

THE FAMILY INTERPELLATES THE CONSECRATE LIFE:

The Role and Mission of Consecrated Persons in the Evangelization of the Family

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Abstract

Inspired by the historic events of the Year of Consecrated life and the two Synods on Family, the author intends to explore some aspects of the mission and contributions of consecrated life in one of the most vital, necessary and urgent field of evangelization today: the family. It shows the importance of the relation between marriage and virginity, between family and consecrated life and how these can mutually influence each other. It indicates how the practice of evangelical counsels, celibacy, and virginity contribute to the family. As its title indicates, the article intends to highlight the functions of and in what ways the consecrated life - experienced as a consecration to mission and lived as a witness to love of God and of neighbour - can contribute to and further advance the family and both can further contribute to the development of each other.

"The Holy Spirit will guide us in finding the road to truth and mercy for all."¹

INTRODUCTION

The vocation and mission of the Consecrated Life in the Church and Nigeria is for all a reason for joy and gratitude, a motive for a new commitment with passion, and a source of renewed hope in their respective Christian calling. After the conclusion of the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, celebrated in 2014 to treat the topic, *The Pastoral Challenges of the Family in the Context of Evangelization*, the Catholic Church in Nigeria again joins the rest of the world, this time in preparing for the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops on *"The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World"* (October 2015), which providentially holds during the Year of Consecrated life. These major historic events in the life of the Church - the Year of Consecrated Life and the two Synods of Bishops on the Family - inspired the choice of the topic for the following reflections. Consecrated persons "contribute greatly to the apostolate of the church in all domains, inasmuch as they find 'in their consecrated life a privileged means of efficacious evangelization' (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, n.69)."² One of these domains is that of marriage and family life. The social-cultural and ecclesial contexts in which family live and in which candidates for consecrated life and priesthood receive formation, and later on, as professed members,

consecrated persons exercise ministry shares many striking similarities across Nigeria (which is our main context), and indeed sub-Sahara Africa, though there are also differences and peculiarities in specific contexts and regions; many Catholic Episcopates and recent studies recognise both facts, and I too do so.

These reflections dwell on some dimensions of the mission and possible contributions of Consecrated Life in one of the most vital, necessary and urgent fields of evangelization: the Family. Rather than giving a point-by-point response to the so many important questions asked by marriage and family, or even evaluating the work that was done – and that is impossible here – the effort will instead be to propose a general consideration on selected aspects and what is being done or can be done to further contribute to advance the family. After an initial consideration of the significance and value of the family and Consecrated Life, this reflection will dwell on the question of vocations and formation, and on the attitude of people towards Consecrated Life. Then attention will turn to African vision of life and the relevance and mission of consecrated life in the light of Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations, *Ecclesia in Africa* and *Africae Munus*. Since religious men and women are consecrated for mission, the article proceeds to explore the evangelical counsels as well as celibacy and virginity insofar as they relate to our mission towards the Christian family. After acknowledging that consecrated persons contribute to the evangelizing mission of the Church in all domains, the focus of this study will then shift to the role and possible contributions of Consecrated Life in the Pastoral Care of the Family: here, it will be helpful to consider the teachings of the Apostolic Exhortation *Familiaris Consortio* and the pastoral orientations of some Catholic Episcopates in Africa. Finally, I shall briefly comment on the preparatory phase of the forthcoming Ordinary Synod of Bishops to be celebrated on October 2015 which began with the celebration of the 3rd Extraordinary Synod (October 2014); some concluding remarks follow it.

The consecrated persons pastorally engage themselves, with courage and humility, in the proclamation of the Gospel of family and life. Many families, in Nigeria as elsewhere today, expect from consecrated life a greater commitment and clearer responses to the emergent, sometimes agonizing questions of our time. The Church calls on consecrated men and women as well to offer this service to the family in truth and mercy, justice and hope. The response to the interpellation from the families are presented in diverse ways and to varying degrees by the Magisterium of the Church, the local Episcopates, the consecrated persons, by lay faithful, according to the capacity and competence of each. This reflection, far from being conclusive, encourages further discussions as we prepare for the Synod of Bishops 2015.

PART I: CONSECRATED LIFE: FORMATION, PEOPLES' ATTITUDE AND THE AFRICAN SYNODS' ORIENTATIONS

1. THE SIGNIFICANCE AND VALUE OF THE FAMILY AND OF THE CONSECRATED LIFE

1.1 The Family

The family, founded on the marriage of a man and a woman, has an immeasurable value and its mission is ever more necessary and urgent for the health and true development of society and church. The two African Synods (in 1994; 2009) reaffirm the importance and mission or function of the family. Each African Christian family is "a privileged place for evangelical witness,"³ a true "domestic church"⁴, a community which believes and evangelizes,⁵ a community in dialogue with God⁶ and generously open to the service of humanity.⁷ In fact, "it is in the heart of the family that parents are by word and example ... the first heralds of the faith with regard to their children".⁸ "It is here that the father of the family, the mother, children, and all members of the family exercise the priesthood of the baptized in a privileged way 'by the reception of the sacraments, prayer and thanksgiving, the witness of a holy life and self-denial and active charity'. Thus the home is the first school of Christian life and 'a school for human enrichment.'⁹ It is in the family that the features of a people take shape; it is here that its members acquire basic teachings. The family is also the best setting for learning and applying the culture of forgiveness, peace and reconciliation.¹⁰

The family is the "sanctuary of life" and a vital cell of society and of the Church. There, children learn to love, learn respect for others, and they learn to know the face of God. Whenever these fundamental experiences are lacking, society as a whole suffers violence and becomes in turn the progenitor of more violence.¹¹ In addition, the family is the first cradle of vocations. It is in his or her family the child first come into contact with the Word of God, makes experiences of faith of the adults and learn to identify the persons consecrated to God and the ministries of the Church.¹²

Due to its central importance and the various threats looming over it - e.g., distortion of the very notion of marriage and family, devaluation of maternity and trivialization of abortion, easy divorce and the relativism of a "new ethics" - the family needs to be protected and defended, so that it may offer to society the service expected of it, that of providing men and women capable of building a social fabric of peace and harmony.¹³ Its protection and defense can be ensured in various ways: the family must draw inspiration and strength from the sacrament of the Eucharist;¹⁴ it must be committed to constant (individual and communal) prayer and, therefore, an assiduous listening and attentive reading of Bible within families is necessary;¹⁵ finally, the Christian

family should carry out its educational mission as a true ministry.¹⁶ Therefore, parents should ensure the integral Christian education of their children.

1.2. The Consecrated Life

Consecrated life is a gift given by Christ who chooses a person individually to respond to His great love in a special relationship. Called by the Holy Spirit to seek God alone, the consecrated persons give themselves totally to the Father and follow Jesus Christ under the guidance of the Blessed Virgin Mary and/or another saint. Jesus asks that person to leave some aspects of the world (such as marriage and following secular goals) to put themselves at the service of their brothers and sisters. The consecrated life is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels. It is not part of the Church's hierarchy, but this way of life belongs to the Church's life and holiness. In the consecrated life, the perfection of charity involves the obligations of chastity in celibacy, of poverty and of obedience in a permanent state of life recognized by the Church.¹⁷

Consecrated life is a vocation just as marriage and diocesan priesthood are. Both men and women can choose to consecrate their lives to Christ as a way to seek an intimate relationship with Him. These men and women give witness that Christ is ultimately who we are called to be united to. They live the truth that only Christ can satisfy the deepest longings in a person's heart, and witness that this union provides a deeper joy than the secular world can give. In effect they are previewing the way we will relate to Christ in heaven.

Those in consecrated life generally join a religious order or congregations. There are various forms of consecrated life, various religious families. Their members live in either solitude or fraternal life in community. They have spiritual resources for their members and for the Church. They are dedicated to the service of the Kingdom of God by carrying out the spirit and charism of their Founder or Foundress. There are many of religious orders and congregations, some founded centuries ago while others are of more or less recent foundation. Consecrated life is most often shared in a community which is united to live out their common mission together.

Some religious orders are considered "contemplative," which means that prayer is central to their day, though there are variations. Others are described "Apostolic" orders inasmuch as these are more active in society and the world; their focus may be teaching, ministering to the sick, or missionary work in Nigeria, in Africa, or abroad.¹⁸

1.3. The vocations to marriage and to Consecrated Life are complementary

God is love because He loves. He calls to love: love of himself and love of neighbour (I Jn. 4:8, 11). St. John speaks of this love in the Christian sense of charity. The human heart is not in peace unless it opens itself to God and to one's neighbour. The love of our neighbour does not go in search of something for itself. It is other-directed and outgoing, not possessive. It implies caring for the other. This call to love, which is indistinctly addressed to every person, is a call to mission. It is essentially a call to holiness of life, ultimately a call to eternal happiness.

So, in human life, there are two forms of great calls from one voice of God; vocations to love: the vocation to Marriage and the vocation to Virginity consecrated to God. Both are different ways of loving, the persons in both groups are called to the maturity of love. Marriage and Virginity are two complementary states of life, two different ways of living one's own particular being as man or woman; they are two ways of attaining the same aim, namely, the completion of one's personality. Every man and woman has the freedom of choosing to get married or choose avowed life. However, he or she has the freedom and possibility, when he or she has the vocation, of renouncing marriage in order to consecrate himself or herself to God in the Church for the whole of his or her life through virginity or celibacy in order to dedicate himself or herself to the service of God and humanity or vice-versa for married life. That is why it is a call but also a free choice entrusted to individuals by the free will of Almighty God. Hence, it solely depends on individuals to make the choice.

2. VOCATIONS TO CONSECRATED LIFE AND THE FORMATION

The family and society have influence on the initial formation of candidate to consecrated life and the priesthood. Most African Catholic Episcopates acknowledge that the family has role and influence - described as "real", "decisive", "indispensable", etc. - on the candidates for consecrated Life and priesthood, and on the Formators and the centres for Formation. Human and Christian formation begins above all within the extended family and the basic ecclesial community or the parish. The influences come from other sources too: the Christian community, liturgy, ecclesial associations or spiritual and apostolic movements, the schools, etc.¹⁹ The family generally is the most fundamental and decisive of these sources of influence.

As the Episcopal Conference of Tanzania notes, "the Christian family is the cradle of genuine vocations for priests, religious and the laity. Good families in a parish offer valuable encouragement and consolation to the priests."²⁰ The Tanzanian

Episcopate in the statement of the Rwandan Bishops, when these describe the Christian family as “bedrock of priestly vocations through education, prayer, gift of self, the love for Christ and the Marian devotion.”²¹

The nature and the degree of this educative influence received from families by candidates vary from country to country; and the evaluation of the influence is often considered serious enough to be taken into account in the vocation’s discernment and formation of candidates and consecrated persons.²² Many of the influences of the families are common to many African regions, while others vary. Whether the influences are judged positive or negative depends on some conditions and on the situation in the region. In Ghana, for example, “generally, candidates from good Christian communities become very good priests but this is by no means always the case. In fact, we have some of our outstanding priests coming from families of traditional, Islamic and religious (backgrounds).”²³ In Angola and Sao Tome, the influence has been positive as long as the candidates meet a welcome and a response from the families.²⁴ In any case, as the Episcopal Conference of Benin notes, “Altogether, there is no opposition between their (i.e., the family and ecclesial movements’) influences and the ideal of vocations, it is rather the contrary. Whether it is in the milieu of Christian or of pagan families, the influences can be positive or negative, and help in the awakening and in the pursuit of vocations”; but, the same Episcopate of Benin also warns that, such influences can sometimes be exaggerated to point as if it is the parents or the milieu that owns the vocation for the young person²⁵.

Obviously, problem may sometimes arise concerning the real impact that the influence of the family may have on the candidate as well as regarding the motivations it generates. On this issue, the Seminary and the Formation Team may be aware of this problem. In this regard, there are various suggestions as to the means used or to be adopted in order to become more aware of and address this problem; these include:

- Contact of the rector with the candidates, the Spiritual Director, the Conference-debate, sharing of the word, and so on;
- The attention given to the spiritual and moral conduct of the candidates;
- And pastoral work.

There are specific positive influences of the family and society on the formation to priesthood and candidates for Consecrated Life.²⁶ For example, the family environment, when it prays for vocations, permits that a priest should be well-perceived.²⁷ The witness of life by some consecrated persons and some priests: joy and apostolic enthusiasm, detached from the world, the significant setting of oneself apart (religious habit). However, the negative influences²⁸ on the candidates cannot be overlooked. For

instance, society's attitude on married life exercises its impact on them: The candidate for consecrated life and priesthood is thought of as someone who is going to lose his or her roots. Celibacy contradicts the society's expectation on every man and woman to marry and to procreate. If overemphasised, this attitude makes the candidate to doubt himself or herself and may lead him or her to misjudge his/her true vocation. Besides, as regard assumption of responsibility, society expects every capable man to be a responsible person for his parents and relatives. This may make the candidate think that he is more needed for material help than spiritual and religious assistance.

The influences of the family and society are, in many cases, not restricted to individual candidate in formation (be it temporary or permanent). The influence extends to the Formators and their educational environment. The influence of the family - as well as the Christian communities and school - where it exists, is undeniable, be these influences positive or negative.

There are several difficulties that constitute obstacles to the emergence and development of vocations and Christian family life. We see the socio-political crisis, inter-ethnic wars in many countries, the insurgence of conflicts and widespread insecurity in regions of Nigeria. These have impacted on the life of families and of religious communities. The materialist spirit has infiltrated into families. Among the poor, the vocation is embraced or refused due to the danger of a secret desire to aim at a socio-economic promotion in the consecrated life and priesthood and which can induce to a non-credible witness.²⁹

To overcome the obstacles to the development of vocations to Consecrated Life and Priesthood and to healthy Christian Family Life, some initiatives present themselves. The Formation Team and the Seminary must try to understand the background of a candidate before they can effectively handle him.³⁰ Effort should be made to know and evaluate the nature and degree of the influence of the family. Visit of the Formators and persons-in-charge of the parish to families will help to achieve the goals of vocational discernment and development of vocations.

3. ATTITUDE TOWARDS CONSECRATED LIFE

Generally, Consecrated life is greatly appreciated by people of many African societies. In Burundi, for example, "the presence of religious men and women is highly evident in all the social and pastoral services."³¹ In some milieu and where there is a long-standing Christian and monastic tradition, "candidates and priests

have little difficulty to understand and live out the requirement of evangelical radicalism that go with ministerial priesthood: obedience, celibacy, chastity and poverty.”³²

Special attention is given to the condition of African women, particularly the African female religious, in the context of the priority given to evangelisation in Africa. According to Bishop Anselme Sanon, the “specific presence of African woman and of the African religious woman in the Church, in the best of situations, is a real, active, dynamic, responsible presence, though often discreet.”³³ Their presence and role are all the more noteworthy and appreciable since the spiritual and religious values of our cultures, their moral energies are due, most of the time, to the family, and the family owes it, to a great extent, to the woman, wife and mother who gives and conserves life. Of course, evolutions of society and cultures are in course and we must accelerate it in favour of a new promotion of African woman. Consequently, evangelization must have an echo in the heart of the Christian women in Africa: they will discover and deepen a sense of their dignity as sister, wife, and a companion of man. The celibate woman, the consecrated African woman is recognised in a new esteem rooted in the light of the Gospel. Therefore, the African religious woman is called upon to take her place and fulfil her role in the Church-Family, accomplishing of her donation as wife and mother, educator and apostle of the Good News, consecrated religious woman, a gift of the Lord to the Church in Africa.³⁴

Still, in view of a witness that is even more eloquent it is in some regions required of consecrated persons - men and women - to participate more actively in the direct animation of the people of God. Many of them already do so, as the Burundian Bishops rightly noted, but the danger of the consecrated persons to remain within their own structures is perceived as real. They can instead increasingly maintain constant and direct contact with the basic ecclesial organisations: work in the parish, participation in the meetings and activities of Basic Ecclesial Community, make pastoral visit to the sick. It is also expected of them to contribute to overcome all kinds of division, and to attend to social promotion in the regions around them. For these reasons and in order to be always a sign of the Kingdom of God, they are requested to live more visibly their religious vows.³⁵ Let us now consider what the Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortations, *Ecclesia in Africa* and the *Africae Munus* say about consecrated life.

4. *ECCLESIA IN AFRICA AND CONSECRATED LIFE*

The First and second African Synods of Bishops offer some insights into the significance, the role and mission of consecrated life. The *Message* of the first African Synod (1994) to the Religious men and women³⁶ teaches that:

- The consecrated life is gift of oneself to God and neighbour in order to reveal to all the beauty and grandeur of the life and purpose of the Church;
- The Consecrated life manifests the holiness of the Church;
- Inculturation of consecrated Life is necessary and urgent; it implies a cultural hospitality to Christ who is chaste, poor and obedient;
- Fidelity to religious Consecration and charism of Institute is a necessary and vital condition for the correct exercise of apostolate.

The role of Religious life is multiple and rooted in its vocation and mission. In his Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n. 94, Pope John Paul II addresses three main set of issues in the context of its reflections on consecrated persons as agents of evangelization, that is: the basic functions of the Religious Life; the vocations to Religious life; and the need for dialogue between religious institutes and local Ordinary of a diocese.

Concerning the functions, in part reiterating the Message of the same Synod, the *Ecclesia in Africa* speaks of three tasks of Consecrated life, and these are its responsibility to:

1. Indicate to everyone the call to holiness;
2. Witness to fraternal life in community.
3. And, consequently, promote communion and cooperation with respect to Bishops, clergy and laity.³⁷

In treating these points the Pope reiterates some of the proposals and ideas earlier presented by African Bishops in their *Message* and *Propositions* of that Synod.

As regards vocations, the *Ecclesia in Africa*, presenting it with more details, gives some guidelines. Firstly, it is necessary to foster religious vocations to consecrated life. This requires above all choosing vocations with “great discernment” and then ensuring that they receive an integral human formation as well as a formation which is solid in its spiritual and doctrinal, apostolic and missionary, biblical and theological dimension. This formation is to be faithfully and regularly updated. The African Synod Fathers express some caution on the matter of the foundation of new Religious Institutes. Here, the African Bishops ask for “great prudence and enlightened discernment,” requesting that the criteria laid down by the Second Vatican Council and the canonical norms now

in force must be followed. On the other hand, once established, these Institutes are to be helped in acquiring juridical status and becoming autonomous in the management both of their own works and of their respective sources of income. This is important if the institute is to be able to sustain its members and apostolate.

Finally, there is the delicate question of dialogue, particularly needed in the area of vocations. It is necessary in order to enhance mutual relation between the partners involved - the Institutes of consecrated life and the local Churches - and advance the apostolate. The hope is that the expected dialogue and the structure suggested for its realization (i.e., the creation of a mixed group for consultation) will serve as a witness to fraternity and as a sign of unity in the service of a common mission.³⁸

The *Ecclesia in Africa* does not claim to exhaustively delineate the role of religious life in the Church. Already as at 1994, the first African Synod Fathers were aware of this fact and therefore made a request, calling for a revision of the document *Mutuae Relationes*,³⁹ "in order to define better the role of religious life in the local Church."⁴⁰ In the meantime, however, the basic orientations of the first African Synod Fathers served adequately to address some of the urgent issues the Church in Africa faces.

5. THE AFRICAN VISION OF LIFE, THE CONSECRATED LIFE AND *AFRICAE MUNUS*

5.1. African Vision of Life and the *Africae Munus*

One of the fundamental values of African worldview is life. The concept of life pervades African social, religious, moral and cultural traditions. It is, of course, evident particularly in African understanding of marriage and family. It underlies the emphasis the community places on inter-personal relationship and on the fundamentally community-oriented vision of society. How does the African understand of the decisive and all inclusive concept of life?

The *Africae Munus*, echoing the African Bishops' reflections, aptly albeit succinctly describes it as follows:

"In the African worldview, life is perceived as something that embraces and includes ancestors, the living and those yet to be born, the whole of creation and all beings: those that speak and those that are mute, those that think and those lacking thought. The visible and invisible universe is regarded as a living-space for human beings, but also as

a space of communion where past generations invisibly flank present generations; themselves the mothers of future generations.”⁴¹

This great openness of heart and spirit in the African tradition, as Benedict XVI noted, predisposes the African to hear and to receive Christ’s message and appreciate the mystery of the Church and, therefore, to value human life to the full, along with the conditions in which it is lived.

Such perception of life, with the basic disposition to value human life, has its dimensions and responsibilities for all citizens and institutions, not excluding consecrated life. Around the theme of human life as understood in African worldview, the *Africae Munus* discusses five major aspects of the consequent responsibilities in the face of present-day challenges, namely: the protection and defense of human life; respect for creation and the ecosystem; the good governance of states; the care for migrants, displaced persons and refugees; and Globalization and international aid. These are areas in which, for the good of the family and society, the consecrated persons carry out their service of charity. They can consistently speak out with a prophetic voice, and they can offer valuable practical contributions, according to the charisms and capabilities of each institute and in harmony with the Church-Family of God. However, for sake of brevity, the focus here is on the protection and defense of human life, which has an ever greater need everywhere today especially in Africa.

The protection and defense of human life has been and continues to be carried out in Africa, particularly in Nigeria, through various initiatives. International institutions have adopted initiatives aimed at protecting human life on the African continent through efforts extended to promote certain aspects of development. Nonetheless, the *Africae Munus* reproaches their lack of ethical clarity at international meetings, particularly the systematic use of ambiguous or confusing language conveying values at odds with Catholic moral teaching. The child in his or her mother’s womb is a human life which must be protected, and thus the Church decries anti-life practices, such as abortion.

Together with the Church-Family in Africa, consecrated persons must without fear or favor be committed to promoting and defending life and, thus, also to offering help and support to women and couples tempted to seek an abortion while remaining close to those who have had this tragic experience and helping them to grow in respect for life.⁴²

Human life in Africa faces serious threats today. For example, there are the ravages of drug and alcohol abuse⁴³; malaria,⁴⁴ tuberculosis and AIDS decimating the African peoples and gravely compromising their socio-economic life.⁴⁵

In the name of life the institutes of consecrated persons and the entire Church-Family should:

- Offer encouragement and give support to all the Church institutions and movements at the diocesan and national levels that are working in the field of healthcare. Some institutes of consecrated life are already much committed in this area of apostolate according to their specific character and acting in a spirit of collaboration;
- Encourage those institutes and programmes of therapeutic and pharmaceutical research which seek to eradicate pandemics. High quality medical treatment should be made available at minimum cost to all concerned.⁴⁶
- Promote and support pro-life initiatives in the dioceses and in the civil society in the spirit of their Institute.

Another form of the defense of life, carried out also by many institute of consecrated life, includes the elimination of ignorance through literacy programmes and quality education that embraces the whole person.⁴⁷ Illiteracy represents one of the principal obstacles to development; it is “a scourge on a par with that of the pandemics”, because while it does not kill directly, it however contributes actively to the marginalization of the person – which is a form of social death – and it blocks access to knowledge. Teaching people to read and write has important advantages. It makes them full members of the *res publica* and enables them to play their part in building up the nation; for Christians it provides access to the inestimable treasure of the sacred Scriptures that nourish their life of faith.⁴⁸

The Church calls on the Institutes of Consecrated Life and all the faithful to respond generously to this great challenge – promotion of quality Education and literacy programmes; the protection and defense of human life - described as a real testing ground for civilization. In order to meet this challenge, the institutes of Consecrated life and other Catholic Institutions, are required to fulfill two important and necessary conditions to be “preserved and safeguarded”, namely, they must maintain their ecclesial identity, and remain faithful to the Gospel message and the charism of their founder.⁴⁹ In addition, it is necessary to raise the awareness of governments, so that they will increase their support for schooling, and moreover, recognise and respect the legitimate right of the Church to offer her particular contribution to education.⁵⁰

5.2. Consecrated persons according to *Africae Munus*

The *Africae Munus* (AM) recognises the great importance and role that consecrated life has in Africa. On many occasions this document explicitly speaks on “consecrated

life”, and the “consecrated persons”. Pope Benedict XVI describes Consecrated Life as one of the major life choices, as a vocation, that one can make, that is, as one way of a total consecration to Christ (AM, nn. 1, 167); indeed, consecrated life is a missionary vocation (AM, 167). Besides, the Consecrated life has an ecumenical mission. Since “the path to reconciliation must first pass through the communion of Christ’s disciples” and a divided Christianity remains a scandal, the institutes of consecrated life – and other members and ecclesial associations of the Church – are to pursue with greater determination the part of Ecumenical dialogue that directs our common journey towards Christian unity; and to listen assiduously to the word of God, faithful to fraternal communion, the breaking of bread and the prayers (cf. *Acts* 2:42), (AM, 89).

The Africae Munus turns attention concretely to consecrated persons. To them, for instance, the Church entrusts the “precious treasure” which is “Africa’s commitment to the Lord Jesus Christ” (AM 1). He exhorts the consecrated persons to enable children receive schooling: “this is a matter of justice for each child and indeed the future of Africa depends on it.” (AM, 134). While emphasizing the importance of individual confession, which no other act of reconciliation or any paraliturgy can replace, the *Africae Munus* encourages the consecrated persons – as well as all the other Church faithfuls – to “restore to its true place the sacrament of Reconciliation in its twofold dimension, personal and communitarian” (AM, 156). Still, the position of *Africae Munus* on Consecrated persons appears more fully when it discusses the role of Consecrated persons as members of the Church, the Family of God (AM,110-120. In fact, the *Africae Munus* highlights four aspects of the role of consecrated persons in Africa, namely, Consecrated persons as prophetic witness; fidelity to charism, ideas and vision of the Founders and Foundresses; Christian contemplative life of consecrated persons dedicated to prayer; and collaboration of National and Continental Conferences of Consecrated persons.

5.2.1 *Consecrated persons as prophetic witnesses*

In many ways consecrated persons bear witness to Christ and His Gospel. “Through the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, the life of consecrated persons becomes a prophetic witness. Hence they can be examples in the area of reconciliation, justice and peace, even in circumstances marked by great tension. Community life shows us that it is possible to live as brothers and sisters, and to be united even when coming from different ethnic or racial backgrounds (cf. *Ps* 133:1). It can and must enable people to see and believe that today in Africa, those men and women who follow Christ Jesus find in him the secret of living happily together: mutual love and fraternal communion, strengthened daily by the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours.”⁵¹ In this way, the witness of the consecrated persons can be a source of encouragement and support to couples, families and young people in their struggles for reconciliation, justice and peace within their own environment.

5.2.2. *Fidelity to charism, ideas and vision of the Founders and Foundresses*

To effectively carry out their important role in the life and evangelizing mission of the Church, the consecrated persons are called upon to remain faithful to the spirit and charism of their Founders and Foundresses, and in communion with the Church. The fidelity to their origins and the unity with the Church, while attentive or sensitive to the signs of times, will permit them to meaningfully respond to the needs and pastoral challenges of people in the church and society today, especially in matters relating to family life. In this regard, the *Africae Munus* asks the Consecrated persons to be vigilant in keeping their lamps alight:

“Dear consecrated persons, may you continue to live your charism with truly apostolic zeal in the different fields indicated by your founders or Foundresses! Thus you will be all the more vigilant in keeping your lamps alight! Your founders and Foundresses wanted to follow Christ truly and respond to his call. The different good works that came about as a result are gems that adorn the Church. You must therefore carry them on by following as faithfully as possible the charism of your founders, their ideas and their vision. Here I would like to emphasize the important role of consecrated persons in the life of the Church and in her missionary endeavour. They are a necessary and precious aid to the Church’s pastoral activity but also a manifestation of the deepest nature of our Christian vocation. For this reason I invite you, dear consecrated persons, to continue in close communion with the local Church and with its head, the bishop. I also invite you to strengthen your communion with the Bishop of Rome.”⁵²

5.2.3. *The Contemplative life: eloquent silent witness, dedicated to prayer*

The Consecrated persons proclaim the Gospel message not only through external apostolate works but also by living a contemplative life. Through a life dedicated to prayer in a silent witness to Christ they follow, contemplative men and women make an eloquent and effective statement emphasizing the power and primacy of the Lord God in our lives and they contribute to sustain families, the Church and the apostolate of all agents of evangelization:

“Africa is the cradle of the Christian contemplative life. Present from earliest times in North Africa, especially in Egypt and Ethiopia, it took root in sub-Saharan Africa during the last century. May the Lord bless the men and women who have decided to follow him unconditionally! Their hidden life is like leaven in the dough. Their constant prayer will sustain the apostolic efforts of the bishops, priests, other consecrated persons, catechists and of the entire Church.”⁵³

5.2.4. *National and Continental Conferences*

The evangelizing mission of consecrated persons demands some form of organization and coordination to be effective and successful. Since the consecrated persons have possessed such bodies, these coordinating institutions are expected to gather their resources to fraternally cooperate and address their common concerns in view of the common good:

“The meetings of the different National Conferences of Major Superiors and those of COMSAM help pool your reflections and resources, not only in order to pursue the goals of the various Institutes, while preserving their autonomy, character and individual spirit, but also to help deal with common concerns in a climate of fraternity and solidarity. It is fitting to foster an ecclesial spirit based on a sound coordination and proper cooperation with the Bishops’ Conferences.”⁵⁴

PART 2: WITNESS OF LIFE, IN WORDS AND ACTIONS: THE MISSION AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF CONSECRATED LIFE

6. CONSECRATED FOR MISSION

Consecrated life has a specific contribution to evangelization,⁵⁵ which includes the proclamation of the Gospel of the family. The specific contribution of consecrated persons, both men and women, to evangelization is first of all the *witness of a life* given totally to God and to their brothers and sisters, in imitation of the Lord Jesus.

Because the consecrated persons love God and therefore must love their fellow human beings, they particularly feel impelled by love to *proclaim Christ to all nations*, to the many men and women who do not know Him. Consecrated persons have the responsibility of making present to everyone Christ who is chaste, poor, obedient, prayerful and missionary.⁵⁶ Moreover, consecrated persons are *present and work in every part of the world*. They work in order to consolidate and expand the Kingdom of Christ, bringing the proclamation of the Gospel of Christ even to the furthest regions. Today too the duty of proclamation of the Gospel of Christ, by making the greatest possible contribution to this evangelising mission of the Church, continues to present a pressing call to Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life.

Another aspect worth considering is the *proclamation of Christ and inculturation*. The proclamation of Christ "is the permanent priority of mission" and is directed towards conversion, that is, to full and sincere allegiance to Christ and his Gospel. The challenge of inculturation should be taken up by consecrated persons as a call to fruitful cooperation with God’s grace in facing cultural diversity.

A genuine inculturation requires the Christ-like attitudes of love and meekness. In this sense the consecrated life makes its members particularly well suited to face the complex work of inculturation, because it accustoms them to being detached from

things, even from many features of their own culture. Applying themselves with these attitudes to the study and understanding of other cultures, consecrated persons can better discern the real values in them, and the best way to accept them and perfect them with the help of their own charism.⁵⁷

7. EVANGELICAL COUNSELS AND THE FAMILY

The evangelical counsels of obedience, poverty and chastity are means of evangelization, which involves in some way the evangelization of the family. The religious vow of obedience is related to African concept of family. Obedience, far from being mere organisational and disciplinary disposition, finds in the African concept of family a “*pierre d’attente*”, as Bishop Somé puts it.⁵⁸ In the organisation of his African family, obedience to authority and dialogue and consultation with individual are promoted.

The question of poverty in consecrated life is often a thorny challenge in African countries. It relates in many ways to important matters of cultural and socio-economic and family values in context of various African milieu. The delicate and complex nature of the question lead some to take the attitude of “let the sleeping dog lie”, in a way that, in some cases, while accepting a theoretical affirmation of the principle or doctrine of the importance of the vow of poverty as stipulated by the Church and respective Institutes, some individuals arrogate to themselves the interpretation and practical application or practice of the vows. Others have not only upheld the doctrine of consecrated poverty but sincerely strive to live up to the stipulated ideal, even with the existing pressures and difficulties. In any case, some authors consider that it is not sufficient to merely present the doctrinal *status quo* but rather calls also for a re-examination of way of conceiving and/or at least the *modus vivendi* of this vow such that it takes into account the new questions or emerging challenges coming from African socio-cultural milieu. The gravity of the questions led some authors and pastors, like Bishop Basile Mvé Engone, to suggest the need to “fundamentally review” the way of living the vow of poverty in the Church in Africa. Such review, he argues, must take into account the relation of the consecrated person with his or her family, with his/her culture, and the relation of the whole consecrated person with his/her context of apostolate.⁵⁹ As regards the relation of the consecrated person with his family two dangers, he adds, must be avoided, namely, the imposition of the family on the consecrated person, and the radical rupture of the consecrated person from his

family. To overcome the challenge of poverty, it is necessary, firstly, to have recourse to the Gospel; secondly, the consecrated person, as well as the diocesan priest and the laity, must come together to engage in the battle of the poor people for life. For that to happen, it is necessary to:

- deepen the sense of welcome through the constitution of a more welcoming community;
- develop the sense of solidarity and of sharing in the African context;
- promote action in favour of the poor in order to concretely help them to free themselves from misery.

These efforts imply frank and durable collaboration of the religious institutes, the laity and the local Church.

8. CELIBACY, VIRGINITY AND THE CHRISTIAN FAMILY

8.1. *Celibacy and Christian Family*

Celibacy is a challenge, a gift, and also a problem. Celibacy is a challenge to priests and consecrated persons of all cultures and of all times. Celibacy is a gift, a grace and charism, from God. It is given only to those He calls for a special mission. Therefore, a person's response to God must be a free choice made out of love for God and for humanity.

Celibacy has also become a serious challenge in the Church today. And efforts are made to propose solutions to it. The causes and the assessment of the situation vary. It is sometimes claimed that the problem of celibacy indicates a weakness in the life of faith of our Church, and above all in the faith of those who are in the consecrated life. It indicates the fading of moral values in our society. The question, then, is asked: Shall the Catholic Church succumb to this tendency, and shall she conform to the current events or rather revive the faith of her children? Crisis in celibacy indicates, we are today, that those who are called to the celibate state of life no more respond to Christ with full commitment and conviction as it used to be. They now give a half-hearted response, a conditional and a temporary or a part-time response.⁶⁰ In this context, the Tanzania Episcopate proposes that the problem of celibacy will be combated from its roots by imparting true faith and true love for Christ in the candidates for the

priesthood and by helping those already ordained to grow in the true faith and love for Christ and the Church.

On its part the convictions and proposal of the Association of Member Episcopal Conference of Eastern Africa (AMECEA), reported by the Tanzania Catholic Episcopate on the occasion of the Synod of Bishops (1990), are enlightening. The AMECEA bishops “are still convinced that:

(1) Celibacy should continue to be part and condition for the vocation and life of a Catholic Priest”. Among the motives is the fact that the lay faithful “uphold celibacy as one of the major characteristics which is an identity of a Catholic priest.” For fear of infidelity in the area of celibacy, some parents would not allow their children to enter into Consecrated Life and the Priesthood. “For them (Parents), one has either to be a faithful celibate priest or he should not become one who later dishonours celibacy.”⁶¹

(2) “We should inculcate true faith and true love of God and the Church as well as good moral values and behaviour right from an early age of the candidates to the priesthood”; but there is also a *caveat*, a warning: “However, care should be taken not to separate them (candidates) completely from their family backgrounds.”

(3) “Good Christian families are the key point for a natural and balanced growth of character. The family is the school and arena for psychological, spiritual and human growth. And the bishops conclude: “If we want to solve some of the serious problems on vocation, formation and even of celibacy, let us begin to teach catechesis in our families and make them true Christian families.”⁶²

8.2. *Marriage and Virginit*

As earlier mentioned in this article, I briefly addressed the vocation to marriage and vocation to consecrated life lived in virginity as complementary, they are two forms of response to God’s call to holiness and mission, to walk towards enjoying eternal happiness.

One may ask, why vocation to consecrated virginity? One consecrates virginity to God in order to be freer to live for and dedicate himself or herself to God and to the things of God.

The vocation to virginity has great value. Firstly, virginity renders the individual free, making him able to dedicate himself completely to the Lord with undivided heart; it is therefore of great help to holiness of life. Secondly, virginity promotes brotherly love. Thirdly, virgins are symbols of the Church that is always faithful to Christ and loves Him without limit; virgins esteem and try to live as best as they can live here on earth what human marriage symbolizes: the unity between Christ and his Church. Virginity

is, thus, very positive for the holiness of the Church and for her credibility. Moreover, virginity is a proof that the new life which Christ gives us is a reality; it is a victory for the kingdom of Christ. Virginity “manifests in a special way the transcendence of God and its requirement over all earthly things and the highest kind of bonds within it.”⁶³ Also, virginity tries to anticipate our future life in heaven.

Virginity is a great encouragement to fidelity in the vocation to married life. This is because, without words, virginity shows to spouses that with God’s grace it is possible to control instincts, worldly desires, and sexual inclinations. Virgins announce disinterested love. “Obviously, these values of virginity can be realised only if the state of virginity is chosen, not out of pride, nor out of spite for married life, nor out of love for oneself, nor out of fear of pregnancy, nor because one has to train children, but only ‘for the kingdom of heaven’ (Mt 19:12) in order to have more facility and freedom in dedicating oneself to the things of God and for the zeal of helping others towards the kingdom of heaven.”⁶⁴

Virginity confirms marriage. The virginal state presupposes the state of marriage and confirms it. The virgin state esteems the Sacrament of marriage as Christ’s blessing on conjugal love. The virgin seeks to sacrifice this great value for a value and love that is greater still. Whoever despises marriage cannot esteem virginity, as St. John Chrysostom reminds us.⁶⁵

9. ROLE AND CONTRIBUTIONS OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN THE PASTORAL CARE OF THE FAMILY

“Proclaiming the Gospel of the Family is urgently needed in the work of evangelization. The Church has to carry this out with the tenderness of a mother and the clarity of a teacher (cf. Eph 4: 15), in faithfulness to the mercy displayed in Christ’s kenosis.”⁶⁶

The specific contribution of consecrated persons, both men and women, to evangelization is first of all the witness of a life given totally to God and to their brothers and sisters (...). Consecrated life eloquently shows that the more one lives in Christ, the better one can serve him in others, going even to the furthest missionary outposts and facing the greatest dangers.”⁶⁷

The role and contribution of the Consecrated Life in the pastoral care of the family must be seen in the context of the evangelizing mission of the Church in her proclamation of the Gospel of the family. In fact, the Church must accompany with tenderness and clarity, attention and care her children, persons preparing for marriage

and the married couples, especially the weakest of her children, who show signs of a wounded and lost love, by restoring in them hope and confidence: "Conscious that the most merciful thing is to tell the truth in love, we go beyond compassion. Merciful love, as it attracts and unites, transforms and elevates. It is an invitation to conversion."⁶⁸ The Church is convinced that proclaiming the Gospel of the Family is urgently needed in the work of evangelization. The Church has to carry this out with the tenderness of a mother and the clarity of a teacher (cf. Eph 4: 15).⁶⁹ As a significant part of the Church's agents of evangelization, the mission and contribution of consecrated persons indeed deserves in the area of family is worthy of special attention.

9.1. CONSECRATED PERSONS CONTRIBUTE TO CHURCH'S EVANGELIZING MISSION IN ALL DOMAINS

Consecrated persons contribute greatly to the evangelizing mission or the apostolate of the Church in all domains. "It is also difficult to measure 'the immense part that they brought and they continue to bring to evangelization' (Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi* 69). The pastoral contribution will be more fruitful to the extent that the action of the Holy Spirit will be more respected and that, in their life and works, the consecrated persons are more faithful to the charism of their Institute (Cfr. *Perfectae Charitatis*, n.2b; *Christus Dominus*, 35)"⁷⁰. While the responsibility to direct and coordinate the apostolate in his diocese belongs to the Local Ordinary (Bishop) of the diocese, he however carries out that duty in respect for the charism of each institute (*Christus Dominus*, nn.33 and 35) and of the apostolic initiative of his collaborators (AG, n.30).⁷¹ One of the principal domains of the Church's pastoral activity to which the consecrated persons mission and contribute is the family.

Christian marriage is a vocation. As such, "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."⁷² In this regard, consecrated persons should, in cooperation with the dioceses and parishes, strive to implement pastoral initiatives in favour of the marriage and family life.

The consecrated persons' dedication to pastoral care of the family has its requirements and conditions. Firstly, this apostolate calls for missionary *conversion* by the consecrated persons - as well as for every other evangelizer. This means that, we must not stop at "proclaiming a message which is perceived to be merely theoretical, with no

connection to people's real problems. We must continually bear in mind that the crisis of faith has led to a crisis in marriage and the family." ⁷³ The faith needs to be strengthened. Conversion also needs to be seen in the language we use, in such a way that it might prove to be effectively meaningful. Proclamation needs to create an experience where the Gospel of the Family responds to each person's dignity and complete fulfilment in reciprocity, communion and fruitfulness. ⁷⁴

In addition, the *Word of God* is the source of life and spirituality for the family. Apostolate carried out by consecrated persons in favour of the family must allow persons to be interiorly fashioned and formed through prayerful reading of the Sacred Scripture. The Word of God is not only good news in a person's private life, but also a criterion of judgment and a light in discerning the various challenges which married couples and families encounter. ⁷⁵ A 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.

Thirdly, it is necessary that consecrated persons take into account in the pastoral care of the family the *various religious experiences in diverse cultures*: these must be appreciated in their positive elements; and then evaluate their limitations and deficiencies. ⁷⁶ In this regard the Church has continually taught the need and urgency for African Christians to welcome and use the authentic values in the rich African cultures in carrying out their mission and celebrations. ⁷⁷

The promotion of Christian unity and fraternity 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, consecrated persons are to be witnesses of unity and fraternal life in community ⁷⁸, and, as such, be a model for married couples and the family.

Another domain of the Church's mission is the inculturation of consecrated life. ⁷⁹ Inculturation involves the judicious taking into account of the authentic cultural values and context of the people among whom we mission. Inculturation is "an indispensable condition" in order that consecrated life could be seen as a witness in its evangelizing mission (*Ad gentes*20; EN, n.69) ⁸⁰ in the area of marriage and family.

Pope John Paul II's Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio*, gives clear indications about the place and the role of Consecrated persons in the sphere of pastoral care of marriage and family life⁸¹. Referring to some of the constant doctrinal teachings of the Church on the significance of Consecrated life, the document says, first of all, that through their consecration to God, the consecrated persons recall the "marriage made by God in which the Church has Christ for her spouse."⁸² By means of their consecration, moreover, Religious men and women are witness to the universal charity which, through consecrated charity, makes them more available to dedicate themselves to the service of God and to works of apostolate.

In addition, at a pastoral level, Religious men and women are able to develop their service to their families, with particular solicitude for children, especially if they are abandoned, unwanted, orphaned, poor or handicapped. Specifically, the Consecrated men and women, furthermore, may:

- take care of the sick persons;
- foster relationship of respect, and charity toward one-parent families or families that are in difficulties or are separated;
- offer their own work of teaching and counselling in the preparation of young people for marriage;
- Help couples toward truly responsible parenthood;
- Open the houses for simple and cordial hospitality, so that family can find their sense of God's presence and gain a taste for prayer and recollection, and see the practical examples of lives lived in charity and fraternity joy as members of the larger family of God.

Therefore, more relevant and opportune today than ever is the Church's exhortation to heads of Institutes of consecrated life, that they should consider – always with substantial respect for the proper and original charism of each one – the apostolate of the family as one of the priority tasks, rendered even more urgent by the present state of the world,⁸³ especially in Africa.

9.3. THE AFRICAN EPISCOPATE ON THE ROLE OF CONSECRATED LIFE

Few Catholic Episcopal Conferences in Africa have expressly and formally dedicated to a significant level their reflections to the theme of consecrated life, and less so as it relates to the consecrated persons' mission and contribution to the pastoral care of family. The Year of Consecrated Life might offer an opportunity for such reflections, and also for extended and richer dialogue with between the Consecrated Life and the Episcopate of any nation or Province. Meanwhile, some Episcopal Conferences and

individual Bishops have referred to the theme, or a specific issue relating to it, here and there in their Directories, Messages, Communiqués and pastoral letters in the attempt to confront some matters arising from the evangelization work at a national or diocesan level.

From the teachings of the African Catholic Bishops it is clear that the areas of contributions of the consecrated persons to evangelization and development of marriage and family life in Africa are many and varied, expressed through diverse initiatives: the religious, pastoral, spiritual, social, cultural, political, medical and health care, educational spheres, etc. In particular, attention has been drawn to the following suggestions and initiatives:

- A 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 way⁸⁴ to members of families and to other people.
- Programmes of on-going formation in the different Congregations and organized at different levels – say, by the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria (CMSN) or by the Department of Pastoral Agent of the Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria - should lead the renewal of religious life toward a more concrete engagement in the church and society, respecting the spirit of individual religious Institute.
- As pastoral workers, the consecrated persons should intensify regular and systematic visitation of all families, including those suffering irregularities of matrimony and willingly listen to their problems, and encourage them in their Christian faith and life. The apostolate of visitation to families maintain a rapport of respect and of charity with families in difficulties or separated;⁸⁵
- Actively participate in the organization of courses for preparation for marriage, which should be all-embracing in content, including doctrinal and moral aspects, medical and psychological aspects, economic and social aspects;
- The witness to the consecrated persons' open unreserved charity and consecrated chastity, founded on the spirit of sacrifice consciously and freely assumed, are a great help to couples and to families.
- Consecrated persons should take charge of special work of help regarding family problems. Similarly, consecrated persons can assume work for children, especially the abandoned, the orphan, the poor or handicapped (Cfr. *Familiaris Consortio*, n.74);
- Consecrated persons should open their houses to the possibility of welcome for spiritual exercises of couples and household;
- Families can benefit from nearby monasteries which can complement the vocation of marriage with that of the consecrated life. The same can be said for the fruitful relationship between couples and priests, in their respective roles.

10. JOURNEYING TOWARD THE XIV ORDINARY SYNOD ON THE FAMILY: THE 3RD EXTRAORDINARY SYNOD OF BISHOPS AND THE COMMITMENT OF CONSECRATED LIFE

The 3rd Extraordinary Synod stated in its final *Synod Report*, issued on October 18, 2014, that its reflections or propositions - most (but not all) of which were approved in vote - "are intended to raise questions and indicate points of view which will later be developed and clarified through reflections in the local Churches in the intervening year leading to the XIV Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, scheduled for October, 2015, to treat *The Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and in the Contemporary World*. These are not decisions taken nor are they easy subjects." In other words, they are springboard, points of departure, not of arrival. In fact, on the basis of its *Reports* and other reflections, the *Lineamenta* (Outline) has been drawn,⁸⁶ and then an *Instrumentum Laboris* (Working Document) will be prepared, for the mentioned Synod of Bishops (2015). Nevertheless, the Synod Fathers say, "the Holy Spirit will guide us in finding the road to truth and mercy for all."

The Final report of the Synod of Bishops 2014 presents, after an Introduction, three main parts, followed by a conclusion, thus adopting a "see, judge and act" method. Part I is titled "Listening: The Context and the Challenges of the Family", highlights the social, pastoral situation and the affectivity in life ; part II, focuses on "Looking at Christ: The Gospel of the Family" presents some doctrinal aspects of marriage and family in the light of God's salvific plan and the teachings of Magisterium of the Church. It reaffirms the indissolubility of marriage and the joy of sharing life together; it reasserts the truth and beauty of the family and the value of Mercy towards broken and fragile families. In Part III, titled "Facing the Situation: Pastoral Perspectives" an attempt is made to propose for further discussion, under seven subheadings, several practical pastoral issues. The Synod Fathers invite all to proclaim the Gospel of the Family today taking into account the various contexts in which the proclamation is done. The final *Synod Report* also allows one to discern areas of pastoral care of marriage that urgently need special attention today.

The Consecrated life is not mentioned in the *Report*, and neither is it cited in the *Lineamenta* for the Synod of bishops 2015). Nor are other agents of evangelization. Still, in Nigeria, as elsewhere, consecrated persons must ask themselves : "where and how can we come to offer help, contributing to the health of the family, in cooperation with the local Churches?" The pastoral perspectives that the *Report* proposes concern some

of the main challenges and issues that the Church must address today. Briefly, some of the areas of pastoral challenges (Cf. *Synod Report*, nn.39-61) involves:

- Guiding Engaged Couples in Their Preparation for Marriage;
- Accompanying the Married Couple in the Initial Years of Marriage;
- Pastoral Care for Couples Civilly Married or Living Together;
- Caring for Broken families (Persons who are Separated, Divorced, Divorced and Remarried and Single-Parent Families);
- Pastoral Attention towards Persons with Homosexual Tendencies;
- The Transmission of Life and the Challenges of a Declining Birth rate; and
- Upbringing and the Role of the Family in Evangelization.

Since the *Synod Report* (which is essentially the same in content, except for its questionnaire, as the *Lineamenta (Outline)* for XIV General Assembly of the Synods of Bishops 2015 on Family) are addressed to the members of the entire Church, the proposed reflections of that *Report* and *Lineamenta* must, along with the *Instrumentum Laboris* (Working Document) to be published, be studied by Consecrated persons and used them as ground for reflection for the forthcoming Ordinary Synod of Bishops. In fact, it is important to raise awareness about and to study these preparatory documents in view of the forthcoming Synod of Bishops (2015), for formation and information. All members of the Family of God are involved in the Synodal process. Particularly the Formation Houses, the seminaries and other educational institutions, the Religious Communities, ecclesial associations, and the parishes and dioceses should engage themselves with the reflections on these preparatory documents. The comments and suggestions, fruits of one's reflections on the *Lineamenta* and the Working Document can contribute to the pastoral and spiritual enrichment of our apostolate in the local Christian communities; they could be sent to the General Secretariat of the Synod of Bishops, Rome, and to the Bishops representing our country at the forthcoming Synod. The eventual publication of the propositions of the Synod and, most importantly, the Pope's post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation resulting from the synod will be another, more decisive phase of reflections and reception, mainly through implementation of the Synod by consecrated persons and all the people of God. Special and immediate attention ought to be given, firstly, to the *Lineamenta*, examining its "Questions Aimed at a Response to and an In-Depth Examination of the *Relatio Synodi*"

The preparation for the Synod 2015 is an opportunity to seriously evaluate the apostolate of Pastoral Care of the Family carried out by our religious Institutes and in the dioceses in view of renewal or update information and in ministry. In light of the widespread debates, the media reports, and the confusion sometimes that was created on the occasion of the 3rd Extraordinary Synod, it seems that as part of the preparation for the Synod of Bishops of 2015 it may be opportuned to offer to the people more explanation or clarification concerning the doctrinal teachings of the Church on some of the current or disputed questions raised by the *Lineamenta*, but also to psychologically prepare the faithful in our parishes for whatever eventual changes and new orientations, or absence of them, in pastoral approach, if any, concerning some questions the forthcoming Synod may want to propose to the entire Church; in this way, particularly in the period of implementation following the celebration of the Synod, the faithful (laity and clergy) may “live through all this with tranquillity, and with interior peace.”⁸⁷ Also, each religious institute may encourage its members to be more sensitive to and address in an organized and on-going manner the issues relating to the family life according to its spirit and apostolic charism and taking into consideration the pastoral needs of the local Churches in Nigeria today. In all these, it is necessary to avoid the temptations of which Pope Francis speaks;⁸⁸ but should not let their presence frighten or disconcert us, nor even discourage us. Rather we should set before our eyes on the good of the Church, of families, the “good of souls” (cf. Can. 1752), our Religious Institute, and this always without ever putting into question the fundamental truths of the family and of the Sacrament of marriage.

FINAL REMARKS

This article attempted to expose the significance, the role and contributions of the consecrated life to pastoral Care of the Family in the context of evangelisation. It presented the significance of family and the consecrated life and their complementary relation, then we saw the vital role of the family in the discernment of vocations and in the formation of candidates are ineluctable. The general attitude towards consecrated life is welcoming and positive even the situation in some other regions is a bit more nuanced. From the religious and cultural viewpoint, the African vision of life seems to me to be one good context in which to understand consecrated life and appreciate the scope of its mission in Africa. Both the first and the second African Synods (*Ecclesia in Africa* and the *Africae Munus* respectively) highlight the responsibility of consecrated persons, insisting on the aspects of calling all to holiness, giving a prophetic witness,

promoting communion and cooperation through dialogue with the local Bishop, the clergy and the laity; they call for fidelity the charism of the Institutes; they speak of fostering vocation and formation of candidates. While consecrated persons contribute to the evangelising mission in *all* domains, we have highlighted their role and contribution in the area of pastoral care of family, in the light of the *Familiaris consortio* and the interventions of African Episcopates.⁸⁹ Finally, I attempted to make some suggestions towards effective preparation for the forthcoming XIV Ordinary General Synod of Bishops (October 2015), suggestions to which, of course, you can add proposals. While we may not always have ready answers to all emerging questions, including the new and more difficult ones of today, the consecrated persons, often interrogated about the values of marriage and the Christian family, shall be disposed to respond to the best of his/her ability, in the desire to contribute to offering “a word of truth and hope.”⁹⁰ We are assured that, in the collegial journey of the Church, the “Holy Spirit will guide us in finding the road to truth and mercy for all.”⁹¹

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¹ *Relatio Synodi* [The Synod Report] of the III Extraordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops: “Pastoral Challenges to the Family in the Context of Evangelization” (5-19 October 2014), 18.10.2014.

² Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples, *Message to Religious Men and Women of Africa (October 1976; published 3/6/1978)*, n.2.

³ 1st African Synod, *Propositions*, 14.

⁴ Vatican Council II, Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium*, n.11.

⁵ Cf. John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Familiaris Consortio* (21/11/1981), n.52

⁶ Cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, n.55.

⁷ Cf. *Familiaris Consortio*, n.62.

⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* (=CCC), n. 1656: it also quotes Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n.11.

⁹ CCC, n. 1657: it also quotes Vatican Council II, *Lumen Gentium*, n.10; John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*, n.92.

¹⁰ Benedict XVI, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Africae Munus*, (19/11/2011), n.43

¹¹ Cfr. *Africae Munus*, n.42

¹² Episcopal Conference of Congo, “La Famille et la Formation au Sacerdoce”, in: *The African Enchiridion*, vol.III, Doc.773,n.3, pg.1901, and at paragraph n. 4, it affirms: “On comprendra aisément la valeur incomparable d’une bonne famille chrétienne et d’un bon environnement socio-culturel tant pour l’éclosion que pour la maturation de vocations prsbytérales solides.”

¹³ *Africae Munus*, n.43

¹⁴ *Africae Munus*, n.44

¹⁵ *Africae Munus*, n.45

¹⁶ *Africae Munus*, n.46

¹⁷ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn.914-915

¹⁸ *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, nn.917-918

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⁸⁰ Chidi Denis Isizoh (Editor), *Attitude of the Catholic Church Toward Culture and African Traditional Religion*, pp.197-198

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⁸⁵ Cardinal Joseph Malula, "Directoire de la Pastorale du Mariage et la Famille," in: *The African Enchiridion*, vol. II, Doc. 579, pg.1377, n.2.

⁸⁶ XIV Ordinary General Assembly *The Vocation And Mission Of The Family In The Church And Contemporary World. Lineamenta*, Vatican City 2014. This Outline essentially repropose, intentionally, the Report of the 3rd Extraordinary Synod of Bishops.

⁸⁷ *Address Of His Holiness Pope Francis For The Conclusion Of The Third Extraordinary General Assembly Of The Synod Of Bishops*. Synod Hall, Vatican City, Saturday, 18 October 2014

⁸⁸ *Address Of His Holiness Pope Francis For The Conclusion Of The Third Extraordinary General Assembly Of The Synod Of Bishops*. Synod Hall, Vatican City, Saturday, 18 October 2014

⁸⁹ At the national level, the interventions of the *Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria* (men and women) through her Communiqués are voices that deserve being heard. See, else were in this volume, the article on "The Family in the Messages of the CMSN to Consecrated persons and the society"

⁹⁰ XIV Ordinary General Assembly the Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World. *Lineamenta*, Vatican City (2014), n.10

⁹¹ XIV Ordinary General Assembly the Vocation and Mission of the Family in the Church and Contemporary World. *Lineamenta*, Vatican City (2014), n.61