritual and moral struggle they have to put up with is that this state does not lessen their sexual appetite that could have been well cared for through marriage. Consequently, the tendency to frequently fall into sexual sin is very much for them and more due to loneliness they increasingly suffer.

Socio-economic dimension

It is basically taken that a married person has economic support from his/her partner. While the partners in some cases may not be working to give economic support materially, their encouragements are still of help to improve one's economic gains. Audu (2010) sees this as one of the reasons God instituted Marriage. This is lacking in the life of most unmarried persons especially women. They do all the workings to make ends meet and this may not be enough to meet the needs that may be coming their way especially that of the extended family members that African culture places on everyone.

In conclusion, the situation of the unmarried within the Nigerian socio-cultural context is one of loneliness that lacks societal understanding, acceptance and sympathy. Painful is the fact that the individual could suffer from the feeling of God's abandonment most especially when despite all their prayers nothing seems working out in the direction of meeting the desire to get married. The problems of falling into self-blame, the development of scrupulous conscience, turning against God or abandoning Him all together can arise.

Theological Perspective of the Unmarried State

Biblical

From the creation of man and woman according to the first books of the Old Testament, marriage was made. The woman was given to the man because it is not good that he should be alone. In addition to marriage is procreation such that while man and woman remain incomplete without marriage, life was not fulfilled without children. For this, desperation for children could lead people to use any means including immoral ones to get it. Besides the case of Abraham and Sarah (Gen. 16:1-4), it happened in the case of the two unmarried daughters of Lot (Gen. 19:30-38). Since men were not coming their way for marriage and they were passing the marriageable age, the thought of losing their chances of having a child made them to resort to using their father, Lot to get a child each. The older daughter gave birth to a son whom she named Moab (saying "from my father") who is the ancestor of the Moabites. The younger daughter equally

gave birth to a son that she named Ammon (meaning “son of my kin”) who is the ancestor of the Ammonites.

The unmarried woman belonged to her biological family until she marries. When she marries, she is handed over to the husband as his property in return for the payment of the bride price. There she is respected as a free person and as wife. As responsibility of her biological family members, when the unmarried for example dies, it is her biological family members that bury her. Speaking on the sanctity of the priests, the Lord told Moses “speak to Aaron's sons, the priests and tell them. None of you shall make himself unclean for any dead person among you” (Lev. 21:1), “except for his nearest relative” (Lev. 21:2) “or his maiden sister, who is of his own family while she remains unmarried; for these he can make himself unclean. But for a sister who has married out of her family he shall not make himself unclean” (Lev.21:3-4). To make oneself unclean means to prepare the corpse. The unmarried corpse is to be prepared and buried by her parental family members but not that of the married. This dependency of the unmarried woman on her biological family members may imply the lack of independence to do anything out of her free choice.

For Molinski (2010), being unmarried was seen as a sign of national decadence. The unmarried women especially were seen as blocking the opportunity of bringing forth children to preserve the husband's clan and as well to people the world. Virginity as a consecrated state of life was unknown. The unmarried state was therefore not a welcome state of life. With all these, the unmarried especially could be desperate to be married since it was not acceptable to remain so when one has reached the marriageable age. This desperation was seen very much in the life of Sara in the book of Tobit.

The story of Sara actually brought out clearly not only the desperation for marriage but the possibility of spiritual evil forces that can be responsible to keep a person unmarried. The woman, Sara was unmarried due to the presence of a demon called *As-modeus* in her life. The story is: “Sara had seven husbands but the demon *As-modeus* had killed each one of them before the marriage had been consummated. The maid-servants said, 'it was you who killed your husbands. You have had seven husbands and you have not enjoyed marital relationship with any of them, why do you punish us? Since they are dead, go and join them. May we never see a son or daughter of yours!’” (Tobit 3:8-9). The insult she received from her maidservants shows clearly that an unmarried could be subject of ridicule and as well falsely accused for her state in the Old Testament society.

Since the unmarried state was not welcome for those up to the age, efforts were always made to ensure that the unmarried gets married, and resolve any

problems that may serve as blocks to it. While non-spiritual problems were handled as they deserved, the spiritual were handled spiritually. In the situation of Sara was revealed how cases of spiritual forces could be handled to free the unmarried from them. She sought God's intervention through prayers (Tobit 3:16-17; 6:14-19; 7-8). These perceptions of unmarried state and the desperation to be married remained till the New Testaments era even though women were treated with divorce for any slightest offense in marriage.

In the New Testament, though Jesus re-installed the noble reason for marriage as God made it from the beginning (Mt. 19:3-10), He equally taught the fact that it has only earthly significance and not a life forever. In heaven there will be no marriage (Mt.22:30). Furthermore, He taught the possibility of not being married either due to certain factors of life or the choice not to marry for a noble reason of the Kingdom of God (Mt.19:11-12). He further taught that while marriage is not just a human design but divine and for those who have the grace to live it as designed by God, one is equally free to remain unmarried for the sake of God and His kingdom.

St. Paul upheld this teaching of remaining unmarried on the ground of the *parousia*. Without downplaying the importance of marriage, he wished that people can renounce marriage for virginity or celibacy for the sake of the kingdom of God(1Cor.7:25-38). While he placed virginity for God's kingdom over marriage, such virginity is for those who can and it is not a sin to marry. However, neither Jesus nor Paul taught unmarried state as a state to be embraced for its own sake except for the sake of the Kingdom of God. In fact, if remaining unmarried does not foster one's good relationship with God but obstructs it through sin, one even as a young widow should get married (1Cor.7:8-9).

Patristic

The Fathers of the Church especially St. Augustine were more concerned with the regulation of sexual relationship even within marriage. He perceived sexual relationship as negatively affected by original sin. The influence of Hellenistic dualism on the Fathers negatively affected their view of flesh, marriage especially the sexual aspect (sexual intercourse) even though they still defended the sanctity of marriage in faithfulness to the teaching of the Church. Based on all these, there was no doubt that they had greater appreciation for virginity, celibacy, chaste unmarried state of life (Molinski, 2010).

Along the same line, there were devout people who remained unmarried because of most profound experience with God described as mystical marriage (Malatesta, 2003). In this sense, they only appear unmarried to human beings but there is marriage between them and God. This form of marriage in actual

fact is meant for all of us at the end of our lives where we would belong to God alone. This group of the unmarried on earth therefore serves as signs of what will be the case of everyone that makes heaven eventually.

So with the Fathers of the Church, being unmarried is glorious when it is for the sake of God and His kingdom.

Magisterial Teachings

The Magisterial teachings of the Church through the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council acknowledged the state of the unmarried in their teaching on the *Universal call to Holiness*. Having taught that irrespective of whatever state one may be, we are all called to holiness and to be lived as it suits the state, they went further to teach that in our various states we are all contributing to the holiness of the Church. The unmarried are not left out in these (*Lumen Gentium*, 1964, p. 41). They have a place in the Church's life and activities. They are not appendages to the ecclesial community who are not persons within it and have nothing to add.

The Catechism of the Catholic Church treated the unmarried state from the point of Jesus' teaching on "Eunuch for the sake of Kingdom of God". This it refers to, as the virginity for the sake of God. It sees both this state of life and marriage state as calls from God who grants the grace to live either of them. Both are to be esteemed and none should be denigrated for the other because to denigrate one is to denigrate the other (*Catechism of the Catholic Church*, 2000, pp. 1618-1620).

The Opinions of Contemporary Theologians

The contemporary theologians especially moral theologians see marriage as a saving state through which those called to it attain Christian perfection. This means for such people called to marry; the unmarried state is not their saving state that can lead them to Christian perfection or salvation. By this fact of call and a saving state, it implies there are those who are not called to marry for which marriage will also not be their saving state. Unmarried state may be their call and saving state. Therefore, just as marriage state, unmarried state can be a call and a means of salvation for some people. A theologian Susan Muto who probably is a spiritual theologian explains this point clearly. She said:

The Single life [unmarried state] is one way to foster intimacy with Christ; marriage is another. It is a misconception to identify the single vocation mainly in relation to the marital life, as if singleness had no identity of its own. This line of reasoning places singleness below marriage or conventual life, unfairly relegating it to a second-class

position. Clearly, before anyone is married, vowed, or ordained, he or she is single[unmarried]. If a marriage ends because of separation or death of a spouse, one is single[unmarried] again. While singleness predates marriage or community membership, it must not be defined negatively in relation to them but as a state of life to be celebrated in its own right. (Muto,2003, p. 902)

Unmarried people are equal to and as well as important as the married. They deserve equal recognition as the married, the ordained and the vowed and it is not a misfortune to be unmarried. How an unmarried is therefore to be given spiritual direction especially within a socio-cultural context they feel their state has no space thereby subjects them to socio-cultural, psychological, religious and economic challenges?

Spiritual Direction

There exist lots of definitions of spiritual directions. Among these definitions we would mention just two that stands out clearly as how it is understood today having developed over time for this ministry. The first is as given by F. Antonisamy. Antonisamy (2003) said: "Spiritual direction is a loving dialogue involving an interpersonal relationship between two friends, the director and the directee, who journey together towards Christian perfection and freedom with the aid of discernment and prayer" (pp.175-176). From this definition we see that it is not necessarily a matter of meeting a spiritual guru that appears to have almost arrived at the end of his spiritual journey. It is an act that takes place between two friends on the same path to perfection, seeking for the way. Situating it within the journey from conversion to perfection he said:

To achieve the end of conversion, spiritual direction is mainly concerned with helping the directee to discern the spirits and to find out the will of God in a concrete situation or to accept the way of life ordained for him or her by God. In other words, spiritual direction creates an atmosphere where a person is able to hear the voice of the Holy Spirit who guides him or her to be perfect follower of Jesus who always did the will of his Father (Antonisamy, 2003, p. 152).

The second definition which appears more frequently used in today's world is that of William Barry and William Connolly (1986). Barry, Connolly (1986) defined it as: "help given by one Christian to another which enables that person to pay attention to God's personal communication to him or her, to respond to this personally communicating God, to grow in intimacy with this God and to live the consequences of the relationship" (p.8). By this definition, it means it is needed out of the desire to deepen one's relationship with God. It is therefore

not just a matter of two friends on the same path to perfection, but there is one among them who is in need of help in the search to deepen his/her relationship with God. The other is the help-giver and the help is not mutual. It is equally not enough to find the path, to discern the direction of the Holy Spirit or the will of God, but one needs to be prepared to live what such findings implies. It is this readiness and living it that make spiritual direction meaningful. But the point common to the two definitions is that both friends are fellows on the same journey and the difference is that in a particular spiritual direction, it is one of them seeking help.

At this juncture, it is good to clarify some of the differences between spiritual direction and counselling whether psychological or spiritual or pastoral.

Spiritual direction and counselling

- a) Spiritual direction is not a problem (psychological, pastoral, spiritual or even social) solving exercise. The issue it focuses on is how “the person is experiencing God in prayer and how he/she is responding to God's initiative” (Cullinane, 2015, p. 116). In this sense, it is wider than solving problems. It is meant to help the individual strengthen his/her relationship with God and as well get the relationship properly in order. But counselling (psychological, spiritual, pastoral, social, etc) is more problem solving focused. The manner problems are handled and the goals of counselling differ from spiritual direction. Psychological counselling for example deals with observable and behavioural aspect of human person. Through natural self-knowledge it aims at getting the person gain greater freedom.
- b) In spiritual direction, the issue is what God is saying? For example, when a directee brings an issue for spiritual direction, the first question is “have you brought this problem to God through prayer and what does God seems to be saying about it?” (Cullinane, 2015, p. 116) and then move from there. But in counselling, issues are looked at by exploring the problem in-depth and this may require going to the childhood background of the person, then look at the feelings, and even emotions associated with the issues presented. At the end, with the help of the counsellor, necessary actions drawn from the problem itself to solving the problem are mapped out. This is not a matter of giving advice which may be the counsellor's opinion or suggestion.
- c) Spiritual direction because of the fact that it is a matter of deepening relationship with God and not problem centred, has no time limit in one's life. It is accompanying one all through his/her life to perfection. But counselling on the other hand, ends as a problem it sets out to look into is solved.

The common ground both share is that they are all looking at the total wellbeing of the one human being.

On the matter of issues that can be brought for spiritual direction, they are spiritual and border on deepening one's relationship with God. Even though non-spiritual such as pastoral or psychological issues may have their roots in the relationship between the individual and God, the main concern is neither the pastoral nor possible psychological issues (Barry, Connolly, 1986). This does not imply that the spiritual direction session does not have "ear" for the non-spiritual, it welcomes and is disposed to all brought to it. Antonisamy (2003) said:

It is not 'spiritual' in a narrow sense, i.e., concerned only with so-called spiritual aspects of our life like prayer, sacraments, morality. It embraces the whole of human life—our relationships, our work and leisure, our preoccupations and tension, our relatedness to the world of politics and poverty, business and culture, conflict and injustice. In this sense, to be spiritual (or holy) is to be fully human; it is to be spirit-led, not led by our false and selfish selves. 'Let the Spirit direct your lives....the Spirit has given us life; he must also control our lives' (Gal 5:16, 25). (p. 176)

The contemporary view where people see connection between their relationship with God and their entire lives relationships, all matters are brought for direction and treated as much as they lead to greater relationship with God (Gratton, 2003). Attention is given to all as much as possible and as helpful to deal with the spiritual matters on ground. In all things brought to direction, the focus of direction will be to find out where God is in the matter and what He is saying or where the Spirit is leading the person in his or her relationship with God. Therefore, religious experience of the person which happens often in a prayer life, forms or provides the ground for spiritual direction (Barry, Connolly, 1986).

Spiritual Direction for the Unmarried Directee within Nigerian Socio-cultural Context

Like any directee, the unmarried is free to give the details of his/her life including both the spiritual and the non-spiritual. What often the directees prefer to present dominantly are what they considered as issues of concern in their lives. So the unmarried who considers their state a thing of great concern would surely present it dominantly exposing all the aspects including the spiritual and the non-spiritual. While some unmarried people seek spiritual direction primarily to deepen their relationship with God, some others are

primarily seeking liberation from the problems or challenges associated with their state. There are others who are seeking spiritual help that would enable them to get married. Then there are others who are concerned about the reasons for their state, looking for explanation from God especially in situation where they are fast passing the marriageable age when their age mates are already married. However according to a married woman interviewee, some unmarried want to remain so because of the problems associated with married life. Some others want it due to pressure from family, friends and the society. For her, only very few unmarried are actually concerned about their relationship with God.

It is very clear that from all that has been stated above, apart from the first that has clear case for spiritual direction to deepen their relationship with God, many of the unmarried are either in need of spiritual/pastoral counselling, or some forms of spiritual help to resolve problems caused greatly by their socio-cultural environment. These mean that majority are often seeking spiritual directors with counselling cases not spiritual direction.

Recommendations

In view of the fact that most unmarried people who seek spiritual direction in Nigeria have more need for counselling within the Nigerian socio-cultural context, the following recommendations are made for what should be the nature of spiritual directions for the unmarried in Nigeria.

1. Spiritual direction needs to have much room for spiritual, pastoral or psychological counselling of the unmarried directee while still maintaining its goal: deepening of relationship or guiding souls to perfect union with God.
2. In view of the above fact, a spiritual director for the unmarried needs to have sound training in spiritual and pastoral/psychological counselling that can qualify them to serve as counsellor when the need arises while still maintain their primary ministry as spiritual director and the goal of spiritual direction.
3. However, being not a problem solver, any problem that is serious that could turn the Spiritual director to mainly counsellor and problem solver may be referred to a counsellor so as to maintain their task and goal as spiritual director. They also have the option in such cases to cease being a spiritual director to be counsellor (spiritual or pastoral or psychological) to such persons, if they have the competency.
4. Also, though psychology could be helpful, it should not be allowed to determine the spiritual path a directee should take.

5. In all, being a spiritual director with the task and goal of spiritual direction, it implies that whether they are counselling or directing an unmarried, all should be handled within the context of prayer and the guidance of the Holy Spirit. This is in view of the ultimate goal of spiritual direction. The spiritual director may not be successful in solving the problems of the unmarried, he/she should be good in directing them under the guidance of the Holy Spirit on the path to holiness or union with God.

Conclusion

The article has tried to study what should be the nature of spiritual direction for the unmarried within the socio-cultural context of Nigeria. While not undermining the fact that the unmarried has issues that call for counselling from whoever they meet for help, going for a spiritual direction session has a defined goal that must be maintained no matter how pressing the need for counselling may be. However, based on the nature and situation of the unmarried state in Nigeria, for effective spiritual direction, disposition and space for counselling are very important within spiritual direction.

REFERENCES

- Antonisamy, F. (2003). *An Introduction to Christian Spirituality*. St. Paul Society.
- Audu, S. (2019). *Marriage: Before and After*. The Ambassador Publications.
- Barry, W.A.; Connolly, W. J. (1986). *The Practice of Spiritual Direction*. HarperSanFrancisco.
- Cullinane, T. (2015). *Preparing for Priesthood: Spirituality for Seminarians*. Paulines,
- Gratton, C. (2003). Spiritual Direction. *The Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. Theological Publications in India. 911-916.
- Malatesta, E. J. (2003). Marriage, Mystical. *The Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. Theological Publications in India. 631.
- Molinski, W. (2010). Marriage. *Encyclopedia of Theology: A Concise Sacramentum Mundi*. St. Pauls. 907-916.
- Muto, S. (2003). Single Life. *The New Dictionary of Catholic Spirituality*. Theological Publication in India. 902-904.
- Dogmatic Constitution of the Church. *Lumen Gentium* (21 November 1964). *The Vatican Collection. Vatican II. The Conciliar and Post Conciliar Documents*. 1. New Revised Edition, 350-426. Dominican Publications.
- The Catechism of the Catholic Church* (2000). (2nd ed.). Libreria Editrice Vaticana.