

CHAPTER 10

THE RELIGIOUS AND THE CHURCH: DIAGNOSIS AND PROGNOSIS

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Introduction

The Religious Life is a state of life. It “is a divine gift which the Church has received from her Lord and which she ever preserves with the help of his grace” (Lumen Gentium, 43). Although the term: religious life is absent directly from Christ’s teaching, it is however obvious that the religious life today springs from his life and ministry. For this reason, the religious life is today inseparably attached to the Church. For the Second Vatican Council, “Although the religious state constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, nonetheless it belongs inseparably to her life and holiness” (Lumen Gentium, 44). The religious are consecrated persons. By consecration, they become persons that are given to God without conditions. More concretely, it makes them “living memories of Jesus’ way of being and acting” of his obedience, poverty and chastity. It transforms the religious into signs and communicators of God’s love for humanity. Arnaiz, José. (2013). Kanu Anthony. (2015) places the consecrated persons as members of the Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic life. The religious, both

lay and clerics assume the evangelical counsels using a sacred bond and become members of an institute of consecrated life according to the law of the Church (Canon 573: 2). In the words of Fleming (1990), the religious dedicate themselves totally to God, intending to pursue perfection in charity by faithfully embracing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. The Second Vatican Council went further to say that “the holiness of the Church is also fostered especially by the observance of the manifold counsels proposed in the Gospel by our Lord to his disciples” (Lumen Gentium, 42). Therefore, we can say that the Council refers to the consecrated persons who profess the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience to follow Christ more faithfully. There are both male and female consecrated persons in the Church.

The male consecrated person living in a monastery is called a “monk”, while the female consecrated person living in the monastery is called a “nun”. They engage in prayers and manual work within the monastery. We also have those in different Orders or Congregations engaged in active life (living outside the monastery). They live in communities and carry out their apostolate among the people of God. The male-consecrated persons in active life are called “brothers”, while the females are called “sisters”. These consecrated persons usually have a form of identity called habit. Before the Second Vatican Council, all consecrated persons wore almost the same pattern of habit (dress) in addition to their insignia (emblem). After the Second Vatican Council adjourned in 1965, many religious congregations began to modify their habits. What is important to note is that despite the modifications in the habits and some congregations not wearing common habits, they still have some identity, like their insignia. All these are operational within the Church for the sanctification and salvation of her members. In this chapter therefore, a historical recap of the religious and the Church, a diagnosis of religious life in the church, its challenges in the contemporary era, and a prognosis with Auchi diocese in view:

considering the impact of the religious before the creation of the diocese, after its creation and the prospects thereof shall be considered.

A Brief History of Consecrated Life

Reference to history enhances the preservation of the identity of historical content. Therefore, a glimpse of Pythagorean era would help a better understanding of the consecrated life. For Bertrand (1945), around the 6th century, Pythagoras, an early Greek philosopher, established a community of brotherhood. The community of brothers was religious but also political and philosophical, and they shared their possession. They committed themselves to the study of religious doctrines, mathematics and science. They lived a life of fraternal love, asceticism and contemplation. John also presented a Jewish community of holy men and women about two thousand years ago (around the time of Jesus) who lived together in a community and carried with them all the fruits of Christianity of future Western civilization. Armand (2015), in reflecting on religious life, said it is one of the Church's self-expressions in the course of her historical awareness. The history of religious life cannot be separated from the life of the Church as a whole. This is why the major developments in religious life were mainly responses to particular crises in the Church or society. Most often, the beginning of each congregation, as Toulmin (1972) puts it, is always the period of its growth and, afterwards, a period of decline and then an era of change over to another new thing. Not unconnected was when persecutions ended with the coming to power of Emperor Constantine (AD 306 - 337), when Christianity, more or less, became a state religion. Christians started to imitate a regal lifestyle, and some Christians, for example, Anthony of Egypt, felt the Church was departing from her calling. A life away from high society living by such Christians was, in a way, a protest as well as a prophetic call to keep to the core of the Christian calling.

In Church history, Saint Anthony of Egypt (251-355) became the first to live a secluded life in the desert. With time, other followers joined him. Some were Saints Benedict, Augustine and Bernard, who became the great founders of monastic traditions. In the Middle Ages, other forms of consecrated life lived among the people came, which was different from enclosed monastic life. The group engages in teaching, medical care and other social services. The Church's authority monitored their activities to ensure they were on the road to holiness of life. The Church as a mother has never stopped watching and assisting her consecrated persons towards holiness.

In the year 2014, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, addressed a letter: "To All Consecrated People" declaring 30th November 2014, being the first Sunday of Advent and 2nd February, 2016 as the Year of Consecrated Persons, to be observed worldwide. In the words of the Pontiff: "During this Year, it would be appropriate for each charismatic family to reflect on its origins and history in order to thank God who grants the Church a variety of gifts which embellish her and equip her for every good work (cf. Lumen Gentium, 12)". Therefore, the Holy Father's letter beckons all the religious to follow past generations' paths to understand the high ethics, vision and values that motivated them. This also shows the members how their charism has been lived for the years they have lived and the creativity it has ignited in them. It also brings to the limelight the challenges the congregations have experienced over the years and how they were able to turn them into opportunities.

Diagnoses of consecrated life in the Church

The Church uses the term consecrated life technically to mean that state of life in which people, both male and female enter through the profession of the three evangelical counsels: Chastity, poverty, and obedience, and these vows are lived in the community and the Church

authority approves of them as a way of following Jesus Christ more closely. According to Ossai Jude (2015)

Religious Community Life is a scholar amoris, that is, —a School of love. Community life helps one grow in love for God and one’s brothers and sisters. Because the community is a place where one learns to love, it is a place of human growth. In the community, one gives and receives love; in the community, one learns to love and teaches others to love. A consecrated person who is a truly integrated community person is a spiritually and humanly mature person.” p123

He went further to state that:

Community life is called into being by God in the sense that religious community life originates from a common experience of God. The mystical experience of faith in God quietly, steadily and inexplicably pulls different persons to form a community of faith. This is the mystical religious experience of every consecrated person who lives a common life. It is not enough for a community to come together for the sole reason of sharing common interests or apostolate. Such a community will be too fragile and can only survive as a social community. A true religious community has to originate from and be sustained by common experience and the love of God. The essential constituent of a religious community is the presence of the Holy Spirit. Moreover, the community is established on the values and message of Jesus Christ. Pp123-124

“By a new and special title, the consecrated people are dedicated to seeking 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” (Code of Canon Law, can 573). By the evangelical counsels, the consecrated person sacrifices what could be termed the best things on earth: marriage, possessions and doing one’s will. Most often, consecrated persons are misunderstood in our world. People tend

to ask them: what do you really do in the Church? People tend to value them based on what they can do and not on their being. Francis, Cardinal Arinze (2014) has this to say for a better understanding of consecrated life:

The professional work that a religious carries out, like teaching, nursing, or doing other social work, is secondary to who the religious man or woman is. A teacher, a catechist, a nurse or a social worker could carry out some of those practical works. But for a religious, the life of consecration has priority and is the apostolic and spiritual basis and fount of those external works. Religious life is about union with God, service of God, knowledge of God, having God as the absolute in one's life and living for God. The religious gives God everything. In that life of total consecration, the service of neighbour has its place. External works become a manifestation of that love of God.

After tracing the origin of consecrated life, we also intend to look at the challenges she encounters. As Heraclitus, a Greek philosopher, said: “change is the only thing that is constant in life.” Religious life is called today more than ever to become a fire that kindles other fires and “lights that light up the heart” (Benedict XVI). They are expected to intensify prayer, possess evangelical radicalness, and service in mission properly to the mission as the disciples of Jesus.

Challenges of the Consecrated Life

In the words of Carballo (2020), consecrated life finds it difficult to offer to the present Christian life a new synthesis and a substitute that could touch and renew its identity and become a significant contribution to the Church and contemporary society. In an article published in the magazine “Convergencia” of the Conference of Religious of Brazil, Fr. Carlos Palacio, (2011), affirms that consecrated religious life today is grappling with what he called an undeniable

‘evangelical anemia.’ He observed it on the level of the individual that make up the religious body and on the level of the institution itself. To conquer the “anemia” both the individual and the institution must reawaken in them, the passion for Jesus Christ which is the love that consecrated person ought to show. The call involves fanning into flame the first love they had when they got their call. Therefore, they are to constantly return to their roots, the Gospel and allow themselves to be remolded and transformed by that Gospel of Christ.

Going further, in his wise irony, Churchill remarked, “The problem of our times is that men do not want to be useful but important. “The consecrated life of today regarding the form, structure, organisation, work methods, and lifestyle does not respond sufficiently to the needs and challenges of a society that has changed and continues to change drastically. The society referred to here is pluralistic (a diverse community where people with different ideas live together and tolerate one another); multicultural (a community of different cultures but seeks the inclusion of the views and contributions of a diverse member of that community and at the same time respect their differences); post-modern (criticizes long-held beliefs regarding the objective reality, value systems, human nature, and social progress); post Christian (this relates to a period in which Christianity has stopped being the main religion. It gradually assumed values, culture, and worldviews that are not necessarily Christian), globalized (describe the growing interdependence of the world’s economies, cultures, and populations, brought about by cross-border trade in goods and services), and shaped by modern information and communication technologies (ICT) and this produce a new form of exclusion and poverty. It brings about exclusion when the consecrated persons ignore the existence of these aforementioned and shut themselves out of these present realities. Pluralism and multiculturalism seem to point in the same direction as they bring out the beauty of “unity in diversity”. Sisters from different cultural backgrounds mostly populate the religious communities with different views and opinions, and this, when properly managed, brings about the beauty of religious life. The

same goes for the male congregations. The wonders of ICT in the 21st century cannot be ignored. Sisters, brothers, nuns and monks need it in order to be more efficient in their witnessing. Again, the prudent use of this is what is required. When not used cautiously, they can exclude some community members. We could have a community with sisters or brothers or nuns or monks living under the same roof, but some are alienated due to imprudent use of ICT in the community.

Today, the problems in religious life vary from country to country. While there is a vocation boom in Africa with many young men and women wanting to commit their one and only life to God in religious life, the story is different in Europe and America, where the number has drastically reduced. One of the interviews carried out by the US Catholic faith in real life (2015) acknowledged the fact that religious life is at a crossroads there. He affirmed that the number of men and women in religious congregations and orders has drastically declined from the peak numbers experienced in the 1960s. He remarked that the schools, hospitals and other ministries started by religious orders are now being staffed basically by laymen and laywomen. It went further to talk about the need to move away from individualism which was not only the problem of the religious in the US but that which cuts across and the need to embrace the communal life that helps build communities. Nevertheless, religious life or consecrated life has brought many good gifts to the Church at different times in history and up till today.

Materialism is also a cankerworm that is eating deep into the fabrics of the religious life today. When referring to materialism, we mean the three temptations of Jesus Christ in the desert: wealth, honour and power. Some religious now seek these three and undermine integrity, truth and moral values. It is true that the society and does not seem to understand the sacrifices the life entails. They see consecrated persons as those who have so much and whom they could approach to solve their financial problems. The onus lie on the religious to educate persons with this mindset instead of trying to prove to them they could

do something thereby engaging in things that are contrary to the life they have chosen. Going further on this, Okoye Agnes (2015), asserts:

This plague of materialism has unfortunately equally affected us consecrated persons. Instead of competing for holiness, there is struggle for acquiring material things, position of honour and authority in the society and in the Church. Hidden campaign, which takes different shapes, does occur before and during general chapter in some institutes of consecrated life; for the purpose of securing vote for oneself or for others through whom one hope to get some material gains..... The search for personal security is taking upper hand among us than the desire for life of union with Christ and total self-giving for others, which is the essence of consecrated life. Call to consecrated life is a call to “leave everything” and thus to “risk everything” for Christ. However, the Lord who calls is saying to the consecrated, “Rise, and have no fear.” p32

Living simply and total abandonment to the will of God is what the life requires. Whatever the religious becomes, it should be to glorify God. It is true that (Canon 660, 1&2) states that the “Church demands the intellectual and professional development of consecrated persons;” but when engaging in studies, the religious ought not to see it as a matter of do or die to the point of compromising the values of the life he or she has chosen. A religious who truly understands what the life is all about does not engage in competition of any kind. She or he thanks God daily for her or his giftedness and those of the sisters or brothers in the congregations. If there is anything she or he can do to fane into flame the gifts in the other, she or he does that gladly.

Prognosis: Religious activities in Auchi Diocese at 20

Witnessing by consecrated persons is older than the Diocese of Auchi, which was created out of the Archdiocese of Benin City, 4th December

2002. Before the creation of the Diocese, We had had the Society of African Missions (SMA) working at the first parish in the now Diocese of Auchi; the first parish being Sacred Heart Parish Agenebode in the year 1897 with her first priest being Rev. Fr. Peter Piotin. He opened other parishes and stations at Ivianokpodi, Iviukwe, Okpekpe and Apana. He established the first Major Seminary, St. Martin's Seminary in Nigeria, located in Ivianokpodi in 1908, which was later relocated to Asaba. Other SMAs that worked in the Diocese at the time were Rev. Fr. I. Healy, the first parish priest of Uzairue. Rev. Fr. Morris Maguire became the first parish priest of St. John the Apostle parish, Igarra, the only parish in Akoko-Edo at the time. We equally had Rev. Frs. Boyle and Grace of the same Order who worked tirelessly to build the faith of the people of the area, especially since it was still under Benin Archdiocese then. Their lives spoke volume, as well as their works.

In 1966, at the invitation of the then Bishop of Benin Diocese, Most Rev. Patrick Joseph Kelly, an SMA still, the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur came to work in the now Auchi Diocese. The sisters worked at the then Teachers' Training College, now Our Lady of Fatima College, St. Angela's Girls Grammar School, Uzairue and St. Mary's Catholic Girl's Grammar School Eme-Ora. The sisters also worked in Notre Dame Hospital now (Santa Maria Hospital) Uzairue and the annex in Agenebode. They were mainly sisters from the British Province of the Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur. After the Civil War, the Sisters were no longer allowed to run the schools they were previously in charge of. Unperturbed by the new law, they continued to support one another in the community and the people of God in the area. These sisters lived and worked with people of different social backgrounds. They went to many rural communities for health outreach and truly identified with the suffering Christ in the people they encountered. Many years later, the second female congregation, the Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, came into the Diocese, still under Benin Archdiocese; in the era of Archbishop Patrick Ebosele Ekpo. Today, the Diocese has five female congregations: Sisters of Notre Dame de Namur, Sisters of the Sacred Heart of Jesus; Sisters of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus, Sisters of Perpetual Adoration and Mother

of Perpetual Help of the Archangel Sisters. There are now two male religious congregations: University Sons of Assumption and the Discalced Carmelite Order. All these congregations are living and working in the Diocese of Auchi to the glory of God. These religious, both male and female, try to reach out in their capacities to minister to the needs of the people in the Diocese. Today, the consecrated persons contribute in no small measure in the areas of health, education; the pastoral life of the Diocese and the people of God.

As the Diocese marks the 20th Episcopal Ordination of her first Bishop, the 20th Anniversary of the creation of the Diocese of Auchi and the Dedication of the Immaculate Conception Cathedral, it is observed that so much has happened in terms of growth and development in the Diocese regarding the activities of the religious in the Diocese. As the Diocese continues to welcome more religious congregations with their different charisms, the people of God will continue to be enriched by their work and, most importantly, by the quality of life, they live as witnesses in the 21st century.

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