

**CONSECRATED LIFE IN NIGERIA TODAY:
CHALLENGES AND PROSPECTS**

An Interview with Most Rev. Dr. Donatus Ogun, OSA,
Bishop of the Catholic Diocese Of Uromi, Nigeria.¹

On the occasion of the celebration of the year of Consecrated life, the Catholic Voyage's Editor-in-Chief, Fr. Oseni J. Ogunu, OMV, had interview with the new Liaison Bishop of the Catholic Bishops' Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) to the Consecrated Life, Most Rev. Dr. Donatus Ogun, O.S.A, Bishop of Uromi. As a scholar he has written extensively on the theme of Consecrated Life. He has been a frequent contributor to the Catholic Voyage, whose Editorial Board is honoured to have him as a member. In this Interview, Bishop Ogun frankly addresses a wide range of issues such as the mutual relations between Diocesan Bishops, the clergy and Consecrated persons; the role of Consecrated persons in society and the Church; the year of Consecrated Life; role of the Liaison Bishop; the establishment of new Congregation; the year of Mercy.

Editor: We appreciate your granting to the Catholic Voyage this interview, at a time when you begin your service as the Liaison Bishop of the CBCN on Consecrated Life in Nigeria and barely settling down as the new Bishop of the Diocese of Uromi. Could you please briefly tell our readers about yourself.

Bishop Ogun:

My names are Donatus Aihmiosion Ogun. I am the Catholic bishop of Uromi Diocese. I was appointed Bishop on 6 November 2014 by His Holiness, Pope Francis, and consecrated on 31 January 2015. Before the appointment as Bishop I was the pioneer director (President) of the nascent Augustinian Institute in Makurdi.

Liaison Bishop of the CBCN to the Consecrated Life

Editor: What are the roles of a Liaison Bishop for Institutes of Consecrated Life?

¹ The preparation for this interview involved several aspects. It was facilitated by precious assistance received by the Editor from a group of talented Oblate of the Virgin Mary Seminarians at the *Lanteri Oblate Seminary*, Ibadan (Nigeria). I, therefore, sincerely thank them for their input to the questions and issues presented to the Bishop at the interview.

Bishop Ogun: During the first Plenary of the CBCN in February 2015, I was elected the Liaison Bishop for the Consecrated Life in the Catholic Bishop Conference of Nigeria. The role of the Liaison Bishop for Institutes for Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life include among others, being a go-between to the two Conferences, that is, representing the Catholic Bishops' Conference before the Conference of Major Superiors (Male and Female) as well as representing the interest of the Conference of Major Superiors before the Bishops. It involves helping to stabilize and of course strengthening the relationship and the collaborative bonds between the two Conferences. Helping, as much as it is possible, to foster collaborative relations and create avenues for reducing frictions to the minimum in collaboration if and where they may exist.

The Year Of Consecrated Life

Editor: What is the year of the Consecrated Life all about?

Bishop Ogun: The year of consecrated life as declared by the Holy Father, Pope Francis, is as beautiful as it is timely. It has come at just the right moment in history, related to the Year of Priests celebrated some years ago. I am sure it is a life-long dream of His Holiness if we are to recall when the thought first came up in September 2013. As a seasoned Pastor, this must have been very dear to his heart especially from his experiences of working in Argentina. Obviously, the understanding of the consecrated life *vis-a-vis* the experience of the challenges in collaboration between institutes of consecrated life and the local churches, (Institutes *contra* Dioceses and by extension, religious houses/communities *contra* parishes). Listening to him in September 2013 when he first talked about establishing a year for Consecrated Life, it is obvious from his feeling as a Pastor that there was need to reiterate the age old understanding of consecrated life through a process of awakening in order to refresh in all the understanding of their respective locus within the Church, the Body of Christ. The Pope said, and I try to quote "it has become necessary that we should have the year for consecrated life, especially, following from the poor understanding of this all important state of life by different categories of persons in the Church as a result of which consecrated persons are often reduced to just being extra hands on the plough rather than a charismatic form of life to foster, from within, the holiness of the people of God". In the same vein, we can say that the Holy Father had in mind the fact that many consecrated persons either do not fully comprehend or are fast losing the true meaning of their state of life. The situation of the lay faithful is not different either and since vocations are born from the family, it is only necessary that there be a good understanding of this state of life by all.

In declaring the year open, the Holy Father says very clearly that *consecrated persons should wake up the world*. That is the summary of his statement: *WAKE UP THE WORLD*. And this among other explanations is a direct call to consecrated persons to return to what we may call *the original inspiration of the consecrated life*.

Jesus Christ as Model for Consecrated Persons

Editor: What meaning does the Consecrated Life hold, and why is it apt, for the Church?...

Bishop Ogun: One of the primary missions of the Church is to help the world to understand why Jesus became man. And it becomes an even stronger reason for the existence of consecrated persons to help human beings understand the purpose for human existence, because the main vocation of the consecrated life is to reflect Christ. Well enshrined or grafted into human history, the consecrated life actually represents for the world the physical presence of the God made Man, the second Person of the Blessed Trinity.

The intention of the Pope is to draw the world back to its source, back to God. In declaring this year of consecrated life, the Church makes an introspection about her own *raison d'être*. The vocation of the Church is to continue the work of Jesus Christ of restoring creation back to God and this happens through the concrete actions of holiness and holy living, helping the human person to key the self back to the original plan of God, making man all over again a true and committed disciple of Christ, and helping creation to attain God's original intention.

Consecrated Life and the Civil Society

Editor:And for the world at this time?

Bishop Ogun: When we look at the way the world is going, that is, past and present civilizations and even the so-called post-modern era, we realize that there are so many twisted interpretations of how things should be. It is not completely out of place now to speak of a twisted interpretation of morality, twisted interpretations of economic life and twisted interpretations of even the spiritual life. We are bombarded in the world by different forms of civilizations, morality, economic progress, and even of bio-ethics. When we talk of morality today, you have crisis in family life, some of which have attempted to redefine the perennial and immutable understanding of marriage. We have forms of economic progress where the rich nations of the world enslave the poorer nations with bad economic policies, policies that will not sincerely lead to the growth of some of these underdeveloped and developing nations but which will make them perpetual slaves. So, it is possible to speak of Neo-Colonialism which cuts across many levels including the new age spirituality. In our case back here in Nigeria, one is bombarded with prayers of revenge and curses, of fire consuming the neighbour, and the prayers of destruction among many others.

The call to the consecrated life to wake up the world could not have come at a better time, and in doing this, consecrated persons as agents of conversion and perpetual disciples and Apostles of Christ, are called to learn from the Master and take the liberating and imbibed message to the world. As perpetual Disciples and Apostles of Christ learning at the Master's feet, they meet the world with their understanding of

the Person of Jesus Christ making Him visible again to the world, help the world to understand the divine law and objective morality as intended by God. They are to help the world understand the meaning of true spirituality as seeking the heart of God and allowing the Spirit of God to direct the spirit of man so that there can be harmony between the intention of God and the intention of man when he prays. These, among others, are some of the reasons why the declaration of this year becomes both timely and indispensable.

Permit me to be a little more parochial; there is also a further challenge for the African during the celebration of this year. I strongly feel that this year is an opportunity for consecrated persons to educate the local people in Africa about the meaning of the consecrated life. What does this state of life mean for us? Now our people are very conscious of activity- what are you doing? And this is often translated into wanting to become an achiever, material achievers. In the local environment, the Catholic priest is considered in some places as the bread winner of the family and he is male, which means even the male religious finds himself falling into this crisis of wanting to become the bread winner in his family. Female religious are not left out altogether. Since the society says you must be seen doing something and achieving something, there is an apparent celebration of rather than upbraiding those who fail in their obligation through establish structures in their families. These have turned out to become the champions and heroes of their community rather than people who ought to be called to order. In this regard, it is very appropriate and most proper to give thanks to God that at this point in the history of these troubled times of humanity, the Church is inviting all, but more particularly, consecrated persons to tell the world who they are and what they represent and by so doing call the world back to God.

We have a world that is asleep, asleep in the wrong direction, in chasing shadows and materialism. Consecrated persons have said they are not materialistic; now, they must help the world to see the true value of things. The world that now prices sex above every other thing, the world that prices money as the ultimate drive, the world that prices power and acquisition as the singular human pursuit; this world is in need of renewal. Christ came to return the world to the Father, to restore all things to their original condition. He is with the Church always (Mt. 28:20) and in a special way through the consecrated persons. Consecrated persons who imitate Christ specifically should as much as possible renew the Church, renew the world by making evident again who they are and who they claim to be.

Consecrated Persons and the Local Church

Editor: As a scholar specialized in Consecrated Life and having served the church in various capacities, and also at the diocesan level, what is your assessment and take concerning the relationship between Diocesan clergy and Consecrated persons in Nigeria today, and on their collaboration in ministry?

Bishop Ogun: When I look at the collaborative relationships through the years, that is, the Nigeria experience, the relationship between the consecrated persons and the diocesan clergy has made some progress but still with much room for improvement. There seems to be some amount of mutual distrust born out of faulty understanding of the Consecrated Life. We have repeatedly written in the past that Consecrated Life as a state of life in the Church should be on the curriculum of the Major Seminaries. Granted that many a diocesan priest serve as spiritual directors, and in most cases, pastors in places or parishes where you have consecrated persons, for them to be able to preach and challenge consecrated persons to look critically at who they are beyond the daily regular sermons for all the faithful, there is need for a deeper knowledge and understanding of this state of life or else they will just be treated like every other pious association in the Church. Cases abound even among learned Catholics asking about the value of the Consecrated Life. There are many knowledgeable clerics who understand very profoundly this state of life. In like manner though, there are priests who simply refer to consecrated persons as another pious association of women who belong to a special class. It is possible to just fantasize or romanticize about this life without a deep or conscious and committed understanding that this life is a state of life founded on the very life of Jesus Christ, his teachings and examples as well enunciated in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*. There is no doubt that the formation the members of the different states of life in the Church undergo is different. Consecrated persons are not all together innocent in this discussion because they see themselves sometimes as a special class, and even if they are, being special does not create room for pride but is a call to humility like the humble Christ they reflect. There is distrust arising from economic reasons: they have come to cart our money away! By way of summary, it should be clearly stated that the foundation of true collaboration depends on the particular charism of the institute. The hierarchy has a role to play here in going back to the intention of the Church.

Editor: *Why the Apparent Confusion?*

Bishop Ogun: There is ample room for improvement in the area of collaboration. In some cases the difficulty comes from the religious themselves who want to make the others feel that they are better trained and better qualified and that they can do it better which again goes back to the point of humility. The absence of humility could be another ground for distrust. A lot of confidence in the tutor by the learner is required to be able to help all to understand the meaning of this particular state of life, and if it is explained humbly and with respect, then there will be more acceptance. But if it is explained haughtily or with disregard, the learner will stiffly resist and even not be interested in acquiring the knowledge. So I think what we have is a far cry from where we should be. Part of the proper relationship, going back again to the place of the Bishop, is to understand the environment.

Pastors who work in Parishes should take pain to understand the pastoral challenges of the parish environment and every Congregation or religious institute that is invited to a place should equally be a response to the pastoral challenge of that environment. Bringing their charism and spirituality to respond to the particular situation of the environment, which means, the Bishop should understand the charism and possibly spend time to look at the Constitutions of the Congregation that he is bringing into the diocese. If he cannot do that personally, he could give the Constitutions to some experts in the diocese to study and see if the Congregation is his true response to the pastoral climate of a particular place, rather than just bring in any group and saying we want Religious by all means. Understanding the Constitutions which will contain the Charism, Spirituality, the Government and Discipline of life among others, is also a way of enriching the entire diocese because the Bishop is inviting a specific way of life into an environment. In other words, this way of life is coming to help build up the spirituality of the ecclesial community, and if something is coming to help build up, then the chief builder or the master planner must understand what he is adding to the structure. Since the Bishop as Shepherd is the overall architect or supervisor of the Pastoral ministry of his Diocese, he has the obligation to understand what is coming into the diocese as every charism he welcomes participates in the overall pastoral plan of the diocese. So, this for me is the first step into any relationship, and strictly speaking, when an Institute of Consecrated Life desires to modify its Constitutions, it is only proper that Bishops in the places where the Institute is present should be aware as there could be changes to some elements previously understood in the Contract. In other words, the group the bishop invited came into the diocese based on their mutual understanding of what the group is all about and so if they are going to change anything by way of abrogating, subrogating or changing any form of their Constitutions they should know if what they intend to modify may affect their Diocese. So, for an improved spirit of collaboration, there should be mutual understanding between the two - those in charge of the apostolate which is the Bishop as Pastor, and those coming to execute an apostolate which is the Religious Institute.

Most times, part of the problem in collaborative ministry as I have said is about money. In many instances apostolates have been reduced to dividends and profits, both by Consecrated persons, Congregations and the Dioceses. Money is needed to run projects, true, but money ought not to be the primary purpose. We have to go back to the original inspiration, Anthony of Egypt, Pachomius, the great hermits and the early fathers of the monastic life. They embraced the Monastic life to shun wealth, to shun the world (*fuga mundi*) so as to help the world better appreciate the goods of the world which in their time was enslaving humanity. Now, what we are going through may only be strange to us because we are new, but if we look at history, the reason for the Consecrated Life has always been a challenge to the world in the words of Pope Francis to *Wake Up the World* and respond to the needs for God in the world.

The Diocesan Bishop and Consecrated Persons in the Diocese

Editor: If the collaboration between Consecrated Persons and the diocesan clergy has not yet reached a satisfactory level in Nigeria, could you further elaborate on what, in your view, should be the proper mutual relationship between consecrated persons and the Bishops of the dioceses?. And, in general, how can the desired mutual relationship be attained and sustained?

Bishop Ogun: The Bishop has the obligation to care for the consecrated persons in the diocese because they are living out a particular charism. However, when there is a profitable project owned by the Congregation, Can. 1263 par. 2, may be applied, where it requires that the institute that has a particular apostolate, if it is doing well, is obliged to support that kind of apostolate in other parts of the diocese not as a tax, but from the spirit of the gospel to support the same works of the gospel. For example, in education or health, if a Religious Congregation has a first class hospital in a part of the diocese, from the net profit, there is nothing wrong in saying we give this much every year, to support the health sector or apostolate in other parts of the diocese to show that we are also giving witness and we are not just here to collect money. So, the greatest crisis of collaboration today in Nigeria tends towards money and mega structures which rather, should be at the service of the gospel.

Building the Bridge in the Understanding of Consecrated Persons in the Church

Editor: Diocesan clergy and the laity seem to have a poor knowledge of the consecrated life. How do you hope to use your office to spread awareness and advance their mutual knowledge?

Bishop Ogun: Now, when we look at the relationship between the diocesan clergy together with the laity, and the understanding of consecrated life, my position as the liaison bishop remains making every effort to foster more enlightenment as regards the place of consecrated life in the Church. This sort of education can only occur when I am called upon since knowledge cannot be imposed; it has to be requested. Experts abound across Nigeria with the knowledge to pass on but if the cup is already full, you have to empty it to create room or even put it on the fire if it is iron, let it heat up then the level goes down before you can add more things to what is already on the fire. Sometimes, our people think they already know and this prejudices acquiring more or true knowledge.

Prospective Challenges as Liaison Bishop

Editor: Religious men and women often run the risk of losing their own identity in being too absorbed in the work in the diocesan context, e.g., parish ministry. How can our identity and charism as consecrated persons be preserved and advanced amidst these concerns?

Bishop Ogun: A further challenge that I see from my position in helping to spread the knowledge or awareness of the consecrated life between the diocesan clergy and the laity is for the religious themselves to be convinced of who they are and spread the message about who they are. They need to also have an understanding beyond the apostolate and the Superiors are not totally innocent in this regard: the quest for returns more than the presence which *Vita Consecrata* talks about. More energy is given to *doing* rather than *being*. We do admit though that, *being*, if not well articulated and lived out can be boring for the idle. In order to be, we must learn to be in communion with God to enjoy the state of *being*. If God is not in it, then there is more excitement from action and execution of activities that people see than in *being*. The religious habit is already an invitation to a recognition of existence and religious must live out this habit as a way of life to help even the lay faithful who look up to them for a deeper understanding. There is a high level of admiration from the lay faithful even when they have only a vague understanding of the vocation to the consecrated life. *Lumen Gentium* (nn. 46) explains very clearly that consecrated persons who embrace this life, are not a waste to the society. Consecrated persons also have to help the world to see their fruitfulness by giving life to others. The fruitfulness of the consecrated life is enshrined in its witnessing as life is born and nurtured in persons who see Christ replicated in real life. The life that consecrated persons give is the regeneration of others through a way of existing. Consecrated persons give spiritual regeneration to our people more than physical rebirth.

In further discussing this crisis of poor awareness and understanding of this state of life among the clergy and the laity, we also look at the situation of men and women religious and their absorption in work and a possible consequence of loss of identity. These are all connected.

Parish Ministry and Clerical Religious

Editor: In what practical ways can consecrated person make their presence felt in the quest for making our nation a better place, taking into context the myriads of challenges (in the social, economic, political and religious realms) that we face daily?

Bishop Ogun: The history of the Church informs us that clerical religious institutes were literally implored to go into parish ministry because of the shortage of the diocesan clergy. Indeed, some of the mendicant and canonical clerical Institutes sprang up for this during the 13th and 14th centuries. Now that we have the blessing of God with diocesan vocation, it is time to begin to return to the original intention for our existence - living together and praying as the life-blood of the Church and beginning some form of deliberate withdrawal from parish-based apostolates to the apostolates of prayer and academics. Consecrated persons are not called to be rich but to come and imitate the poor Son of God. Even the evangelical counsels do not give room for wealth; they actually create room for total poverty and dependence on

God. Poverty in all spheres, from the use of the will to decide (autonomy), material poverty (owning nothing) and of course, poverty even through *not having children*. There is a deep connection between all the counsels and total self-emptying. The more we begin to look at the energy placed on parish apostolates as an escape from the original intention of the consecrated life, the more productive I think consecrated persons would become and sought after. This is an opportunity to quickly introduce the concept of *charism*. The Pope in this same document, *Waking up the World*, gives the definition for consecrated life as making an aspect of the life of Christ visible or as one's mode of *being*. This is a very deep expression: to make an aspect of the life of Christ visible as a way of life. It means a deep look at the person of Christ and make an aspect of this personality come alive again to challenge the Church to wake up the world.

Proliferation of New Institutes

Editor: The establishments of new religious congregations get momentum by the day. What does this hold for proliferation of religious institutes, or should we say of "charisms"?

Bishop Ogun: Charism, from its Greek, 'Charis', means gift. It is a free gift or a gift of grace given by God through the Holy Spirit as a reflection of an aspect of the life of Christ. This understanding, once it is clear, will help all to understand the meaning of the consecrated life. Every Constitutions is built around a particular gift received which is concretized or expressed for all to see. It is a cause for concern that apostolates are nowadays becoming quasi-charism. Anybody familiar with the history of the Church and the history of consecrated life will see that in the 18th and the 19th centuries, many religious congregations were born, and to a great extent, for reasons of performing an apostolic task. We will not go into the history of the use of the term 'Congregation' as distinct from 'Institute', but many congregations were born essentially to take care of pastoral needs. Now, there should be a difference between the pastoral needs and the way of the spirit. What history has further demonstrated to us is that needs come to an end. By the time the Church starts to respond to a particular need, the State (that is, civil society) sees the importance of that need, and soon, politicians come into it, put in more money and the church is placed in a competitive stance. This clearly explains to us that one does not need to profess the evangelical counsels as such to become an active professional in the world. Notwithstanding this apparent competition from the civil societies, the Church should not be discouraged in carrying apostolic ministries since the spirit behind the initiative is evangelical. At least, doing it well is a part of the process of waking up the world to its negligence. However, in making an aspect of the life of Christ a way of life, the apostolic work becomes richer when we profess to live as Christ lived - poor, chaste and obedient to the Father. Christ came to show us the way back to the Father. The total gift of self without holding back of the will in an undivided heart, loving God as the highest value, obeying Him is the supreme law. The young man asked Jesus, "What is the greatest commandment of the law?" And

the Lord said to him, 'Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, with all your might'. (Cfr. Mt. 22:36-40). Now, if you love with all your heart, your emotions are stolen; with all your soul, your spirit is captured; with all your energy, then your will and the desire to use your energy in the wrong direction is already imprisoned by Divine Love. Thus, one now becomes a free slave of God. *Free slave* because you do not have any of these again as yours. But free because you live in God and anything placed in the hands of God leads to total freedom and liberation.

This is for me, a deep understanding of *Charism* which must be at the heart of every definition of the consecrated life; this has to be the road back home. Consecrated persons must return to what inspired our founders. What inspired St. Benedict, Francis, Dominic, Augustine, Bernard, Angela Merici, Vincent De Paul, Anthony Mary Claret, Don Bosco? All of these, had some original inspiration which the members set out to live so as to bring Christ to humanity, to reform humanity in order that humanity can reform the world. That is the return that we need to embrace. It is the distinctive element of the consecrated life and its common denominator rather than *work* which is fast becoming *uniform*. What makes all the difference is that there is an aspect peculiar to each, which while not denying the entire Christ, the consecrated person finds the self keying into with the least resistance and this is the aspect that makes the difference, one Congregation from another. If there is a deep understanding of this, that the vocation of the consecrated life is to restore humanity, then consecrated persons are already on the road to liberating society.

Recently, we talked about witnessing in a violent world and I asked, "What is violence?" The distortion of the good. And so, everything that is done to destroy the good is violence and consecrated persons are those who have discovered the meaning of the good and they want to enthrone the good. Their response to the challenges of society is to make the world see again the value of goodness.

Editor: What makes a Congregation new?

Bishop Ogun: Establishing of new Religious Congregations in Nigeria and indeed Africa seems to be pastorally fashionable today, probably because we are still a pastorally challenged environment notwithstanding the crowds we have as converts or as Catholics; *challenge* in the sense of people jumping from one world to another either seeking recognition or discovering a new identity of being called Christians rather than making a choice. Christianity is a deliberate choice to want to live like Christ, and to want to live like Christ requires an understanding of who Christ is, a developed personal Christology. This is where the Catechism remains indispensable. On a closer analysis of the matter, we may ask ourselves, why people want to start new religious congregations. The first response is, there is need for new congregations. But they must be truly new as the appellation *new* implies. And if we connect founding to charism, then we may begin to ask, what is really new about

this proposal? If we say there should be no new ones, it means the Holy Spirit is no longer alive in the Church. But if the Spirit is alive, then we need to rediscover what the Spirit is saying to us as a Church because from what the Spirit is saying, we can respond to the challenges of the world of today. But if consecrated life is reduced to work, then what we call *new* will not be new after all, but a replication of Catholic schools, Catholic hospitals, hospices, and of different jobs rather than a totally new experience of the expression of the person of Jesus Christ or an aspect of the life of Jesus Christ. I may not have been quoting documents, but these are in numerous documents of the Church, especially *Ad Gentes*, among others, which through the years, have become part of us. So, establishing new congregations is not odious but they must be new in truth even by their identity.

Consecrated Persons and the Year of Mercy

Editor: Providentially, the year of the consecrated life will be followed by the Jubilee Year of mercy; does this have any message for Consecrated Persons? How do consecrated persons proclaim the Truth and Mercy to those who are burden and broken-hearted in Nigerian society today in order to help sustain their hope?

*Bishop Ogun: Consecrated persons are agents of mercy. Christ came that we may have life and have it to the full. His vocation which he clearly expressed in the Gospel according to Luke Chapter 4 when he entered the temple remains the comprehensive vocation of all Christians but more immediately of consecrated persons. The consecrated life makes present the life of Christ, teachings and example which are summarized in the *Beatitudes* (Matt. 5). Now that we celebrate the Year of Mercy alongside the year of consecrated life which terminates on 2/2/2016, the words of the Lord reverberates again, "Blessed are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy". To be another Christ is to continue to relive the sentiments of Christ and be seen as witnesses to the mercy of God just as their physical appearance already resonates the person of Christ to the world. There is an elaborate program issued by the Holy Father in *Vultus Misericordiae* as well as the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization, for the celebration of the year of mercy which all must key into first at diocesan, then at congregational level or vice versa and finally in the local community and parish. Consecrated persons, whose vocation is a regular *conversio morum*, must be seen to be persons of mercy, showing mutual forgiveness and as agents of the mercy of God. Every spirituality and charism fall within the mystery of salvation and those who make the following of Christ their sole business must be seen to reflect the mercy of God proclaimed and lived by Jesus Christ. Thus, this year is a further call to renew and wake up the world that is fast losing consciousness of sin to return to the path of God who waits to *welcome the stray*.*

Consecrated life (persons) has a special role to play in this year of mercy in several ways. In the first place, the formation process of the consecrated life is the shaping of a person into the person of Christ through the imitation of the founder(s) and the

spiritual patrimony accorded to posterity and approved by the church. This process could be seen as the moulding of the person through the model presented by the founder into more improved reflection of Christ the Lord. The person who satisfies the process of formation is now considered as supremely redeemed to live as a full human person after the likeness of Christ. This person who has gone through the process of self-mastery is now qualified to help others improve on themselves in their respective state of life. This is the ultimate gift the consecrated life owes the human society (world and Church) in this extraordinary jubilee Year of Mercy. They must present the truth of God as not inimical to any person with pure Christian love. Just as the bee or butterfly perch on flowers and suck the nectar without injuring the plant, so should the agents of mercy patiently lead all to the intention of God and gently help all with respect.

Celebrating the Year of Consecrated Life in Nigeria

Editor: Any comment on the current celebration of the Year of Consecrated Life in the context of Nigeria?

Bishop Ogun: The response to the National celebration of the Year of consecrated life which took place in Ibadan (31/7 - 2/8/2015) remains for me a most discouraging event, especially in the area of attendance. The turn-out was rather disappointing, first on the part of consecrated persons where Congregations apparently sent mostly the young religious, and then on the part of the ecclesiastical hierarchy all of whom were absent, with exception of the local ordinary - Archbishop Abegunrin, Archbishop Job and myself. The discussion of low turn-out would require an altogether separate parlance or write-up but suffice it to say that the Nigerian Church did not celebrate the year of consecrated life as this state of life deserves. There was an exaggeration of personal comfort and refusal to make sacrifice which is at the foundation of this state of life (Phil. 2:1-11). What this attitude portends for the future of the consecrated life in Nigeria deserves a more profound study.

There is a parochial and almost sectional celebration of the year of consecrated life among Religious Institutes across the country. As liaison bishop for the consecrated life, I feel that a part of the process of waking up the world should go beyond celebrating vespers in religious houses by consecrated persons present in a Diocese. It should be at the parish level after the Diocesan level. On a rotational basis, there should be celebration of vespers and benediction in parishes by consecrated persons together with the lay faithful and possibly at Deanery levels where the Diocese is too large, rather than gathering for meals and funfare in religious houses. It is part of waking up the parishes. Furthermore, the joy of seeing different habits and institutes would become both a call to prayer as well as vocation drive. In a situation wherein attendance at meetings is left to the younger ones there is every reason to question the excitement, enthusiasm and joy of the older religious still in the life.

There is an urgent need during this year to prayerfully revisit the myriad of conciliar and post-conciliar documents on the consecrated life especially at joint celebrations

between the clerics and consecrated persons. It is easy to claim to know what these documents contain but this year is a unique opportunity for open discussion regarding collaboration. There cannot be effective collaboration if there remains a nebulous understanding of one of the parties in the relationship.

A Looking at the Future

Editor: What are the prospect for Consecrated Life in Nigeria?.

Bishop Ogun: The future of consecrated life in Nigeria is quite beautiful as it is challenging. While we may celebrate the apparent springing up of Institutes as a blessing and of course the overwhelming response of persons desiring to join the religious life, we should carefully look at what happened in Europe and America and plot the graph, the curve of which is on the downward slope. If it could happen to a people with centuries old of the Catholic faith, unless we reread and learn fast we would repeat their present situation even much earlier than it took them to decline when we are faced with an even less serious onslaught.

The future of the consecrated life will depend on the profoundness of our theology and Christology as a response of the Church to heal and strengthen itself from within as well as respond to the challenges of society. The consecrated life is the spiritual palliative of Christ to His wounded Body, the Church. All who embrace and make this state of life their primary mode of being must be ready at all times to seek the mind of Christ so as to remain relevant to humanity since they strive to represent God who in the words of St. Augustine is Beauty ever ancient and ever new.