

**APPROACH TO DEEPENING THE KNOWLEDGE AND UNDERSTANDING
OF CONSECRATED LIFE AMONG THE LAITY IN THE CHURCH IN NIGERIA**

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ABSTRACT

Unity being one of the marks of the church cannot be more appropriate a topic for reflection than now when our nation, Nigeria, is being plagued with so many challenges that seem to threaten the bedrock of her foundation - her unity. The family of God here on earth which subsists in the Catholic Church continues to be a point of reference for the larger society. Consequently, concerted effort must be made to strengthen this bond of unity that exists among the three states of life within the Church. One way of doing this is through constant dialogue among the various states of life within the Church. To this end, this paper will reflect on ways to better strengthen the existing relationships between the consecrated life and the lay life within the Church in Nigeria. Our task in this paper is of fourfold, first and foremost, we will reflect on the role and place of the consecrated life and the laity within the Church. Second, we will also look at the consecrated life within the context of the evangelical counsels; thirdly, we will further explicate the mission of the consecrated persons in the modern world, and lastly we will proffer proactive approaches and attitudes to better understanding of the consecrated life by our lay men and women.

Ut Unum Sint (That They May Be One), John 17:21

INTRODUCTION

The Church of the Post Second Vatican Council has witnessed a rise in lay activity within the Church. The documents of the Council, especially Chapter 4 of *Lumen Gentium* and the decree on the lay apostolate *Apostolicam Actuositatem*, clearly give an impetus to the pivotal place the laity occupy in the Church's mission in the world. The documents encourage the laity to be leaven in the world through the holiness of their own lives. They are also to infuse the Gospel values in their families, places of work, and public life.

In the same instance, the Consecrated Life has also undergone a dramatic change in the last few decades, and there is the possibility of even more radical change in the next two to three decades. This, social scientists call a major paradigm shift. The Church of Christ which subsists in the Catholic Church here on earth consists of these three states of life - the clerical life, the consecrated life and the lay life or married life. Each has its different roles and functions to play within the body of Christ. As St. Paul states in his Letter to the Corinthians; "There are different

kinds of gifts but the same Spirit; there are different forms of service but the same Lord... even though many different parts but one body (Cf. 1 Corinthians 12: 4-6 & 12). The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* explains that the very differences which the Lord has willed to put between the members of his body serve its unity and mission. What in a plain language can be referred to as "Unity in diversity." Thus, unity remains one of the marks of the Church. In the Creed, we profess the church to be one. Since, the church is made up of many and different parts with different roles and functions, each being unique and important to the mystical body of Christ, concerted efforts must be made to strengthen this bond. One way of doing this is through constant dialogue among the various states of life within the Church.

Our task in this paper, therefore, is of fourfold. First, we will look at the role and place of the consecrated life and laity within the Church. Second, we will also look at the consecrated life within the context of the evangelical counsels; third, we will further explicate the mission of the consecrated persons in the modern world, and lastly we will proffer proactive approaches and attitudes to better understanding of the consecrated life by the lay men and women.

WHO ARE THE CONSECRATED PERSONS?

In recent times, it has been observed that people and even consecrated persons themselves have demonstrated a clear confusion concerning their identity which has led to an even greater confusion within the Church. The *Catechism of the Catholic Church* defines the Consecrated life as a state of life which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, while not entering into the hierarchical structure of the Church, belongs undeniably to her life and holiness. Christ proposes the evangelical counsels, in their great variety, to every disciple. The perfection of charity to which all are called, entails for those who freely follow the call to consecrated life the obligation of practising chastity in celibacy, poverty and obedience. It is the profession of these counsels, within a permanent state of life recognised by the Church that characterises the life consecrated to God. It can also be said to be the act by which the Consecrated person dedicates himself or herself totally to God, to God's service and to His Church. Consecrated life is a gift of God to His Church. It is a vocation like marriage. Both men and women can choose to consecrate their lives to God as a way to seek an intimate relationship with Him. These men and women bear witness to God as the ultimate goal of their existence and He, alone, the consecrated person is called to be united with. Thus, consecrated life is a deeper way of living out the baptismal promises by the consecrated person who felt called by God and so responded generously, out of his or her own free will to this call of God. This state of life (i.e. the consecrated life) is one way of experiencing a more intimate relationship with God. In the history of the Church, there exist different categories of consecrated life – such as Order of Virgins; Hermits and widows; contemplative life; Apostolic Religious life, secular institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life.

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Since consecrated life is a divine calling; a gift from God, it cannot be imposed or forced on anyone by anybody. It can only occur whenever God wills it and to be conferred on whomever it pleases God to confer it on; just as we so read about the consecration of David in I Samuel 16:12-13. That is why discernment is a vital part of this calling, even before the profession of the consecrated person; discernment is the first part of the consecration and it is very essential. Like the consecrated life, the laity also have their role and place within the mystical body of Christ, and they are important to the building up of this mystical body. To this we now turn to explicate.

WHO IS THE LAITY?

The term *Laity* can be defined as the body of the faithful, outside of the ranks of the clergy and those belonging to the consecrated life approved by the Church. These faithful are incorporated into Christ and His Church through Baptism. The decrees of the Vatican II Council have a profound effect on the spirituality of the laity. For instance, *Lumen Gentium* states emphatically that the lay state is not a lesser state, a concession to human weakness, rather they are those concerned primarily with temporal order. The laity form part of a people brought into unity from the unity of the Father and Son and the Holy Spirit. In other words, everything said about the “people of God” equally applies to laity, consecrated persons and clerics alike. With this phrase the “people of God,” used by the document, the laity is no longer relegated to the bottom line of the Church, but by baptism they are incorporated into Christ; they, in their own way, share in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly office of Christ, and to the best of their ability carry on the mission of the whole Christian people in the Church and in the world. Imperatively, this life of communion is at the very heart of the Church.

Lumen Gentium further focuses on the role and mission of the laity. Article 31 of this same document, speaks of their special vocation to seek the kingdom of God by engaging in temporal affairs and directing them according to God’s will. Article 33 speaks of the laity having to build up the Church and describes the lay apostolate, commissioned by baptism and confirmation, as a participation in the saving mission of the Church.

As earlier alluded to, St Paul says though we are many parts but we remain one body. Different services but to the same Lord (Cf. I Cor. 12: 4-6 & 12). Why is it that this unity is rarely reflected in our actions towards one another? This image of the Church as the family of God becomes very faint in our minds and evasive and misleading in our actions towards one another. We speak more particularly to the relationship that exists between the Consecrated persons and the clergy; and even between the consecrated persons and the laity? Can the Church in Nigeria in particular and the Church in Africa at large be categorised as the “family of God” in the real sense of the word? What is the nature and mission of the Church in Nigeria? Are they different from that of the Universal Church? Of course not! *Ut Unum Sint (That They May Be One) John 17:21*. However, it is obvious that confusion also characterized the nature and role of the consecrated life within the church. This confusion affects more than the consecrated persons themselves. It influences the

laity's attitude to the religious life, and thus often becomes a negative influence in the contemporary crisis of vocations to the priesthood and the religious life. For instance, parents will not encourage their children to embrace vocations to the religious life, simply because they have little or no understanding of what the consecrated life is all about. In the same vein, one listens to layers of comments and complaints from the consecrated persons over lack of knowledge and understanding of a life consecrated to God by the lay faithful; yet the consecrated persons made little or no attempt in helping the laity understand their place and role in the Church. It is our aim and aspiration that this work can help to bridge the existing dichotomy between the laity and the consecrated persons. It is also our desire that this work will steer up a deeper reflection on the relationship that exists more particularly between the consecrated persons and the laity with the bid to bridge the gap if any.

Miguel Garijo-Gembe rightly submits that the tension between the horizontal and vertical dimension of the faith is the most obvious issue which divides contemporary Church at times. What are these horizontal and vertical dimensions of faith all about? Vertical dimension is for those who are concerned primarily with a direct relationship with God and almost totally care less about their neighbours; often than not we find some Consecrated persons in this category. It worries them less whether the laity have a clear understanding of the consecrated life or not. On the other hand, the horizontal dimension is for those who stress a social liberation that is to be achieved through social interactions with their neighbours in the name of the gospel. Their primary preoccupation is how to live out the gospel values in our contemporary world. They focus more on relational dimension of the Church. They see God in their neighbour and treat them as such. So, Miguel Garijo-Gembe says if there is variance in the way people perceive God and relate to God, it can automatically have an adverse effect on the way they relate to one another. Therefore, he sees the expression of the different spirituality as an obstacle to unity in our contemporary Church. Should the expression of the various spiritualities disfigure our unity in Christ? The answer rests with the individuals. On the other hand, there is the belief that the people of God understands Communion within the Church to mean variety and not uniformity. Communion is a gift of the Spirit present in the variety of charisms and states of life. *Vita Consecrata* sums it up in these words:

In the unity of the Christian life, the various vocations are like so many rays of the one light of Christ, whose radiance "brightens the countenance of the Church." The *laity*, by virtue of the secular character of their vocation reflect the mystery of the Incarnate Word particularly insofar as he is the Alpha and the Omega of the world, the foundation and measure of the value of all created things. Sacred ministers, for their part, are living images of Christ the Head and Shepherd who guides his people during this time of "already and not yet", as they await his coming in glory. It is the duty of the consecrated life to show that the Incarnate Son of God is the eschatological goal towards which all things tend, the splendour before which every

other light pales, and the infinite beauty which alone can fully satisfy the human heart.

Nigerians want a church that is communion and congenial. As Emmanuel Orobator asserts, it will be presumptuous for anyone to negate or challenge the commonly accepted African notions of communality and interrelatedness. One of the strengths of the African race is communal life, and we will continue to thrive in this even within the body of Christ; especially within the Church in Nigeria in particular and the Church in Africa at general. St. Thomas Aquinas puts it this way, the presence of the three states - ordained ministers, consecrated life, and laity - is essential for the perfection of the Church, for her dignity and her beauty. If this be so, one cannot understand the meaning of any one of the three states without some understanding of the other two. And thus without an adequate vision of the consecrated life, the whole people of God - clergy, religious, laity - will be poorer in the understanding of the Church, and of their own vocation.

THE EVANGELICAL COUNSELS

What are the evangelical counsels of the Consecrated Life? The evangelical counsels are the three vows (i.e., poverty, chastity, obedience) which consecrated persons make to God out of love for God. They are called counsels for those who desire to become "perfect". In the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus told the rich young man, if you want to be perfect, go and sell your possessions and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come follow me (cf. Matthew 19:21). It can be described in this term that the way of the Counsels is a path to perfection. A desire to attain sanctity, does play an important role in a person's decision to embrace the life of the evangelical counsels. Constitutions of religious orders and congregations give sanctification of members as their primary purpose. The monastic tradition presents the life of a monk as the expression of a desire to seek God, to live the Gospel literally, to obey the Lord's invitation to the young man: "If you would be perfect, go sell what you possess and give to the poor . . . and come, follow me" (Matthew 19:21). Moreover, the counsels are specifically effective means of attaining holiness. Aquinas asserts that observance of the evangelical counsels frees the human heart from attachments to worldly things, and therefore constitutes a particularly effective means of attaining that perfection of love in which Christian perfection consists. The Second Vatican Council reaffirms this when it states: "The way of the counsels represents a clearer and more complete way of being conformed to Christ." What more could be said?

According to the mind of the Church, the evangelical counsels are not binding on all and hence not necessary conditions to attain eternal life. Rather, they are "acts of supererogation" that exceed the minimum stipulated in the Ten Commandments. Yet the question remains, Why is it that only a few choose that which is better and makes one more happier? The New Testament gives a response to this: "Not all who can accept this but only those to whom that is granted" (Mt 19:11); again, St Paul says "Each has his particular gift from God" (1Cor 7:7). Another pertinent

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question that arises is: Why does God call some to this “better” path and not others? Does God has favourites? Of course not. The Second Vatican Council points to the universal call to holiness in which the laity also share in. Those whom God calls, he also consecrates. Baptism is the consecration of those called to the Church. For this reason all the baptized possess “a common dignity of members deriving from their rebirth in Christ, a common grace as sons, a common vocation to perfection, one salvation, one hope and undivided charity.” This universal baptismal vocation is a call to apostolate; but it is also, indeed primarily, a call to holiness; without holiness the apostolate will not bear fruit.

Thus, Christians who made religious vows before a competent church authority are recognised as members of the consecrated life. Religious vows in form of the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience were first made in the twelfth century by St. Francis of Assisi and his followers, the first of the mendicant orders; however, as noted in the *Catechism of the Catholic Church*, Christ proposes the evangelical counsels, in their great variety, to every state of life within the Church. More particularly, Consecration in religious institutes is made and effected by means of the evangelical counsels. For instance, the religious are consecrated, by the fact of their assumption of the evangelical counsels. Therefore, the counsels constitute the exact manner of living consecration to God. There is invariably a relationship of cause and effect between consecration and the evangelical counsels, notes Gerard Nwagwu. The Code of Canon Law states that consecrated life through the profession of the evangelical counsels is a stable form of living in which the faithful follow Christ more closely. Consequently, the evangelical counsels become a means to an end. In other words, the profession of the evangelical poverty, chastity and obedience are not made for the love or fun of it, but for the glory of God and in this way they are truly consecrated to God. What are these three counsels all about? We begin first with the Evangelical Chastity. The Evangelical Chastity embraced for the sake of the Kingdom of God, is a sign of the world to come, and a source of greater fruitfulness in an undivided heart. It involves the obligation of perfect continence observed in celibacy. The Evangelical Poverty embraced in imitation of Christ, who for our sake was made poor when he was rich, entails a life which is poor in reality and in spirit, sober and industrious, and a stranger to earthly riches. It also involves dependence and limitation in the use and the disposition of goods, in accordance with each institute’s own law. Evangelical Obedience undertaken in the spirit of faith and love in the following of Christ, who was obedient even unto death, obliges submission of one’s will to lawful Superiors, who act in the place of God when they give commands that are in accordance with each institute’s own constitutions. The question is what is the relationship between the counsels and the vows? What is a vow? A vow is a deliberate and free promise made to God to do some good for love of God. For the consecrated person, the three religious vows coincide in content with the three evangelical counsels. As asserted by Nwagwu, when the consecrated persons embrace these counsels in the form of vows, there s/he fulfills the necessity of stability in the consecrated life. The counsels assumed as vows therefore

demonstrate the intention of permanence, stability, sincerity, and seriousness of living the commitment involved in consecration to God.

However, the consecrated person is called to live these counsels in a more radical way. When such a person does so, he or she appears to move against the current and values of this world which the lay persons hold in high esteem. The Consecrated person becomes a sign of contradiction to the world. While at the same time, the counsels aim at challenging and remedying these human and cultural values. For instance, the Evangelical Obedience challenges the pride of life and the tendency for self assertion and all manifestations of power and domination. By this evangelical obedience, the consecrated person renounces his or her will power for that of the constituted authority while the lay people go out of their way to seek power and recognition in this world. The Evangelical Chastity challenges the human tendency of giving one's heart in love and expecting love in return. As well as the tendency of the flesh to draw one to pleasure, self gratification and all forms of adornment of the flesh. Thus, by this evangelical chastity, the consecrated person renounces the pleasure one derives from sexual activities; bearing and rearing of biological children while the lay persons find their fulfilment in them. Lastly, the Evangelical Poverty, challenges and remedies the propensity of acquiring material goods and possessions, while the lay persons work very hard to acquire money and amass material wealth, the consecrated person by the vow poverty moves against this current of acquiring money and amassing wealth to living poor and simple lifestyle in the actual sense of the word and serving God in the poor of this world.

No issues touch the lay man and woman more profoundly and universally as these three things- money, sex, and power. No issues cause more controversy than these three. Yet, the consecrated persons chose out of free-will without any duress to renounce them for the sake of the kingdom to be free enough to serve of God and neighbours. To this end, *Lumen Gentium* affirms that the state of life, which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, while not entering into the hierarchical structure of the Church, belongs undeniably to her life and holiness. Therefore, it cannot be devalued nor underestimated.

COMMUNION AND MISSION OF THE CONSECRATED PERSON

Vita Consecrata acknowledges that in recent times, one of the fruits of the teaching on the Church as communion is the growing awareness that her members can and must unite their efforts, with a view of cooperation and exchange of gifts in an effort to participate more effectively in the Church's mission. *Lumen Gentium* also reaffirms the relevance of the consecrated persons to the larger world when it states, "Let no one think either that their consecrated way of life alienates religious from other men or makes them useless for human society." The consecrated persons are called to a unique vocation in order to be commissioned and sent to perform functions proper to their vocation. Mission is the necessary counterpart of a vocation. The task of devoting themselves wholly to the mission is inclusive in the vocation of the consecrated. *Vita Consecrata* further makes it clear that the Church

entrusts to the consecrated persons, the task of spreading the spirituality of communion, firstly in their inner lives and then the ecclesial communities and beyond its boundaries “Consecrated men and women are sent forth therefore to proclaim, by the witness of their lives, the value of Christian fraternity and the transforming power of the Good News, which makes it possible to see all people as sons and daughters of God.

Furthermore, St. Pope John Paul II notes in *Vita Consecrata*, “I hope that reflection will continue and lead to a deeper understanding of the great gift of the consecrated life in its three aspects - consecration, communion, and mission.” By recognizing in Baptism the common sacramental origin, consecrated men and women share a common vocation to holiness and to the apostolate with other members of the faithful. By being signs of this universal vocation, they manifest the specific mission of consecrated life. Thus, the consecrated persons and the laity must and will continue to tread the path of communion and mission, since this is the task entrusted by Christ to His Church: That they may be one (Cf. Jn.17:21), and in his Valedictory speech to His Apostles, he gave them the mandate to “Go into the world proclaiming the Good news” (Mk.15:16) To this end, we will make a concerted effort to actualize this prayer of Jesus and His missionary initiatives in our world. We now present a proactive approach to better understanding of the consecrated life by the laity.

Constant Dialogue and Communication

The dichotomy between the laity and the consecrated persons can be bridged through constant dialogue and communication among their members. These can be achieved in variety of ways either through Mass media like internet, movies, documentary, through articles in journals, through sermons and faith sharing, through seminars and workshops, etc. Fully aware of some of the challenges that plagued us as a people and as a race, we must nevertheless rest on our awl. Challenges that characterised the unusual slow pace of communication include, power, illiteracy, and the slow pace of getting information to the grassroots among the laity; even the Mass Media in Nigeria are heavily constrained by one factor or another which more often than not are totally outside the control of those who might yawn to use them in the service of the mission of the church. With poor communication network systems to convene messages, this may make this proposal unreliable. However, notwithstanding all these hurdles, efforts can still be put together in this regard.

Authentic Witnessing to the Consecrated life: The Consecrated persons are called to witness to the Risen Lord through the authentic living out of their vows or the evangelical counsels. In doing so, they remain a sign of contradiction to the world, As the psalmist says: “No sound, no voice is heard yet their span extends throughout the world and their message reaches the ends of the earth” (Psalm 19: 3-4). St. Augustine once said that neither eloquent words nor passionate speech

persuade the way lives persuade. It remains no less true of today that the life of the speaker has greater effect in persuading than the most eloquent speech. Consequently, there is no dichotomy between the good news and the bearer of the good news. Our world needs more witnessing. Our world needs more consecrated persons who are living the evangelical counsels in the actual sense of the word. The consecrated life observed faithfully is a martyrdom. In living of the evangelical counsels, there must be demands and experience of real sacrifice and actual suffering. This, if accepted in good faith, can communicate volumes to the laity who are daily faced with the challenges of married life and parenting. St. Pope John Paul II reaffirms this when he says that consecrated men and women are sent forth to proclaim, by the witness of their lives, the value of Christian fraternity and the transforming power of the Good News, which makes it possible to see all people as sons and daughters of God, and inspires a self giving love towards everyone, especially the least of our brothers and sisters.

Holiness of life and Apostolate efforts

An authentic and sincere witness of life to the evangelical counsels requires interior conversion of heart that matures through personal life and develops to external commitment and service. There is a need for the practice of intensified prayer and rigorous asceticism lived in generosity of heart by the consecrated persons. Witness of holy life counteracts effects of shallow faith that offers no satisfactory answers to the vital questions of life which often make our lay men and women run from pole to pole after immediate solutions proffered by the new age religions and miracle worker pastors. By their prayers, works of penance, sufferings and witness through holiness of life, the consecrated persons propagate the faith better. Consequently, their apostolate among the laity will become more fruitful and effective, and they in turn will be making a difference in the lives of those they serve and daily encounter in their apostolates.

Education and collaboration between the laity and the Consecrated persons

When the vocations of both married life and religious life are properly understood, both will flourish. The laity are to infuse the secular world with the Gospel, but how will they know what the Gospel teaches or how to carry it out effectively without the living witness of priests and consecrated persons who have given their entire lives to Christ? Religious live the radical self-gift of the vows and prayer, becoming a beacon and encouragement to the laity. Conversely, the laity living out the marital vows and authentic family life foster and encourage their children's generous response to the vocations God is calling them to as clerics or as consecrated persons. Furthermore, by their witness of marital fidelity, they encourage and strengthen the ongoing faithfulness of the consecrated persons.

The Lay Movements Sharing some Aspects of the Consecrated Life

Pope John Paul II's Post-Synodal Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata*, acknowledges that in recent times, one of the fruits of the teaching of the Church as communion is the growing awareness that her members can and must unite their efforts with a view to cooperation and exchange of gifts, in order to participate more effectively in the Church's mission. One way the consecrated persons are doing this is by allowing the laity share some aspects of their lives. It is stated in *Vita Consecrata*: "Institutes have come to the conclusion that their charism can be shared with laity. The laity are, therefore, invited to share more intensely in the spirituality and mission of these Institutes... a new chapter, rich in hope, has begun in the history of relation between consecrated persons and the laity." Groups of laity are formed with various titles, commit themselves to sharing the apostolic mission and the spirituality of various Institutes, and in this way, come to be identified in the same spiritual family. They have their own specific contribution to make to the mission of the Church – precisely by virtue of their lay status – a contribution that cannot be realized by the priests nor the religious. They bring along with them an enthusiasm, freshness, and a variety of experiences which enrich the institute. An initiative of this nature has led to a better understanding and cooperation between the consecrated persons and the laity, and this should grow even more and be encouraged.

Collaboration in apostolate initiatives

In recent time, especially in the Western world, we have seen lay people taken on roles and responsibilities that were once given to the religious institutes. For instance, schools and hospitals that used to be staffed entirely by religious sisters and brothers are now being served entirely by lay faculty or staff. If a religious is still present, she/ he is often in an administrative position or far removed from the classrooms or hospital wards, leading some to think they are far removed from the ordinary people. The major problem is that there is no longer vocation boom in the West. Even in Africa where we still have a fresh experience of vocation boom to the priesthood and the consecrated life, there are no reasons why these two states of life cannot collaborate in fruitful and meaningful apostolate initiatives both in the hospitals, schools and other social and pastoral works. A less clericalized ecclesial environment will facilitate healthy collaboration between the laity and consecrated persons, especially in Nigeria. Such collaboration will only make the lives of the individual richer and the church better and effective in her mission to the world.

Inculturation of Consecrated Life

Most traditional Africans see the consecrated life as a strange and weird kind of life meant for the Europeans and the Western world. Consequently, they discourage vocations to the Consecrated life and the priesthood. The Church demands and expects the inculturation of authentic African values, especially in the Consecrated life. Speaking to Africans and recognising their desire, the Church strongly calls for the "Africanisation of the religious life." The Congregation for Institute of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life and the Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples state: "This africanisation requires that the consecration to God

in the religious life be lived in the social-cultural context proper to Africa and that it may be seen by those around as a manifestation of real love of God and neighbour.”ⁱ To Africanise religious life means also to integrate into it the values of the African culture in harmony with the Gospel. ‘The Church considers with great respect the moral and religious values of the African Tradition.’ⁱⁱ We are, therefore, not to deny our cultural values but to study them with great attention to discern what they have that is good, true and beautiful and to give these a new dimension in our consecrated life. There are some that can be immediately adopted such as: the sense of the presence of God, natural to the African; values of community life: joy, sharing, hospitality, availability, etc. There are others that ought to be purified like: the sense of clannish solidarity, (wrong understanding of) the sense of fecundity, etc. All these require research and some efforts of which we are aware.

Above all, it is necessary to remember that culture, like human being, needs to be converted in spirit and truth (Jn.4:24), and that the passage from African values to those of the religious life will always demand a qualitative jump and should transcend the assumed values.

We are very attentive to your desire to reach this much needed africanisation. While it is necessary to make every effort in view of generous evangelisation of culture, our consecration to God must take into account the socio-cultural context where it is lived.ⁱⁱⁱ This is an indispensable condition in order that it could be seen as witness.^{iv} We encourage every consecrated person to continue to study this aspect of the religious life without forgetting that a true consecration to God is based, above all, on the supernatural, universal values and on fundamentals common to all the religious. This africanisation of religious life must extend to all genres of vocations.^v

Along the same line of thoughts, St. Pope John Paul II and the African Bishops themselves have passionately called for the inculturation of Consecrated life in Africa.^{vi} Consequently, the consecrated persons must wake up to this challenge of owning up to the life and living it as Africans by imbibing in their own lives and communities all that is good, true and beautiful in the African culture that can better enrich the consecrated life. For example, Religious communities can intensify the liveliness of their liturgical celebrations by making use of local musical instruments and symbolic gestures that are African in style and nature. They can also inculturate the way they practice the evangelical counsels, say of poverty, the way they live community life, and so forth.

The Promotion of the African Sense of Sacredness among the Laity

The traditional African way upholds and promotes reverence for that which is sacred and even the traditional priests among the people are revered. That attitude and outlook must be encouraged among our laity who often than not no longer see any value or sacredness among clerics and the consecrated persons due to secularism, modernism and relativism. That which is considered sacred is giving way to the fastest growing modern life, though this has its positive and negative

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aspects. It is within this reality that the consecrated men and women must continuously give themselves to God through living out of the vows authentically, through prayer, solitude, self denial, services to the poor and needy, and alleviating the sufferings of the poor.

Conclusion

If the Church in Africa and particularly in Nigeria are to grow to its full potential, there is a strong and urgent need to continually promote and encourage mutual collaboration which bears genuine understanding and forbearance among the consecrated persons and the laity, as well as the inculturation of consecrated life. As St Pope John Paul II once told some group of religious:

As religious you are in a position to make a special contribution to the promotion

of the unity of the Church. Your experience of community life, common prayer and cooperate apostolic service prepares you for this task. May you dedicate yourselves to the great cause of unity with renewed vigour; seeking, in a spirit of openness and respect, to break down barriers of division and to encourage the progress of harmony and mutual collaboration.

May this message of the Holy Father continue to be in our consciousness as we live out our lives as consecrated people.

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ENDNOTES

Lumen Gentium #8 All quotations from the documents of Vatican Council II are taken from *Vatican II: The Conciliar Documents*, ed. Austin Flannery, Dublin: Dominican Publications, 1988.

Catechism of the Catholic Church #873

Catechism of the Catholic Church #914

Lumen Gentium 42-43; *Perfecta Caritatis* 1

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Lumen Gentium #30

Lumen Gentium #31

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Lumen Gentium #33

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The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life

Vol. 11, 2015. ISSN: 2659-0301 (Online) 1597 6610 (Print)

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II, q.
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Canon #599
Canon #600
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Vita Consecrata #13
Starting A fresh from Christ #8
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ⁱ Congregation for Institute of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life and the Congregation for the Evangelization of People as, *Message to Religious Men and Women of Africa*, n.3, October 1976, published 3 June 1978

ⁱⁱ Paul VI, *Africae Terrarum*, #14.

The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life

Vol. 11, 2015. ISSN: 2659-0301 (Online) 1597 6610 (Print)

- iii Vatican Council II, *Ad Gentes*, # 18; Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio*, # 40.
iv *Ad Gentes*, #20; Paul VI, *Evangelii Nuntiandi*, #69.
v Congregation for Institute of Consecrated Life and Society of Apostolic Life and the Congregation for the Evangelization of People as, *Message to Religious Men and Women of Africa*, n.3, October 1976, published 3 June 1978
vi Cf. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, #79-80; *Ecclesia in Africa*, #59, ## 62-63.

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