

**ATTITUDES IN THE ADVANCEMENT OF KNOWLEDGE OF
THE CONSECRATED BROTHER: THE NIGERIAN CONTEXT**

Kesiki Simon, FSC*

For the sake of dissemination of knowledge, some attitudes the Consecrated Brotherhood faces in Nigeria. It cites how the Church esteems the Brotherhood but not forgetting the particularity of the Nigerian Church as an entity with experiences worth noticing. Objectively, it briefly investigates into the innate human tendencies to develop attitudes, given situations. Using situational experiences, it exposes how the Nigerian social situation and the Consecrated Brother have come a long way with their understanding for each other studying some sources of these attitudes. It further prints specific stages of training towards the Brotherhood, expatiating each stage briefly. The consecrated Brotherhood is seen to be lived in either the exclusive congregation or the mixed congregation and some light is thrown on the different structures. The Religious Brother is further challenged to seek to be understood and not simply wait to be understood. Pragmatic suggestions are offered, both implicitly and explicitly, to speed up dialogue between the Brother and the Nigerian society. In conclusion, the article appreciates the fact that change is basic. It goes ahead to call on the need for both parties to adjust both physically and socially without losing relevance.

Introduction

The intention of this paper is to create and speed up an ongoing encounter and dialogue between the Consecrated Brother and the Nigerian society in the twenty first century. It would not be justifiable to discuss the attitudes without investigating some root causes of these attitudes. Here, we shall seek to provoke the parties to reconstruct the lenses through which they view themselves. Here too, I have in mind a Consecrated Brother of Nigerian origin living and ministering within the Nigerian society.

While the universal Church esteems the distinct life of the Consecrated Brother, the existential experience of Nigeria as a particular Church poses an interesting study. St. Pope John Paul II said of the consecrated Brother; *'I am convinced that this form of religious life, which has, throughout history, been of such great service to the Church, is still today most suitable for the new apostolic challenges which the proclamation of the gospel message must face.'* The assorted theological documents on the Consecrated Brother (as our experiences tell us) are not an automatic marriage of ideologies of the Brother and his Nigeria situation and this is no fault of anyone.

Social psychology teaches us that attitudes are learned tendencies. Gordon Allport, one of the founding fathers of social psychology, explains that attitudes are formed by actual, imagined or implied presence of other human beings. It is very human to have attitudes and the Nigerian society has got full rights to have attitudes towards a consecrated Brother.

Who is a Consecrated Brother?

A consecrated Brother is a man who takes the three evangelical vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. The Brother is the prophet of his time guided by the Holy Spirit to live out his baptismal vows in Community with other Brothers. *Lumen Gentium* 43.

In Nigeria, a Consecrated Brother belongs to either the exclusive or the mixed religious Congregation. The exclusive Congregations are those that have solely Brothers and no priests as members, while the mixed ones are those congregations that are made up of both Brothers and Priests. Some exclusive congregations are Marist Brothers, Brothers of the Christian Schools (De La Salle Brothers) Presentation Brothers, Brothers of St. Stephen, Christian Brothers etc. Mixed congregations include; The Augustinians, Salesians of Don Bosco, Spiritans, Claretian Missionaries, Carmelites, Oblates of the Virgin Mary, Jesuits, etc..

The Brother in the Official Church

The traditional Doctrine of the Church and the official Ecclesial positions on the consecrated Brother in recent times as expressed in the Church's document, the *Vita Consecrata*, published in 1996 upholds the life of the Brother. The Code of the Canon Law among other church documents holds the Consecrated (Life) Brother in high esteem. No one is in doubt. Our focal point here is the Consecrated Brother in the Nigerian context.

As a prophet to his society, is it the Brother who creates his environment or the environment that creates the Brother? I feel these relationships are mutual. The Brother should not be a contradiction to his society and at the same time, the Brother should be cautious in adjusting to social expectations. Losing a distinct nature just to be socially accepted is not the point of the consecrated Brother in his capacity as a prophet of his time.

Sons of Sceva?

The Nigerian society views the life of the Brother in direct comparison to the life of the priest. As such, they expect to see a very close life style in all aspects of their lives. At

the end of the day, the Brothers have come to be seen as the seven sons of Sceva who were told by the spirit;

'Jesus I recognise, Paul I know, but who are you.' Acts 19:15. In the same vein, the Nigeria context more often than not seems to say to the Brothers, 'Reverend Fathers we recognise, Reverend Sisters we know, but who are you Reverend Brothers? This is the basis for some of the attitudes often created from deep concern to know the Brothers.

Stories of Hope

Some Brothers had gone to visit a parish priest, a long term friend of the Brothers. His parishioners were informed beforehand of the visit and the priest intimated them of the fraternity he enjoyed while with the Brothers. The priest had once lived with the Brothers when he studied outside his Diocese. His cordiality with the Brothers was spontaneous and both parties enjoyed good time together. Then a time came for the introduction and the priest presented the Brothers to the people in the following words; *'These are the Brothers. They have refused to marry and they have refused to be priests. In fact, they are in between.'*

The Vocations Director of a Brother congregation once received a bulky letter from the Vocations Director of the Diocese where the Brothers served. Therein were forms of candidates who had applied to join the Major seminary and an accompanying letter from the priest to the Brother. The letter cited that the young men whose forms were enclosed were genuine young men with all the recommendations to join the Major seminary. He continued that these young men however, lacked the educational qualifications for admittance into the major seminary and if the Brothers could admit them into the consecrated Brotherhood.

A recruit into a consecrated Brother congregation shares some thoughts about his new found vocation just few months into his initial formation programme; *'my identity as a candidate for the Brotherhood remains a thing of keen inspection. Often I overhear people saying that I am wasting my time being a Brother. I am struggling against the human forces that see no sense in my choice.'*

During a two week pre-profession retreat for Novices , a young novice shared his situation with other fellow retreatants. He maintained that, if in two weeks from then he was professed, he would be the first professed Brother from his area. Most interesting was that in the same area, there were forty three priests and over seventy sisters and he concluded, *'I have been almost alone in my journey to the Brotherhood. My*

greatest challenge does not lie in silencing the voice of opposition but in assuring myself that I am not deceived; that I am not mad.'

A Rev. Sister once asked a question; *'Brothers, how do you survive as a teaching Brother in a highly clerical society like Nigeria?* She concluded with an underlined sympathetic tone as to why Brothers have to suffocate in a vocation no one understands or cares to understand when they have got the option to be priests.

A Bishop who was a chief celebrant at a wedding mass saw a consecrated Brother in the procession and this Brother eventually sitting on the altar. After the liturgy, the Bishop expressed his displeasure. The Bishop felt it was not okay for a Brother to join the procession and sit on the altar.

A Brother was once told that his life was a senseless waste. In response he said, *'Commitment to consecrated life is no more senseless than a God becoming a human person suffering, dying and rising for us. Love does such things that are senseless.'*

A group of students engaged in a casual discussion with a Brother and the following attitudes they held about the Brothers surfaced.

- Brothers are always looking serious; do they dance at all?
- I see the Brothers as being too formal and perfect in everything they do and highly structured for a young person like me.
- I admire the life of the Brothers but I don't think it is for me.
- Brothers don't have personal cars.

A Brother visited his home parish after his final vows to show his appreciation to his people for the support he got during the final vows ceremony. After the mass on that day, the President of the Catholic Women Organisation (CWO) signaled the Brother aside and asked him why his ordination was taking too long to come. Ironically, this very devoted Christian woman was the very one who had organised the women to come out in mass to support the Brother at his final vows.

Making of a Brother

There are many Catholics in Nigeria who have never seen a Brother going to school. On the other hand, there are chains of seminaries where all Catholics I dare to say, know to be great areas of learning for future priests. The faithful do contribute at some special masses to feed and support the seminarians in their studies. This is a common fact. On the other hand, they have never heard of contributions for Brothers' training, not to talk of seeing an institution like the seminary where the Brothers are trained. The following paragraphs give brief stages a young man follows to his perpetual vows as a Brother.

Advancing the knowledge on the Consecrated Brother is the surest way to correct or harmonise some attitudes.

a. Aspirancy

This is a period when any young man interested in joining the Brothers keeps touch with the Consecrated Brothers. Visits to and from the community of Brothers is part of this stage. Familiarisation is the key factor at this stage. Students, who are still in school, be it secondary or tertiary institutions are recruited as aspirants. During their holidays, they could come and spend some time with the Brothers, to see how the Brothers live. This aspirancy period is flexible as the young man is still busy in another commitment. Both the Brothers and the aspiring young man at this stage observe each other for possible admission when both parties are ready. It is a good experience for any young man and it is not compulsory that once one aspires he must join the Brothers. This period could go for six months , three or more years. The young man can commence his Aspirancy period even when he is in secondary school so that as soon as he graduates, he can join the Brothers.

b. Postulancy

The Postulancy is a more structured stage similar to the Spiritual year in the Seminary for better understanding. At this stage, the young man moves into a structured programme with other young men to further nurture their call to the consecrated Brotherhood. The Postulancy is normally managed by specially trained Brothers on the staff. They accompany the young men to discover their call in a more formal way from the Aspirancy. Gradually, the young man is being introduced to the life in stages. During this period, there is a designed syllable of study. Rudiments of the Scriptures, Church History, institute resource materials, Religious life and psychology among other courses are taught. Some congregations affiliate some of the courses to gain credits from universities or equivalent institutions. This period ranges from six to eighteen months depending on the religious Congregation.

c. Novitiate

The novitiate is a more structured stage. This stage comes immediately after the Postulancy or after the tertiary studies as spelt out in the Congregational policies. No matter the time it comes, its structured nature remains fundamental. After this stage,

the novice is ready to take his first religious vows as a member of the congregation. Novitiate is characterised by deep prayers and discernment. Structured courses are also available and like the Postulancy too, the courses could be affiliated to a university for credits. However, the focus of the novitiate is deepening one's prayer life, the spirit and charism of the congregation, discernment process and other facets of the human development.

d. Scholasticate/Professional training

The Scholasticate period is the time to specialize in a professional skill according to the talent and interest of the Brother. This training takes place in the secular universities or its equivalent institutions, that can meet the needs of the Brothers. In the Nigerian case, over 95 percent of the Brothers are trained during this time outside the country. This has largely been so, because of the strikes in the Nigerian universities that interfere with the smooth training of the Brothers in public universities.

The visibility of the Brothers in Nigerian society would have been most pronounced during this stage if the Brothers had a particular university of studies. During this period, the congregational needs and the individual's talent and interests are explored for maximum utility of the human resources. The Brothers go to school depending on the ministry the congregation is engaged in. These ministries include medical, educational, youth ministry, communication, charity, engineering, journalism, hospitality ministry etc.

e. Perpetual profession/vows

After following the various stages of initial formation and experiencing the community life, the young man is ready to take his perpetual vows, final vows or perpetual profession as one chooses to term it. The period from Postulancy to final commitment lasts for an average of 8 to 10 years.

f. On-going formation

The on-going formation embraces programmes of continuous renewal that the perpetually professed undertakes in order to keep abreast with the realities of the evolving situation in his congregation, church and society. These programmes take different forms, for example: further studies, renewal courses, seminars, retreats, sabbatical leaves, new skill acquisition programmes, educational researches, etc.

depending on the paradigm shift stirring the individual Brother. On-going formation is continuous.

How some attitudes evolved

A Chinese proverb says that; “The best time to plant a tree is twenty years ago and the next best time is today”. Relating this to the reality of the foundation of the consecrated Brother in Nigeria, it suffices to make some connection. What is the connection? Most of the congregations of Brothers in Nigeria have their foundations outside Nigeria. When these Brothers came, they did a lot in terms of ministering to the educational and other needs of the people. They aided in offering architectural expertise and used their engineering skills to drive through bumpy regions to get the missions into the remotest areas. Very little was done in many congregations to recruit local Brothers to replace them in comparison to the effort put in recruiting local priests to replace the aging priests. So, the next best time to talk about the consecrated Brother is today, now and here.

When eventually some need to promote vocation to the consecrated Brother was considered, the advertisement bred some unintended attitudes in the local church. In many cases, the adverts required six credits including English for those who wanted to be priests and five credits including English for those who wanted to be Brothers. The presentation of different educational qualifications for aspirants to Priesthood and Brotherhood, instead of opening door to brotherhood projected Brother as a man of lower educational standard within the Nigerian society. Each publication of *The Ambassador Magazine* carried these adverts throughout the 90s.

Those who were initially initiated into the consecrated Brotherhood had to be trained by the foreign formators. Some had very vague knowledge of the Nigerian society. These formators gave the impression that all that the Brother needed was provided in the community living. While their seminary counterparts had more time to come back home and be with their people during breaks and apostolic/pastoral programmes, the average Brother remained only in the institutions in which Brothers worked and from the institutions they went to the communities, with minimal interaction with the local church. From this onset, the local Nigerian church never really got to know the Brother. Finally, the attitudes that surround the consecrated Brother are emergency indicators that the Brother needs to speak more openly about himself in the Nigerian situation. These attitudes are nothing negative but revolutionary in that they are a call to the Brother to dialogue with the Nigerian society, how to be a Nigerian Consecrated Brother in Nigeria.

Conclusion

Some of these attitudes are there because, the emerging spiritualities of the said society are increasingly contrasting the basic life style of the Brothers as observed by the people. Historically, the age of persecution, the early Christians felt they had no heroic perspective in their religious practice. Therefore, individual men and women took off to the deserts to live as hermits in strict solitude and prayers. After some time, the monasteries emerged and moved away from the desert to live in rich agricultural areas, praying and farming. I am sure older hermits were seen as obscured with the appearance of monasteries. As the society changed, mendicants who begged to sustain themselves emerged. Gradually, the feudal culture produced canons that mingled with the land owners and political law makers singling themselves as rich landlords.

The lavish life of the canons saw the mendicants adapting their lives to live in townships to beg and support those who were wretched. A social response to the society saw some canons giving up their wealth to help the poor. They also received from the rich sources to enable the paupers to live decent lives.

At each turn of history, attitudes developed. We see the society changing to maintain its relevance without missing its focal point: service to humanity and love of God. This remains the challenge of the consecrated Brother and the Church in Nigeria today.

*Kesiki Simon, FSC, is a Brother of the Christian Schools known as De La Salle Brothers in Nigeria. He currently serves in the Postulancy Formation House of the Brothers in Benue State after four years of experience as the Vice Rector of St Peters Minor Seminary, Yola Adamawa State. Passionate for youth ministry, Kesiki has engaged in youth activities in and outside Nigeria. He is author of the book, *The Gift of Youthfulness*.

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