

**CELIBATE FOR MEN, MARRIED TO GOD: THE MOTHERHOOD AND
FATHERHOOD OF THE CONSECRATED PERSONS**

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ABSTRACT

The African vision of life and family according to which, every son and daughter of the family must, in turn, become father and mother of a new family constitutes a resistance and a strong obstacle to religious life. It especially presents an African challenge to the religious vow of chastity and consecration for the Kingdom of God. The vow of chastity is not, as such, a vow against life, family, and begettingness. It is a vow for a new dimension of life, family and of new begettingness of human lives. Hence, the motherhood and fatherhood of the consecrated persons is a motherhood and fatherhood of the Kingdom of God. That is why, as celibate as they appear to be, they are all married to God for a parenthood of love and charity. As such, against a certain and an absolute African familial view of biological fecundity and birth, religious consecration sees human family, life and procreation from another perspective, that of love, charity and the gift of oneself for others.

INTRODUCTION

Till date, a good number of African families oppose priestly and religious vocation for their children because of the principle of biological fatherhood and motherhood, as understood within the African context defined by the 'communitarianisation' of the individual.² In Africa, John Mbiti says, the human being is nothing if she or he does not get married and give birth to children.

For African peoples, marriage is the focus of existence. [...] Marriage is a duty, a requirement from the corporate society, and a rhythm of life in which everyone must participate. Otherwise, he who does not participate

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² According to Mbiti, "in traditional life, the individual does not and cannot exist alone except corporately. He owes his existence to other people, including those of past generations and his contemporaries." "The individual can only say: "I am, because we are; and since we are, therefore I am. This is a cardinal point in the understanding of the African view of man." " John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy* (Garden City: Anchor Books, Doubleday and Company, Inc., 1970), 141.

in it is a curse to the community, he is a rebel and a law-breaker, he is not only abnormal, but “under-human.” Failure to get married under normal circumstances means that the person concerned has rejected society and society rejects him in return.³

Begettingness is a cardinal point, which defines African anthropology and the individual in the society. A person is nothing if she or he does not have children. For this reason, some families can concede the priestly and religious vocation of their children, if and only if they will secretly come and perform their duty of motherhood and fatherhood for the life and perpetuation of the family lineage. For them, indeed, “to die without getting married and without children is to be completely cut off from the human society, to become an outcast and to lose all links with mankind.”⁴

Yet, by placing ourselves in the perspective of the new paternity and maternity we have in Christ through religious and priestly life, we can review this African traditional conception of biological family life, marriage and fecundity and at all cost. By doing so, we will value human family, not first of all from the angle of biological fecundity and begettingness, but by the loving of Christ and the neighbour, in view of the Kingdom, which is the universal and ultimate human family to love and to take care of. With this, one could define another African humanism based on the gift of self to others and on the *ministerium* (service) of charity, and not first of all on the physical motherhood and fatherhood, generation or procreation. This is, in fact, what we intend to discuss in this paper, which is not to undermine or devalue human biological family and procreation, but to re-value it through the singleness or celibacy of the consecrated persons (religious).

In the first part, we shall speak of vows or evangelical counsels, which characterise religious life as its very being, and defines the *sequela Christi* (following of Christ) of the consecrated persons. Based on this, in the second part, we shall speak of religious as prophets of the eschatological family, because of their way and state of life which foresee and already anticipate –though imperfectly – the coming Kingdom. In the third part, we shall address the motherhood and fatherhood of the religious who, though celibate in the sight of men, are married to God for life, for eternity. Hence, in our fourth part, we are going to discover that religious life gives and saves lives for the society in general, and for the Church in particular. For this reason, and despite their weaknesses, religious persons have to live faithfully and responsibly their commitment to Christ through the evangelic counsels. This will constitute the last part of our reflection.

THE SEQUELA CHRISTI: POVERTY, CHASTITY AND OBEDIENCE

³ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 174.

⁴ John S. Mbiti, *African Religions and Philosophy*, 175-176.

According to the Code of Canon Law, a vow is a deliberate promise made to God for some possible and better good. It is a religious virtue which needs to be fulfilled by the person professing it.⁵ Every promise, even the religious one is not a vow, but every religious vow is a promise because of the commitment to be faithful by which we are temporally or perpetually tied to God. In terms of religious vows also known as evangelical counsels, Christ is considered as the Religious *par excellence*, the Primordial or Fundamental Religious. He is the source, the root and the goal of religious evangelical counsels. For it is to imitate Him who was poor, chaste and obedient till death, that we commit ourselves after Him through the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience.

The poor Christ: Christ the Poor Man shows us his poverty through his incarnation. He accepted to lose His heavenly honours and glories, in order to come down to look for us, to love us and to enrich us by His poverty. It is on account of His poverty that Saint Paul writes as follows to the Philippians: "Christ Jesus, who, though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross." (Philippians 2: 6-8, RSV⁶). Much further, speaking of Christ's poverty, the same Paul affirms again: "For you know the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, that though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that by his poverty you might become rich." (2 Corinthians 8: 9).

Christ accepted the poor condition of a manger, the crib, in which He was born (cf. Luke 2: 6, 12, 16), because "there was no place for them in the inn," which was in fact made for all. (Luke 2: 6). Christ chose poor parents, who could only afford a pair of pigeons for sacrifice during His presentation in the Temple (Luke 2:24). He lived a poor life even within His apostolic mission, such that He did not have a personal roof to live under.

To all His followers, He said: "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests; but the Son of man has nowhere to lay his head." (Luke 9:58; Matthew 8:20). When the crowd wanted to make Him King, He declined the offer and preferred to withdraw into a desert place in order to pray. (cf. John 6: 15). He even lacked money to pay the collectors of the half-shekel tax. (cf. Matthew 17 : 24-27). Furthermore, although He was born in a manger, He died miserably on the cross, like a malefactor or a cursed one between two thieves. He deprived Himself of His garments, of His life and of everything upon the Cross on which He ended His earthly life. He did not even have an honourable and befitting burial. His burial was done in the haste and His tomb an unknown and borrowed tomb (John 19:31, 41).

Christ's poverty was not only material, but also affective and spiritual. Though He is the Word and Wisdom of God, He accepted to be educated and taught in a human manner as someone who does not know anything. In fact, Luke the

⁵ Cf. *The Code of Canon Law. New Revised English Translation* (Bangalore: Theological Publications, 1983), can. 1191, §1.

⁶ *The Holy Bible. The Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition* (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 1966), is the version we are using in this essay.

Evangelist says of Him that, He “grew and became strong, filled with wisdom.” (Luke 2: 40). At His birth, He had no friends and companions but the poor shepherds and their flock (cf. Luke 2:16-18). Denied by His people, just a few believed in him and in what He was doing for their sake (cf. John 1:11-13); even His own disciples. In brief, He was hated without a cause (cf. John 15:25).

In short, as Fulton Sheen puts it, through His poverty of fact and of spirit, His economic, social and intellectual poverty, Jesus conquers three kinds of pride: “the pride of what one has [possession], which is economic pride; the pride of what one is [by position], which is social; and the pride of what one knows [knowledge], which is intellectual pride.”⁷ Religious vow and live after this Christ’s poverty, “the Universal Poor Man of the world.”⁸ They want to follow and imitate Him till the end, in order to be configured to Him in holiness, and perfect Life.

The chaste Christ: Jesus showed His chaste life by living single and perfectly continent all his life. The matrimonial status of the consecrated persons is first applied to and accomplished in Him who says: “there are eunuchs who have been so from birth, and there are eunuchs who have been made eunuchs by men, and there are eunuchs who have made themselves eunuchs for the sake of the kingdom of heaven. He who is able to receive this, let him receive it.” (Matthew 19:12). He is therefore the First Eunuch of the Kingdom of heaven. Still, it is to express the universal and fundamental value of His perfect chastity that He replied to the Sadducees: “You are wrong, because you know neither the scriptures nor the power of God. For in the resurrection they neither marry nor are given in marriage, but are like angels in heaven.” (Matthew 22: 29-30).

Hence, following and imitating the perfect chastity of this Universal Man, the religious takes vow of chastity and lives it as consecration to Christ, the First and Primordial Eunuch of the Kingdom.

The Obedient Christ: Christ showed us His obedience to the Father by accepting to be sent by Him in communion with the Spirit for the salvation of souls (cf. Psalm 35; Luke 4:18-19; John 3: 17; 5:30, 37). In the name of this obedience to the will of His Father, He accepted death; death on the Cross. Saint Paul, highly describes this obedience of the Son of God when he writes: “though he was in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied himself, taking the form of a servant, being born in the likeness of men. And being found in human form he humbled himself and became obedient unto death, even death on a cross.” (Philippians 2: 6-8).

Time and again, Jesus tells us Himself: “My food is to do the will of him who sent me, and to accomplish his work.” (John 4:34; 5: 30; 6:38). At Gethsemane, while He was tempted to flee from His Father’s will, He committed Himself to the Father saying “Father, if thou art willing, remove this cup from me; nevertheless not my will, but thine, be done.” (Luke 22:42; Matthew 26: 39; Mark. 14:36). As human, Jesus is the very incarnation of perfect obedience. He is the Universal Obedient Man in the world; and it is to imitate His obedience that we follow Him, so as to be perfect as He, His Father and the Holy Spirit are perfect. In all, religious *sequela Christi* is from and for Christ the poor, chaste and obedient till the end. It

⁷ Fulton J. Sheen, *The Cross and the Beatitudes. Lessons on Love and Forgiveness* (Missouri: Liguori Publications), 2000, 50.

⁸ Fulton J. Sheen, *The Cross and the Beatitudes*, 51.

is in this following of Christ that they are seen as prophets of the eschatological family, and their state of life as premise of the life to come.

CONSECRATED PERSONS: PROPHETS OF THE ESCHATOLOGICAL FAMILY

Speaking of the excellence of religious life, Dominic Hoffman and Basil Cole wrote: "The Kingdom of God is an inestimable treasure – in our Lord's words it is "the pearl of great price". It is a treasure so great that a man must be willing to give all he has in order to obtain it. For, time is short and eternity is one way of saying forever."⁹

Based on this affirmation, familial paternity or maternity of a priest or a religious is of another order. It is not a paternity or a maternity like that of the earthly spouses, but a paternity or maternity proper to the Kingdom of God and belonging to the Kingdom of God. It is a spiritual and eschatological paternity and maternity. Eschatological, in the sense of what we will soon be, and live in God in the eternal life which has already started. In fact, in the new and eschatological humanity of the Kingdom, we will live in Christ like Angels, without any necessity of a biological and carnal fecundity and union (cf. Matthew 2:30). Because of Jesus, we now have a new filiation in God, in whom we are reborn, no longer according to the flesh, blood or carnal will of men and women, but of God Himself (cf. John 1:13); the very Father and Mother of the New Family of Christ. As Kasper notes,

Priestly celibacy is part of the context of the following of Christ who, unlike the Rabbis of his time, lived celibate. It is part of the call's context to leave one's family for Christ's sake and Gospel's (Mark 10:28ff.); and to be entirely present at the service of "many" (Mark 10:45), because of the Kingdom of heavens (Mark 19:12), totally, without division, and with carefree about a family as well (1 Cor. 7:33ff.). Lastly, the priest must bring up to date Christ Jesus in His sponsal love for the Church His Spouse, and express the eschatological newness of the Gospel. Celibacy assumed in a voluntary way bears, thus, a witnessing character really suits to the priesthood.¹⁰

Thus, in the celibate and chaste life, there is a sort of anticipation which shows that with the advent and event of the resurrection that has already begun, marriage has lost its firm propos (purpose) and its absolute interpretation, in terms of assuring perennial or continuity of the human being's life (cf. Genesis 1:28).¹¹ With the

⁹ Dominic Hoffman and Basil Cole, *Consecrated Life: Contribution of Vatican II* (Mumbai: St Pauls, 2005), 26.

¹⁰ Walter Kasper, *L'Église Catholique. Son Être, sa Réalisation, sa Mission*. Traduit de l'allemand par Joseph Hoffmann (Paris: Cerf, 2014), 337.

¹¹ Cf. Pier Giordano Cabra, *A Short Course on the Consecrated Life. Reflections on Theology and Spirituality*, (Libertyville: Institute on Religious Life, 2010), 23.

resurrection, we have another alternative of life besides marriage and marital life. This alternative is celibacy and chastity for the Kingdom of God. With the resurrection, one must quit his or her earthly biological family, not so as to get married and found a new family (cf. Genesis 2:24), but to enter into the Kingdom of God, in which union and communion with God is greater and profound than marital union between a man and a woman.

In this new dispensation, one is father, mother, brother and sister of / for Jesus when one does the will of God, that is, to hear and to put into practice the Word of God (cf. Matthew 12:46-50 ; Mark 3:32-35 ; Luke 8:9-10; 11:28), in order to be perfect as God the father is perfect (cf. Matthew 5:48). Luke the Evangelist explains it very well in his version of Jesus' response to the question of the Sadducees about marriage after death.

The sons of this age marry and are given in marriage; but those who are accounted worthy to attain to that age and to the resurrection from the dead neither marry nor are given in marriage, for they cannot die anymore, because they are equal to angels and are sons of God, being sons of the resurrection. (Luke 20:34-36)

More so, the marital state of a man and a woman is just a picture of the spiritual union and mystical marriage with God.

In effect, "The same Divine Revelation which tells us of God's love for us also tells us about that we cannot live merely for the human and the material."¹² One must also live divinely and spiritually. For this reason, religious life indicates to us what is ultimate and superior. It is proleptic. It tends towards the eschatological future of the human family through vows and the service of charity. Put in the words of Hoffman and Cole,

Religious life is built on this preeminence of the future life, a life with God most of all. It is also built on the many important needs on this earth for ourselves and for others. But whatever religious do in the earthly city they do ultimately for the heavenly city. It is in the context of this twofold mission, and in the subordination of the one to the other, that religious life has its meaning and its glory.¹³

In other words, it is for the greater good of humanity which religious life serves, that consecrated men and women sacrifice their own marital life and biological fecundity. Sometimes, they are looked at and mocked as single persons, and yet they are married to God for a greater and eternal cause which benefits and will benefit the entire humanity.

¹² Dominic Hoffman and Basil Cole, *Consecrated Life*, 26.

¹³ Dominic Hoffman and Basil Cole, *Consecrated Life*, 26.

MARRIED TO GOD FOR A MOTHERHOOD AND FATHERHOOD OF LOVE AND CHARITY

The vows, for consecrated persons, are like the matrimonial ring, the sign of their marriage with God. By their consecration through the vow of chastity, religious (both males and females) make themselves “alone for God alone” (“*solī Deo*”).¹⁴ This aloneness for God alone constitutes, in fact, a kind of mystical marriage with God for the sake of the Kingdom and salvation of humankind. Through the vow of chastity, they become poor of their physical paternity and maternity, in order to enrich, support and comfort human family as a whole. Hence, they obey the Father and Mother of all things, that is, the Triune God, willing to identify themselves with Him for the sake of the Kingdom.

Thus, if “the supreme vocation ...is to be always with the Lord,”¹⁵ as John Paul II says, the supreme marriage is to be with God too. In this sense, prophet Isaiah writes: “your Maker is your husband, the LORD of hosts is his name; and the Holy One of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of the whole earth he is called.” (Isaiah 54:5). In this same vein, the Book of Revelation speaks of “the marriage of the Lamb” with all of us as His bride (cf. Revelation 19:7, 9; Matthew 22:1-14; Luke 14:15-24).

In other words, with the religious consecration and celibacy, one must live as we said another marriage; enter into another family much precious and greater than the one of the flesh: the great family of the Kingdom of God. Thus, he or she who lives the vow of chastity and celibacy as consecration to Christ is not really single. He or she lives in another union, another nuptial life by which, as noted by Fulton J. Sheen, he or she “may be free to serve and love not just another man or woman and a few children, but all men and women in the bonds of charity in Jesus Our Lord.”¹⁶ Hence, a priest, a religious (male and female) also beget; they are fecund. They beget children in labour, like Saint Paul (1 Corinthians 4:15; Galatians 4: 19); children in the Spirit, children of the Holy Spirit and for the great family of Heaven.¹⁷

Because of this universal love and service of all in all, one may speak here, therefore, of a sort of “polygamy of love.” Polygamy not of the African type, not carnal and earthly, but mystical, that is, in the love Christ and the service of His Kingdom. For in Christ, though we are many, we form only one Body, the Church (1 Cor. 12:12), which is the Christ’s spouse. As such they become spouses, mothers and fathers of a great multitude including those who are biologically spouses, mothers and fathers. In that great and larger family of the Kingdom of God and because of it,

The priest is called “Father” – because he has begotten children not in the flesh, but in the Spirit. That is why the superior of a religious community of women is called “Mother” –She has her little flock in Christ. That too is why certain

¹⁴ Pier Giordano Cabra, *A Short Course on the Consecrated Life*, 17.

¹⁵ John Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life *Vita Consecrata* (25 March 1996), 7.

¹⁶ Fulton J. Sheen, *The Cross and the Beatitudes*, 42.

¹⁷ Cf. Jean Paul II, Jean Paul II, *Aux Evêques, aux Prêtres. Lettres à l’Occasion du Jeudi Saint 1979*, (Paris: le Centurion, 1979), 8.

teaching orders of men are called “Brothers,” and why women bound in religious life by the vow of chastity are called “Sisters”.¹⁸

Every celibate person, every religious person who vows chastity and lives it effectively is in love with Someone: The Eternal God who is (cf. 1John 4:8, 16) and to whom she or he is married forever. To express it, Fulton Sheen writes: “Everyone with a vow of chastity is in love, not in love with that which dies, but with that which is eternal – the love of God.”¹⁹ Christ becomes, therefore, the Real and True Spouse; the Companion and Friend of life of everyone religious. In Him and through Him, new links are established, no more according to carnal and human birth, but according to the new Christian birth in Christ (cf. John 1:12-13).

Noteworthy, the vow of chastity and consecrated celibacy are not made an escape from sacrifices pertaining to marital life, nor a denial of marital life itself.²⁰ No! It is rather a detachment from egoistic bonds of the flesh linked to our human nature, to our ego, for further bonds which are spiritual and superior. These bonds demand of us the same (if not more) sacrifices than of the marital state. But in this detachment for the Kingdom, there is always one and many women to love; one and many men to love; one and many children to feed and to take care of.

Consecrated life has, indeed, a parental value in the Church and in the society. When we see the maternal and paternal; fraternal and social role that religious and priests play in the lives of widows, widowers, orphans and abandoned children, we cannot but understand and appreciate this new maternity and paterernity ; fraternity and sociality in Christ of the religious. Chaste life is ideal motherhood or fatherhood when it is lived for Christ and for the sake of the Kingdom. Religious life becomes, therefore, one of the means to “saving the African family”²¹ and to make her to effectively live as God’s family in the modern world.²²

In fact, one can be mother without ever being in a maternity hospital. One may also have been severally to a maternity hospital, with many children begotten, but without ever truly being a mother. True motherhood is the motherhood of the heart. One is really father or mother when she or he loves and is responsible.

This is also valuable to the African conception of ancestrality, a title by which one enters the African pantheon and is crowned. In this vein, to beget many lives is not sufficient to become an ancestor. An ancestor should be one who saves lives and defends them against death and all kinds of life’s violations. Moreover, to save life, to take care of and to serve life are other modes of begetting and of being mother and father. In this sense, everyone can be father, mother and child, insofar as he or she is committed to the service of life. Finally, the greatness of a human being is when she or he is a saint – no matter how old he or she is.

¹⁸ Fulton J. Sheen, *The Cross and the Beatitudes*, 42.

¹⁹ Fulton J. Sheen, *The Cross and the Beatitudes*, 44.

²⁰ Cf. Fulton J. Sheen, *The Cross and the Beatitudes*, 41.

²¹ John-Paul II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Church in Africa *Ecclesia in Africa* (14 September 1995), 84.

²² Cf. John-Paul II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, 63, 94.

Sanctity is measured by the life of charity and service to humankind for the glory of God and salvation of souls.

Priests and religious are single in the eyes of human beings, but they are really spouses, fathers and mothers in the eyes of God, in His Kingdom and for His Kingdom. At the same time, those who are married in the eyes of men and women of this world can be seen as single in the eyes of God, for each human and marital fecundity which does not lead to divine and spiritual fecundity; fecundity in God, for God and His Kingdom, becomes sterile. For this reason, even the human natural family is called to respond to and to live, the spirituality of the Kingdom of God. Human natural family becomes, therefore, fecund for the Kingdom for Christ, if it engages Christ and is committed to Him. For one must not only be father or mother according to the flesh; brother and sister according to the flesh, but also according to the Spirit and the Kingdom. As Kasper notes,

It is not only physical life that is transmitted in marriage and in the family. In them also, the second birth, the social birth, the intellectual, spiritual and cultural formation of the young person is effected, and this is of fundamental importance for the edification of the human family and for the Church as well.²³

In this sense, marital and family life is greatly deficient when it is cut off from God and from the Kingdom, just as consecrated or religious life is foundationally deficient if it is cut off from the idea of marriage and human family. In brief, God is the source of the both state of life, such that without Him, they run dry.

RELIGIOUS LIFE GIVES AND SAVES LIFE FOR THE SOCIETY AND THE CHURCH

Modern and postmodern philosophies want to kill or annihilate the idea of the father and mother; of the natural motherhood and fatherhood as designed by God the Creator from whom every family, fatherhood and motherhood on earth and in heaven are named (cf. Ephesians 3:14-15). According to the moral theologian, Marcus Ndongmo, one of their impacts in the present society is "marriage's counterfeiting."²⁴ Generally, they want to extinguish the unique human nature given in two complementary dimensions (masculine and feminine) by God at creation. They want to negate human familial and natural composition.

However, as said above, this is not the case with religious and consecrated life and celibacy. Consecrated life and celibacy is not the negation of the human natural

²³ Walter Kasper, *L'Église Catholique*, 307.

²⁴ Marcus Ndongmo, *Sauver la Famille Africaine. Réflexion sur le Mariage comme Fondement de la Famille*. (Yaoundé: Presses de l'UCAC, 2008), 97.

family, nor is it the negation of heterosexual marriage between a man and a woman as it is suppose to be.

Religious life and consecrated celibacy are not against human biological motherhood and fatherhood too. Rather, they re-affirm and redefine them within the divine project of salvation, so that all might be in Him, from Him, through Him and for Him (Romans 11:36; 1 Corinthians 15:28). In fact, while exalting virginity and chastity which are sources of a new motherhood and fatherhood in Jesus, the desert Monks energetically affirmed the value of marriage and biological parenthood.²⁵

As some may think, consecrated life or religious persons do not kill social life because of their state of singleness, which is biologically infecund. On the contrary, consecrated life gives life and saves life. For Dominic Hoffman and Basil Cole,

Religious life, like the supernatural life of grace itself, is not meant to crush what is good in human nature but to bring it to perfection though not by any blind demand for self-centred human perfection. This supernatural goal and perfection involves certain renunciations in the life of every Christian, even more therefore in the life of a religious.²⁶

In other words, religious life and consecrated celibacy perfect human society, in one way or another. They give vitality to human social life. Through their consecration and state of life, they sustain, protect and defend it. In this way, they participate very well in the integral human promotion of the society; they participate in their own way in the fight against the economic and social underdevelopment of their countries and of the world. Their consecration and celibacy enrich and support the existing biological fecundity, motherhood and fatherhood. In this way, in their consecration, "it must be insisted that the elements of human existence by no means be neglected."²⁷

Only the love for Christ, configuration to Him, and the service of the Kingdom can give sense to consecrated life and priestly celibacy (cf. Matthew 19:12). It is for the sake of the Kingdom that Christ Himself recommends it (cf. Matthew 19:12) as being "a sign of pastoral charity and an incentive to it as well as being in a special way a source of spiritual fruitfulness in the world."²⁸ "A sign of pastoral charity" because one becomes free for all, without any embarrassment; and this constitutes a source of great spiritual fruits for the Church and for the world. Because of this spiritual fecundity and charity that gives, saves lives and promotes human dignity, religious persons have to faithfully keep on their commitment to the vows, despite trials and their weaknesses.

²⁵ Cf. Pier Giordano Cabra, *A Short Course on the Consecrated Life*, 8.

²⁶ Dominic Hoffman and Basil Cole, *Consecrated Life*, 26-27.

²⁷ Dominic Hoffman and Basil Cole, *Consecrated Life*, 26.

²⁸ Concile Vatican II, Décret sur le ministère et la vie des prêtres *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 16.

WEAK BUT COMMITTED WITNESSES

Temptations, trials and weaknesses of religious and celibate life are certainly many. But let us remain faithful to our vows to God. For if evil is easier to commit and live, and if we are more zealous to it, great and eternal is the punishment due to it if we die without repentance. But, if doing and living good seems difficult to us, as we are lukewarm about it, let us keep in mind that a great promise and reward is tied to it, if especially we rely on God's grace.

"We are all conscious of having this treasure in earthen vessels [2 Corinthians 4:7]; yet we know that it is a treasure."²⁹ It is a treasure to cherish, to preciously keep and to offer for the sake of humanity. Hence, despite inherent temptations and difficulties, we must always safeguard it as a gift for the Kingdom; we must remain committed witnesses. For, if Christ is the Spouse of the Church, our Mother, we in turn, like Christ and for Him, must become spouses for the Church, for humanity through celibacy and the priestly ministry which configures and identifies us to Christ, the very Person from whom we are what we are. In the priestly celibacy and consecrated life, there is a mystical union similar to the one of Christ with the Church His Spouse (cf. Ephesians 5:23-32).

Concerning priestly celibacy, vows or evangelical counsels in general, a double standard of life is a counter witness to the Kingdom of God of which we are already signs and premises to here on earth. We are called to become more and more conscious and responsible. What really strengthens and gives sense to the vows and promises we make is when we live them with faithfulness, commitment and joy. A religious or priest who violates his or her vows and promises becomes sooner or later a source of troubles for the Church and his / her own community. For this reason, Kasper redefines the sense of chastity and celibacy in our life and helps to understand them in relation to Christ and the Kingdom, in a world which is losing sense and values in all. He writes:

One can understand the form of celibate life freely accepted only if one does not just see its negative aspect, namely, the voluntary renunciation of something, which constitutes a part of the greater realities in human life, that is, renunciation of family and marriage. We must consider this renunciation from its positive aspect, namely, the friendship with Jesus and walking after Him; the service of the Kingdom of God and of men. Only he for whom God represents everything can renounce everything, insofar as that is humanly possible.³⁰

Saint Paul himself found celibacy as something good; an eschatological advantage (1 Corinthians 7: 26) for service and hope for the coming of the Lamb. That is why he chose it without however contempting the other states of life (1

²⁹ Jean Paul II, *Aux Evêques, aux Prêtres*, 8.

³⁰ Walter Kasper, *L'Église Catholique*, 337.

Corinthians 7:27-28, 36-38), especially marriage, which he proclaimed as being a “great mystery” in reference to Christ and His Church (Ephesians 5:32). “It is only from this theological, Christological and finally eschatological perspective that it is possible to comprehend the affinity between priestly ministry and voluntary celibacy. Considered from a pure immanent perspective of the world, one must count it as senseless.”³¹

CONCLUSION

To bear children as fruits of love in matrimonial life and for the perennial of human existence is good. On this matrimonial and heterosexual life that is open to procreation, Africa’s stand is still relevant, especially in the present current of same-sex marriage which opposes it. But the love of God and of the Kingdom of God to the point of detachment from one’s own marriage, family and children is greater. It is a great charity to human universal fraternity and family inaugurated by Jesus Christ in the mystery of Incarnation-Redemption, which engenders and defines the new humanity of man and woman. To live chastity and celibacy for the Kingdom helps us to respond to the universal call to holiness made to all – to religious and priests in particular.³² Celibate’s chastity is poverty; poverty for the Kingdom in that there is a certain familial attachment which can prevent us from going to Christ and to freely serve Him. Religious chastity and celibacy is also obedience to and imitation of Christ who was single and chaste for the Kingdom.

³¹ Walter Kasper, *L’Église Catholique*, 337.

³² Cf. Concile Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*, chapitre V; *Presbyterorum ordinis*, 12.