

THE PLACE AND ROLE OF THE FAMILY IN THE FORMATION AND MISSION OF PRIESTS AND CONSECRATED PERSONS

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ABSTRACT

The family, which is the first cell of Society and the first school of humanization or civilization, occupies the most important and indispensable place in the formation and mission of priests and consecrated persons. This its place informs its role which is the proper up-bringing of children, that is, the holistic physical, spiritual, psychological, moral, social, and cultural formation of these children from whom will emerge priests and consecrated persons.

An environment imbued with love of God and human beings which constitutes a community of persons is necessary for such holistic formation.

Families have to teach their children both spiritual and moral virtues that will help them become real human beings capable of living responsibly in this post-modern age.

It is the responsibility of families to give their children an education commensurate with their religious belief in such a way that when the children grow up, they will not depart from it.

They will take special care to nurture vocations to priesthood and religious life whenever they see their sign in their children. Parents have to live exemplary lives in accordance with the Gospel values so as to inspire the desire for spiritual things in their children.

Families have the duty of supporting priests and consecrated persons with prayers, material and moral encouragement both while they are in formation, and even more while on mission. By so doing, they will be fulfilling their role as agents of evangelization.

1. INTRODUCTION

The family, among all the other human Institutions like the Society, the Church, Schools, and so on, occupies the first and most important position in the life and development of persons. This is because a person begins his life from the family where this life and its potentialities have their nurture; and that same person “goes forth from the family in order to realise in a new family unit his particular vocation in life”², and, finally, from this family, whether as biological or religious, the person goes back to his/her Creator to render an account of his/her stewardship. This “new family unit” could either be another natural family by means of marriage; a Diocese or Religious Congregation for Priests and Consecrated persons; or even a single life-style but as a member of

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² Pope John Paul 11, Letter to Families. 1994 Year of the Family, no. 2.

other Associations. Here lies the need for us to examine the Place and Role of the Family in the Formation and Mission of Priests and Consecrated Persons.

Because of this inalienable role that the family plays in the life, growth and death of its members, it becomes imperative for us to clarify, even if in a very skeletal form, the concept "Family", as well as the concepts "Formation", "Mission", and "Priests and Consecrated persons". This will enable us to situate our presentation in its proper perspective. Then the Role of the Family in the Formation and Mission of Priests and Consecrated persons will be presented in three parts, namely: the Early Development and Growth Stage; the Formal Formative Stage; and, finally, the Ordination/Consecration and Mission Stage. These are simply the developmental stages of the life, formation and mission of the people concerned. The conclusion will then wrap up all our discussions.

CLARIFICATION OF TERMS

(a) Family

This stands for *"a group of parents and their children; one's spouse and children; a group descended from a common ancestor; household; one's own flesh and blood ..."*³. The Free Encyclopedia defines family, in the human context as *"a group of people affiliated by consanguinity, affinity, or co-residence. A nuclear family, also referred to as a 'conjugal' family - husband, wife, and unmarried children who are not of age"*⁴. The Catechism of the Catholic Church sees family as *"a man and a woman united in marriage, together with their children"* (CCC 2202). What interests us more here is the nuclear family which is the nucleus or the first cell of the Society. From the African perspective, however, family embraces both nuclear and extended since the upbringing and formation of children, though primarily the duty of the nuclear family, is equally the responsibility of the extended family, and even the clan, bearing in mind the principle of subsidiarity. Moreover, the extended family and others can as well be relied upon for the sustenance of the mission of Priests and Consecrated Persons.

(b) Formation

This is the process of helping people develop, that is, moulding or building up the character and potential of a person. The person's physical, spiritual, psychological, moral and cultural dimensions are given particular attention in this process. This implies the formation to mature and responsible human beings capable of total self-giving in every sphere of life, and particularly in imitation of the Lord Jesus, for Priests and Consecrated Persons, who they are called to follow. *"For formation to be complete"*, therefore, *"it must include every aspect of Christian life. It must, therefore,*

³ Lorna Gilmore, ed., Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus, Essential Edition. Glasgow: Harper Collins Publishers, Second Edition, 2006, p. 300.

⁴ Wikipedia, The Free Encyclopedia, modified 11 March, 2012.

provide a human, cultural, spiritual and pastoral preparation which pays special attention to the harmonious integration of all its various aspects"⁵.

(c) Mission

This simply means *"a specific task or duty; a task or duty that a person believes he or she must achieve"*⁶. The specific task here is that of evangelisation whether in active or contemplative religious life. Just as the Apostles of old, Priests and Consecrated Persons are called and are being sent to evangelise and carry out charitable and social works in the name of Christ, Who is the Evangeliser *par excellent*?

(d) Who are Priests and Consecrated persons?

"Every high priest is taken from among human beings and is appointed to act on their behalf in relationships with God, to offer gifts and sacrifices for sins;..." (Heb. 5:1). Here we see that a priest is a human being just as every other human being, but with the special mission of being a mediator between God and men. This is the mission that specifically belongs to Christ, into which He gratuitously incorporated ordinary human beings for the continuation of His mission on earth. By virtue of this incorporation, through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, the priest becomes *"another Christ - an Alter Christus"*, thereby, becoming a mediator between God and people. *"Through the Sacrament of Holy Orders, the priest shares in the priesthood of Jesus Christ in a unique, public way. The profound invitation to the priest, therefore, is that he would represent Jesus Christ in his personal life and in his public ministry"*⁷.

The Priest is not only an *"Alter Christus"*, but he also acts in the person of Christ - *"in persona Christi"*. The Vatican 11 Fathers stated clearly that *"Priests by the anointing of the Holy Spirit are signed with a special character and so are configured to Christ the Priest in such a way that they are able to act in the person of Christ the Head"*⁸. Hence, as Christ handed over His mission to the Apostles, these in their turn incorporated their successors, the Bishops, in their ministry of consecration and evangelisation. The Bishops, therefore, by the authority entrusted to them, ordain priests as their co-workers for the continuation and expansion of that apostolic mission that Christ entrusted to the Church⁹.

⁵ John Paul 11, Post-Synodal Exhortation, VITA CONSECRATA. Vatican City: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1996, no. 65.

⁶ Lorna Gilmore, ed., Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus, Essential Edition, op. cit., p. 523.

⁷ Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria, I Chose You. The Nigerian Priest in the Third Millennium. Lagos: Catholic Secretariat of Nigeria Publication, September 2004, p. 9.

⁸ Vatican 11 Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Presbyterorum Ordinis, 7 December 1965, no. 2.

⁹ Cf. Ibid..

Consecrated Persons

These include men and women who are consecrated to God for the continuation of Christ's mission on earth. To consecrate means to *"make sacred, dedicate to a specific purpose; devote, set apart"*¹⁰. This consecration takes place in their various Religious Communities or Congregations, through the profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience, for the purpose of following Christ more closely in their lives and with ardent charity. These consecrated men and women *"who are called by God to the practice of the evangelical counsels, and who make faithful profession of them, bind themselves to the Lord in a special way. They follow Christ who, virginal and poor (cf. Mt. 8:20; Lk. 9:58), redeemed and sanctified men by obedience unto death on the cross (cf. Phil. 2:8). Under the impulse of love, which the Holy Spirit pours into their hearts (cf. Rom. 5:5), they live more and more for Christ and for His Body, the Church (cf. Col. 1:24). The more fervently, therefore, they join themselves to Christ by this gift of their whole life, the fuller does the Church's life become and the more vigorous and faithful its apostolate"*¹¹.

It is good to mention here that there are priests who are also consecrated persons because they belong to Religious Congregations. They are referred to as Religious priests. Consecrated men and women, because they belong to Religious Institutes or Congregations, are also known as Religious men and women, and they live what we call Religious Life - the life described as *"Sequella Christi"* - the following of Christ.

Priests and Consecrated persons, therefore, are those who by virtue of their vocation, are closely knitted to the person of Christ and His mission, and as such are expected to live up to the demands of their vocation as lights of the world and the salt of the earth, (cf. Mt. 5:13-16).

And because Priests - *Alter Christi* , and Consecrated persons should be icons of Christ, obedient, chaste, poor, loving, compassionate, et cetera, they deserve a formation commensurate to their vocation and mission, and this formation has to start from the cradle which is the family. This is in consonance with what St. Pope John Paul 11 once wrote that *"the formation of future priests (and consecrated persons)... is considered by the Church one of the most demanding and important tasks for the future of the evangelisation of humanity"*¹². Such being the case, therefore, that task should be made lighter by the contribution of the family with the proper upbringing of their children.

2. THE FAMILY AND HER ROLES

The role of the family in the formation and mission of Priests and Consecrated persons can never be over-emphasised. That role is more urgent as well as

¹⁰ Lerner Gilmour, ed., Collins English Dictionary and Thesaurus, Essential Edition, op. cit., p. 165.

¹¹ Vatican 11, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 28 October 1965, no. 1 (emphasis mine).

¹² John Paul 11, *Pastore Dabo Vobis*, no. 2, (Bracket mine).

demanding in our present day society because there are a lot of negative forces militating against the proper upbringing of children today. These include: the demon of divorce which attacks and corrodes the stability of family life, and it is on the increase in this post-modern age; the so-called "Reproductive Health Programme" that propagates false birth-control methods like contraception and abortion; the mentality of consumerism by which materialism is idolised; as well as economic challenges which lead to the inordinate quest for wealth. Here both husband and wife are in pursuit of money, thereby, leaving the care of their children to house-helpers, and this, no doubt, contributes to the corrosion of the foundation of the family. This quest for wealth at times leads to long separation between husband and wife, the husband living in another country for a long period of time, for whatever reason. Let it be clearly stated here that the people around whom the children grow have a great influence on the development of their character and personality. If they are entrusted mostly to the house-help, the latter automatically plays parent to the former (the children). Hence, the need for parents, particularly mothers, to devote quality time to their children, especially from infancy to adolescents. Parents who sacrifice the humanisation of their children on the altar of money should heed the wisdom of an ancient, pagan philosopher Aristotle, who said that *"household management attends more to men than to the acquisition of inanimate things, and to human excellence more than to the excellence of property which we call wealth"*¹³.

Besides, there is the challenge of anti-Christian culture occasioned by the nihilistic mentality of this age. This is the age where many have lost the sense of the sacred, for, according to the father of extreme nihilism, Friedrich Nietzsche, "God is dead." And the consequence? – everything is permissible. Man has to become god unto himself. This anti-Christian/Cultural/Moral ideology brought in its wake all other godless ideologies, mentalities and associations which are menacing our contemporary society, and no less the family which is the first cell of the society. Here is the origin of the secret cult phenomenon to which both children, adults, highly and lowly placed in the society, are victims. The effects of Pentecostalism are no less influential. And children who lack basic human and Christian formation easily fall prey to these inhuman ideologies.

In the face of all these contemporary challenges, there is great need for the upbuilding and strengthening of Christian families so that they take up their proper place and role in the formation of the present and future generations among whom will emerge Priests and Consecrated Persons. It is heart-warming to know that the Federal Radio Corporation of Nigeria (FRCN) is in the forefront of the campaign for the moral formation of children. It presented an elaborate programme with the discussion on the "Importance of the Family in the Society", during the International Day for the Family which was celebrated on the 15th day of May, 2015. Again, their

¹³ Aristotle, "Politics" in *The Complete Works of Aristotle, The Revised Oxford Translation*, Edited by Jonathan Barnes, Vol. Two, Bollingen Series LXXI.2. New Jersey: Princeton University Press, Fourth Printing, 1991, 1259b17.

commentary after the national news of July 5, 2015, was titled "Improving the Moral Development of Children through Parental Censorship". In that commentary, parents were advised to monitor the programmes their children watch in the social media, know their peer groups, establish a daily routine for them, and make sure they are trained to take part in the household chores, that is, giving them proper home-training, et cetera¹⁴. Moreover, the South-East Zonal Stations of the same FRCN has a jingle which runs thus: "*Izunate umu ntakiri dika osi kwesi, g'eme ka enwee echi g'akamma - Bringing up little children as expected, will yield a better tomorrow*". All these point to the all-important fact that families need to buckle up in their role of populating the society with humanised persons.

A. Early Development and Growth: We said earlier that the place of the family in the formation and mission of Priests and Consecrated Persons is indispensable and irreplaceable. This place on its part determines its roles which are equally indispensable and, in some cases, irreplaceable. This role of the family starts right from pregnancy till death. Hence the first and primary role of the family is that of bringing into existence, by virtue of their divinely-assigned role as husbands and wives, the candidates to priestly and religious vocations. Unless children are born, we cannot talk of vocations of any sort. From here, other subsequent roles take off.

i) The need for making the family a peaceful, loving, and homely environment becomes imperative before and during *pregnancy*. Psychologists are of the view that the environment impacts on the baby in the womb. And if families are to breed humanised persons, they have to be such as could be designated ideal, where God and each individual member are given their proper places - a family that is really a community of persons. The family, therefore, has the fundamental role of being the school of love because it is love that specifies the essence and role of the family, bringing out its identity. To the extent to which the family remains faithful to its being the school of love, to that extent will it foster the community of persons that it is. "*... Without love the family is not a community of persons and, in the same way, without love the family cannot live, grow and perfect itself as a community of persons. The children reared in a loving environment (family) will no doubt grow into loving individuals capable of the life and sacrifice that vocation to the priestly and religious life demands*"¹⁵.

ii) In this case, the family becomes the most influential school of humanisation or civilisation of its sprouting members. According to Samuel Smiles, "*... homes, which are the nurseries of children who grow up into men and women, will be good or bad according to the power that governs there. Where the spirit of love and duty pervades the home, there we expect an*

¹⁴ Cf. FRCN Network News, Commentary, 10.00p.m., 5th July, 2015.

¹⁵ John Paul 11, *Redemptor Hominis*, no. 10.

*issue of healthy, useful and happy beings, capable of following the footsteps of their parents, of walking uprightly*¹⁶.

As the primary place of humanisation, the family has the indispensable role of introducing their children to the life of faith and morals. It is in the family that children are introduced to the life of prayer because *“by reason of their dignity and mission, Christian parents have the specific responsibility of educating their children in prayer, introducing them to a gradual discovery of the mystery of God and to a personal dialogue with Him”*¹⁷. They do this by their practice and faithfulness to *Family Prayer*. As the domestic Church, family prayer should have a privileged place in the life of the family. The parents’ example and faithfulness to it will surely inspire their children to the desire for heavenly things, for *“inspired by the example and family prayer of their parents, children, and in fact everyone living under the family roof, will more easily set out upon the path of a truly human training, of salvation, and of holiness”*¹⁸.

From family prayer, they gradually introduce them to participation in the Eucharistic celebration, preparing them, in co-operation with the Christian community for the reception of the Sacraments, and to other devotional prayers, especially the recitation of the Holy Rosary.

The family should be the principal school of moral and social education of children. The social virtues which are necessary for every society, and the rudiments of morals with which they can be truly humanised and so be able to discern their vocation are first assimilated from the family. *“In the family, moral virtues are taught, starting from the very first years of life, the spiritual heritage of the religious community and the cultural legacy of the nation are transmitted. In the family one learns social responsibility and solidarity”*¹⁹. Hence the foundation for all spiritual, religious, ethical, social, and cultural values necessary for the development and wellbeing of the children are laid in the family.

Families (parents) have the basic right and duty to give their children proper sex-education, as well as follow it up in the schools where they enrol them. This is in view of developing a true understanding of the meaning of the body and its function in human maturity – education to chastity. And when children indicate their wish for priestly or religious vocation, parents *“will devote special attention and care to*

¹⁶ Samuel Smiles, *Character. Helps to Personality Growth* (Abridged). Bandra, Mumbai: Better Yourself Books, 1996, pp. 29-30.

¹⁷ Pope John Paul II, *Familiaris Consortio, The Family in the Modern World*, 1982, no. 60.

¹⁸ Vatican II, *Pastoral Constitution On the Church In the Modern World, Gaudium et Spes*, 7 December, 1965, no. 48.

¹⁹ Pontifical Council for Justice and Peace, *Compendium of the Social Doctrine of the Church*. Nairobi, Kenya: Paulines Publications Africa, 2005, p. 121; CCC 2224.

education in virginity or celibacy as the supreme form of that self-giving that constitutes the very meaning of human sexuality"²⁰.

The exemplary life of parents in fostering and encouraging vocations to priestly and religious life cannot be overestimated. Christian parents who, by their words and deeds, live according to Gospel values inspire their children to embrace those values. *"We must remember that if parents do not live the values of the Gospel, the young man or woman will find it very difficult to discern the calling, to understand the need for the sacrifices which must be faced, and to appreciate the beauty of the goal to be achieved. For it is in the family that young people have their first experience of Gospel values and of the love which gives itself to God and to others."*²¹ St. Pope John Paul 11 had earlier stressed the indispensability of the role the exemplary life of parents plays in the moral formation of their children. For him, children raised in a family that lives in accordance with the moral norms imperceptibly imbibe that type of life and allows it to direct them²². In the thoughts of Nwaobilo, *"if godly parents produce godly children, they will in turn produce godly children"*²³, and such children will, by the grace of God, live godly lives, and from among them will emerge godly vocations to the priesthood and religious life. An Igbo adage has it that *"ihe agwo muru, agharo ito ogologo – whatever is begotten by a snake is always longish"*, implying that like begets like.

It, therefore, follows that the foundational human and spiritual formation of children is an inalienable right and duty of the family. According to the Vatican Council 11 Fathers, *"The role of parents in education is of such importance that it is almost impossible to provide an adequate substitute. It is, therefore, the duty of parents to create a family atmosphere inspired by love and devotion to God and their fellow-men which will promote an integrated, personal and social education of their children"*²⁴. This duty of both human and spiritual education of children is the gravest obligation incumbent on families (parents), an obligation which is naturally recognised by reason.

The family as the first cell of the society and the cradle of humanisation or civilisation of its members, the children, has the very important role of providing the basic necessities of life – food, clothing and shelter, for their children. This role is usually taken for granted but we deem it proper to remind ourselves that it is the family which lives up to this expectation that produces healthy and well-formed individuals, capable of living up to their respective vocations and responsibilities in the society. Health of body and mind, therefore, is indispensable in the formation and mission of *Priests and Consecrated persons*.

²⁰ Pope John Paul 11, *Familiaris Consortio*, op. cit., no.37.

²¹ John Paul 11, *Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation VITA CONSECRATA*, op. cit., no. 107.

²² Cf. John Paul 11, *Letter to Families*, op. cit., no. 5.

²³ Ann O. Nwaobilo, *Effective Parenting*. Nigeria, Port Harcourt: Gitelle Press Ltd., Reprinted 1012, p. 26.

²⁴ Vatican 11, *Declaration on Christian Education, Gravissimum Educationis*, 28 October, 1965, no. 3.

B. Formal Formation

This is the period of formal education. It is the responsibility incumbent on the family to see that their children get the best possible education. First of all, the parents should choose, for their children, schools where integral education of the pupils is the norm. In this case, minor seminaries, juniorates, mission and good private schools become best options because of the fallen standards of our public schools. Only in such institutions is there the possibility of guaranteeing the continuation of the basic human and spiritual formation already initiated in the family. Even while in such schools, their supervisory role should not be mitigated. Hence, St. Pope John Paul II opined that *"families, and more specifically parents, are free to choose for their children a particular kind of religious and moral education consonant with their own convictions. Even when they entrust these responsibilities to ecclesiastical institutions or to schools administered by religious personnel, their educational presence ought to continue to be constant and active"*²⁵.

When the children are in school, it is the duty of the family to provide for all their living and school needs, while at the same time making sure that it instils the discipline of simple life-style and accountability in the children. It is part of their formation that children should be able to distinguish between their needs and their wants – a discipline that portrays mature human beings capable of responsible living in the society and in priestly and religious life.

Besides the provision of school needs, families have to play a very important, loving and interested supervisory role in their children's progress. It is their inalienable right to be monitoring their children's school progress as well as engaging them in dialogue through which they will be able to decipher the direction of the children's formation. In other words, they need to intensify their role of accompanying their children in their formative stages.

The same role is expected of families all through the school formative years of their children, from their nursery, primary, secondary and tertiary levels; and in the case of candidates to priestly and religious life, till their ordination or religious profession level.

C). The Mission Proper

It is only after ordination or profession that the stage of mission proper begins. It could be mission *ad intra* or *ad extra*, that is, within the person's country of origin or outside the country. The important thing is that one is considered mature enough to launch into the mission of evangelisation proper. To embrace this mission, there is need for professional preparation, either formally or informally.

At this stage, families, both nuclear and extended, have the role of continuously supporting the mission of the Church through their children. They do this, first and

²⁵ Pope John Paul II, Letter to Families, op. cit., no. 16.

foremost, by consistently praying for their children as well as for all missionaries, bearing in mind that *“unless the Lord builds the house, in vain do the builders labour”* (Ps. 127:1). This we refer to as *“Family Prayer Apostolate”*. Our Holy Father Pope Francis also reminds us that prayer is the source of the fruitfulness of the mission²⁶.

It is not uncommon to hear people telling priests and consecrated persons that their prayers are more effective, being special friends of God, by virtue of ordination or religious consecration, and rightly so. However, their need for people’s prayerful support cannot be over-emphasised. This is because of the hydra-headed challenges that buffet them in their efforts to *“live lives worthy of their vocation”*, as well as carry out their missionary activities effectively.

We must be aware that the devil expends more time, energy and tactics on priests and consecrated persons because it encounters more resistance from them. This is to show us how serious and urgent it is to be praying for our priests and consecrated persons. There is no doubt, however, that priests and consecrated persons have the responsibility of universal intercession for the children of God; after all, *“they have been taken from among human beings to act on their behalf in their relationship with God ...”*.

Besides, families, especially those who are well-to-do, have the responsibility of supporting the mission of priests and consecrated persons financially and materially through their Dioceses and Religious Congregations, or even personally since they are mature and are conversant with the life they have, by the grace of God, embraced. Even, the not-too-well-to-do can as well make sacrifices for the work of evangelisation. Therefore, *“each one should give as much as he has decided on his own initiative, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver”*, (2Cor. 9:7).

Moreover, no one will ever be more generous than God.

It is a well known fact that those who contribute more for the support of the “Third World” or Developing Missions today are said to be old, retired and not-too-wealthy people who imitate the widow in the Gospel according to Mark, Chapter 12:42. We recall also that it was the families and friends of early missionaries who supported them massively, financially and otherwise, for the success of their mission in our land. Archbishop Charles Heerey’s sister, Mrs. Hasset, was said to have contributed financially towards the building of the Holy Trinity Cathedral, now the Basilica of the Most Holy Trinity at Onitsha²⁷. And just as *“the faithful of the Christian Village depended very much on the charity of the missionaries”*²⁸, of Bishop Joseph Shanahan’s days, so do the people of our poor mission lands depend on our missionaries for food, clothing, medicine, school needs for their children, et cetera. It

²⁶ C.f. Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life And Societies of Apostolic Life, Year of Consecrated Life, REJOICE. A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women (A message from the teachings of Pope Francis). Nigeria: St. Paul Publication, 2014, p. 25.

²⁷ Cf. Mary-Noelle Ethel Ezeh, I.H.M., Archbishop Charles Heerey and the History of the Church in Nigeria, 1890-1967. Bandra, Mumbai: St. Paul Press, 2005, p. 15.

²⁸ Mary-Noelle Ethel Ezeh, I.H.M., Archbishop Charles Heerey ..., op. cit., p. 37.

is part of the missionary activity not just to give people fish, but also to teach them how to fish. In this case, the establishment of skills acquisition centres, and the empowerment of those who pass through them, become an indispensable means of evangelisation. And these, no doubt, need finance. Therefore, our missionaries in some African countries and in other poor countries of the world need finance and materials for the effective carrying out of their missionary work. Their families and friends are hereby called upon to encourage and support them.

Priests and Consecrated Persons equally need moral support from their families. This is in the form of healthy pieces of advice and encouraging words when the going gets tough. Though their Dioceses and Congregations are there for them, yet the role of their family members is very effective in boosting their morale.

3. CONCLUSION

The family as the first cell of the Society, the first school of humanisation or civilization, where the formation of character and personality are given indelible foundation, has an inalienable responsibility of giving its young members proper home training – human and spiritual – that will make them truly human beings. The precarious nature of our technological age makes this responsibility more urgent and indispensable, especially as it concerns the formation and mission of priests and consecrated persons.

The life-style of some priests and consecrated persons leaves the impression that either they lack some basic home formation or that their families constitute clogs in the wheels of the life they are called to live. Let it not, therefore, be thought that “*for some priests (and consecrated persons) the whole idea of going into the priesthood (and religious life) is, after all, a self-serving conspiracy between them and their parents for no other purpose than economic and, therefore, temporal gain*”²⁹. Families should rather see to it that their priests and consecrated persons get the necessary help, advice, and encouragement that they need from them, for effective living and mission work. Here, the extended family members should be involved. They should desist from unnecessarily distracting them from their resolve to following in the footsteps of Christ.

We appreciate and encourage the formation of Associations of Parents of Priests and Religious as obtains in some Parishes and Dioceses. That is an appropriate avenue for enlightening families on their roles in the mission of their sons and daughters who have taken to a priestly and religious vocation. Fr. Nwatu is of the opinion that the get-together of such families should be “*a forum for them to consider ways of helping their sons (and daughters) both materially and otherwise, to become better priests (and religious) according to the mind of Christ; to be instructed on their obligations to their children – the obligation of discouraging the incidence of bringing home all kinds of ill-gotten goods and/or money, ...*”³⁰.

²⁹ Felix Nwatu, *The Catholic Priesthood In Nigeria Today: The Wheat and the Cockle?* Enugu, Nigeria: Fourth Dimension Publishing Company Ltd., 2010, p. 47. Bracket mine)

³⁰ Ibid. Bracket Mine.

Families are, therefore, called upon to contribute their quota at seeing that their priests and consecrated persons are faithful to the life they have been called to live. Families should always rejoice and thank God for blessing them with genuine vocations, rather than taking pride in the material benefits – prestige and monetary – that they bring to them. Christ's teaching on Divine Providence becomes more apt here, to "*set your hearts on his kingdom first, and on God's saving justice, and all these other things will be given you as well*", (Mt. 6:33). Moreover, it is an abomination which carries with it grave consequences to offer something to God with the right hand, and turn around to take it back with the left hand, thereby playing Ananias and Sapphira, (c.f. Acts. 5:1-10).

To assist families play their role in the formation and mission of priests and consecrated persons, we suggest what we call "**Family Evangelisation and Re-evangelisation**". This is a situation where parishes will organise instructions to families for the effective parenting of their children. Resource persons should be men and women who are seen as ideal couples, as well as those with special professions like psychologists (child psychology). It is our belief that such a forum, besides the normal Marriage Course or Instruction, will offer young couples an opportunity to learn the art of family life and proper child-upbringing – human and spiritual. It will also be an avenue for enlightening parents on the vocation and life of priests and consecrated persons. We may not be too far from the truth by saying that some parents are ignorant of the significance and implication of the vocation and life of priests and consecrated persons.

We need to re-emphasise the fact that every Christian family should be responsible for encouraging and nurturing vocations to the priestly and religious life. This is one of the apostolates of the family, as the Second Vatican Council Fathers have it in number 11 of the *Decree on the Apostolate of Lay People, Apostolicam Actuositatem*, 18 November, 1965. Although the work of fostering vocations devolves on the Christian community as a whole, yet "*the greatest contribution is made by families which are animated by a spirit of faith, charity and piety and which provide as it were, a first seminary (novitiate) ...*"³¹. The era of European missionaries now over, it is a duty incumbent on Africans, and more so Nigerians, to become missionaries not only to ourselves, but also to the whole world. And these missionaries will not fall from heaven but will come from Christian families. Although we have already started, yet the harvest is plentiful but the labourers are still very few, (cf. Mt. 9:37). Since the work of evangelisation is the responsibility of every baptised Christian, all hands must therefore be on deck to keep the flame of spreading the Good News always aglow, to the greater glory and honour of God, and the salvation of the children of God.

³¹ Vatican 11, Decree on the Training of Priests, *Optatum Totius*, 28 October, 1965, no. 2.