

**THE STUDY OF CONSECRATED LIFE IN DIOCESAN SEMINARIES AND
INSTITUTES FOR THEOLOGICAL FORMATION: THE VALUE, URGENT
NEED AND IMPLICATIONS**

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ABSTRACT

The Theology of Consecrated Life should be made part and parcel of the Diocesan Seminaries' and Institutes for Theological Formation's Academic Curriculum to help eliminate the stark ignorance manifested by many diocesan priests, especially the young ones, of the nature, place and functions of Consecrated persons in the Church. Such ignorance is evident in the misguided spiritual direction given to young consecrated persons by such priests, lack of appreciation and respect for consecrated persons, and poor collaboration between such priests and the consecrated persons ministering in their parishes. This poor collaboration and its consequent effects have been a source of counter witnessing to the Gospel and grave scandal to the faithful.

Their formation should therefore be geared towards holistic personality formation to enable them appreciate who they are, thereby modelling their lives and ministry on that of the person of Christ Who they represent – they act “in persona Christi”. They need an in-depth understanding of the composition of the Body of Christ which is the Church, so as to minister adequately to each part. The Church which is hierarchical is composed of various members, just as the human body, each with its specific function for the orderly functioning of the whole Body. If they understand the Church as “mystery” and “communion” and behave accordingly, there will be more effective ministry in the Church, all the members playing their respective roles to the best of their abilities, after the example of the early Christian Community.

When candidates to the priesthood understand better the nature, place and function of consecrated persons in the Church, they will collaborate with the Bishops in fostering and promoting consecrated life in the Church, as well as teach the lay faithful to do the same.

INTRODUCTION

Seminary formation, a continuation of the basic formation acquired from the family, primary and secondary levels of education, is expected to be a higher and more comprehensive, all-round type of formation. Not only is the seminarian expected to be knowledgeable in the secular subjects and the world in which he lives, but also in the life of the Church which he is being prepared to serve. Besides the normal theological studies comprising the Scripture, dogma, liturgy, the

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sacraments, et cetera, he should equally be conversant with the existence, nature and functions of all the various members of that body of Christ, the Church, in which he is to be the overseer. One of those members is the consecrated persons.

Experience, however, has shown that many of the products of our Diocesan Seminaries and Institutes for Theological Formation are very ignorant of the nature and value of consecrated persons in the Church. This ignorance is being manifested in some misguided spiritual direction of young religious women by their so-called “fathers, brothers or friends”, and lack of cordial collaboration in the ministry, hence bearing counter witness to the Gospel. Here lies the need for this write-up, to underscore the urgent need, value and implications of including the study of consecrated life in the Seminary Curriculum.

To continue however, we need to survey briefly the nature of the Church with regard to her members, Seminary Formation for holistic personality, the need and urgency for this formation, and then the conclusion.

THE CHURCH

The documents of the Church have different symbolic images of the Church. Such images include: **a sheepfold** whose only necessary gateway is Christ; **a flock of sheep** of which Christ is the Good Shepherd – the function of which He handed over to Priests; **a cultivated field** in which both Jews and Gentiles are branches of the true vine, Christ, who gives them life; **the building of God** with Christ as the cornerstone; **that Jerusalem and our Mother; the body and bride of Christ** in which every member works for the good health and well-being of the whole body².

In this body *“He continually provides ... for gifts of ministries through which, by his power, we serve each other unto salvation so that, carrying out the truth in love, we may through all things grow unto him who is our head (cf. Eph. 4:11-16)*³. The Council Fathers made it clear that the whole body of Christ is charged with the continuation of Christ’s saving ministry, though some are specially chosen for directing the smooth running of the ministry⁴, just as any group of people gathered for the same purpose must have a leader as well as other functionaries for the smooth running of the organization.

It follows from the above that this “body and bride of Christ” is made up of many and varied members whose common identification mark, baptism, makes each and every member a stakeholder in the affairs of the Church. But the Church is hierarchical and this hierarchical nature is a self-evident fact which is established by the Founder, Christ Himself. He handed over the mantle of leadership of the Church which He established to St. Peter after his profession of faith in Mt. 16:11-19. Peter had his collaborators in the persons of the other apostles and disciples. Today we have the Pope, Bishops, Priests, Deacons, Religious men and women and the

² Cf. Vatican 11, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, Lumen Gentium, 21 November, 1964, nos. 5-7.

³ Vatican 11, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, op. cit., n. 7.

⁴ Cf. Vatican 11, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 7 December, 1965, n. 2.

laity. The Council Fathers expounded this very clearly in numbers 18-29 of *Lumen Gentium*.

This hierarchy is graded into clerical, lay, and the religious states. While the clerical are the ordained members of the Church, the laity comprises “*all the faithful except those in Holy Orders and those who belong to a religious state approved by the Church*”⁵. Some people, in their confusion or ignorance think that the religious state is a state midway between the clerical and lay states. But the Council Fathers tell us that religious state should rather “*be seen as a form of life to which some Christians, both clerical and lay, are called by God so that they may enjoy a special gift of grace in the life of the Church and may contribute, each in his own way, to the saving mission of the Church*”⁶.

Those in this state are otherwise called consecrated persons or religious. The Church’s law aptly described Consecrated State thus: “*Life consecrated through profession of the evangelical counsels is a stable form of living, in which the faithful follow Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, and are totally dedicated to God, who is supremely loved. By a new and special title they are dedicated to seek the perfection of charity in the service of God’s Kingdom, for the honour of God, the building up of the Church and the salvation of the world. They are a splendid sign in the Church, as they foretell the heavenly glory (Can. 573§1)*”⁷. From the above, we note that Consecrated life is not just an appendage to the life of the Church but that which “*belongs to the life and holiness of the Church. It is therefore to be fostered and promoted by everyone in the Church (Can. 574§1)*”. We need to emphasize here that the fostering and promotion of consecrated life is the duty of each and every member of the Church. Most of the Bishops understand this very well and are doing whatever they can to foster and promote Consecrated life in their respective dioceses. It is however regrettable that some of the Bishops’ collaborators, the priests, have a very low understanding and image of consecrated persons, hence the relationship of cat and dog or that of rivals between them, which very often is a source of scandal to the people of God.

These consecrated persons as we have seen, are those called by God to follow Christ more closely in their lives by the profession of the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience, after the example of Christ, the chaste, poor and obedient; as well as that of the chaste, poor and obedient Mother of God. These vows liberate the consecrated person from all encumbrances to loving and worshipping God ardently and perfectly, in the service of God through the mission of the Church. The consecration by vows makes the consecrated visible sign of that eternal kingdom to which all God’s people are invited. By consecration, they are set apart solely for God and His service – through the Church. Candidates for priestly formation therefore, need an in-depth understanding of this consecrated state for a better understanding of the Church, and for more efficient ministry.

SEMINARY FORMATION - FOR HOLISTIC PERSONALITY

⁵ Vatican 11, Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, op. cit., n. 31.

⁶ Ibid., n. 43.

⁷ The Code of Canon Law, New revised English Translation. St. Paul Publications, Nigeria.

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According to the Council Fathers, the object of training in the Major Seminaries should be *“to make them (Seminarians) true shepherds of souls after the example of our Lord Jesus Christ, teacher, priest and shepherd”*⁸. Moreover, the onerous task facing Priests as ministers of God’s Word, the Sacraments, the Eucharist, and as Rulers of God’s people⁹, demands a corresponding type of formation to prepare them adequately for the task. The Church is doing her best this wise. But because of some misguided spiritual direction of some young consecrated persons, and some scandalous show-off between some diocesan priests and some consecrated persons working either directly in their parishes, or as administrators of other establishments under the parish like schools, hospitals, *et cetera*, it becomes expedient that candidates for priestly formation be exposed to the nature, life and mission of consecrated persons. After all, the Council Fathers stated that *“Priests should keep in mind that all religious, men and women, being a particularly eminent group in the Lord’s house are deserving of having special care directed to their spiritual progress for the good of the whole Church”*¹⁰, not forgetting however their material progress, since a healthy mind needs a healthy body.

Their formation should be such as to incorporate the study of the different components of the Church, and in our case, the consecrated persons in particular. They should be formed to understand, from their study of the theology of mission, that the work of evangelization is the principal responsibility of each and every member of the Church – the baptised, thereby making the whole Church missionary. This consciousness will foster proper cooperation with all the members of the Church, the consecrated persons inclusive.

Their formation should be such that makes them real or polished human beings, those who are educated and not just learned¹¹, hence the need for holistic formation. This involves human, spiritual, affective, intellectual and pastoral formation. For the purpose of this write-up, emphasis will be on human and pastoral formation; human as the basis of all types of formation since ‘grace is built on nature’. Moreover, the Synod Fathers opined that *“the whole work of priestly formation would be deprived of its necessary foundation if it lacked a suitable human formation”*¹².

The importance of human formation can never be over-emphasised knowing that he is to be acting **‘in persona Christi’**, the Head and Shepherd of the Church. He should therefore be helped to develop those human virtues of Christ which will enable him *“know the depths of the human heart, perceive difficulties and problems, make meeting and dialogue easy, create trust and cooperation, express serene and objective judgments. ... They need to be educated to love the truth, to be loyal, to respect every*

⁸ Decree on the Training of Priests, *Optatum Totius*, 28 October, 1965, n. 4.

⁹ Cf. Vatican 11, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, *Presbyterorum Ordinis*, 7 December, 1965, nn. 4-6.

¹⁰ *Op. cit.*, n. 6.

¹¹ Cf. Nkechi Ezeanyino, “Being Learned or Being Educated? A Critical Question”, in Benjamin Ike Ewelu, ed., *Philosophical Reflections on African Issues*. Enugu, Nigeria: Delta Publications (Nig.) Ltd., 2010, pp. 1-12.

¹² Cited by Pope St. John Paul 11 in his Apostolic Exhortation, *Pastore Dabo Vobis*, 1992, n. 43.

person, to have a sense of justice, to be true to their word, to be genuinely compassionate, to be men of integrity and, especially to be balanced in judgment and behaviour"¹³. Here, humility as the queen of all virtues is indispensable. With humility true respect and appreciation of the other will be easy, and the application of justice in relationships will become natural. All these imply that human formation should help the seminarians develop the personality of communion required of the leaders of communities.

The formation should be such as to make the seminarians aware of the Church as "mystery" in which case it is the work of the Holy Spirit while human beings are merely "unworthy servants". Hence whatever function one is performing, he/she is doing it only as an instrument under the direction of the Holy Spirit. They should also be made aware that the Church is a "Communion", and as such the pastor should imbibe community spirit to enable him collaborate effectively with other members of the Church – the Bishops, priests, consecrated persons and the laity¹⁴. In other words, they should, *ab initio*, imbibe the spirit of collaborative ministry in which every member of the Church will be given ample opportunity to contribute his/her quota towards the development and progress of the Church and subsequently of the society. This is the spirit that characterized the early Christian Community and contributed to the fast spreading of the Good News.

THE NEED AND URGENCY FOR THIS FORMATION

The need and urgency of this kind of formation are self-evident since an adage has it that 'ignorance is the worst disease' and ignorance is the principal suspect in misunderstandings between peoples. Again, half education on its part is very bad because it equally contributes to misunderstanding and misinterpretation of issues. As future leaders of God's people, seminarians should be conversant with the constitution of the Body of Christ, the Church, as well as the nature and function and usefulness of each part. This knowledge will no doubt enhance appreciation of, and respect for those parts and eventual harmonious working together with them. That peace, mutual understanding, respect and acceptance are ingredients for meaningful progress and development in any society, the Church inclusive, is an incontestable fact. This is especially true with the understanding of the Church as "Communion".

It is very important that candidates to the priesthood be well informed on the nature, necessity, and function of consecrated persons, especially in these days and age when traditional values are fast eroding. With all the confusing and contrasting ideologies of this technological age, in which some traditional teachings are being subjected to ideological criticisms and questioning, there is need for proper understanding of the consecrated state in the Church.

It is not uncommon to see some diocesan priests of this age questioning the validity and compatibility of the vows especially that of chastity and poverty, to

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Pope St. John Paul 11, Apostolic Exhortation, Pastore Dabo Vobis, 1992, n. 59.

human nature, and even to God's purpose of creation. Such people, instead of being spiritual fathers that they should be, advising and encouraging the young consecrated persons who come to them for help, turn out rather to be wolfs in sheep's clothing. How many consecrated persons have lost their vocations through the instrumentality of those so-called "spiritual fathers, brothers or friends"?

Moreover, manifestations of strained relationships that exist between some parish priests and the consecrated persons ministering in their parishes are evidences of counter witness to the Gospel. Many a time lay faithful are scandalized, and in some cases they are called in as arbitrators. Such incidences no doubt are very ugly ones which proper understanding of consecrated state in the Church will help to eliminate.

Besides, there are cases where some diocesan priests, especially those of the new age look down on consecrated persons - Rev. Brothers and Sisters as not being knowledgeable enough. They see them as those whose duty is only to teach catechism, wash sacred linens and decorate altars. This mentality has given rise to questions like: "What do the religious do in the Church?" And this question is equally found on the lips of many lay people. If candidates for priesthood are well-informed about the nature, place and function of consecrated persons in the Church, they will in their turn enlighten the lay faithful, exercising their function as teachers of the faith.

CONCLUSION - THE IMPLICATIONS

The implication of this formation is that it will help in presenting the Church as "**The Family of God**" which she is, in which all the parts are working harmoniously for the wellbeing of the whole body, each performing its specific function according to its nature, cf. 1Cor. 12:4-30. The early Christian Community which represents a true example of the Church in collaborative relationship, cf. Acts. 1:12-14 should be our model. Here, the Mother of Jesus, the apostles and some other women were in the upper room united in prayer **with one heart**. They did everything **with one heart**, - remaining faithful to the teaching of the apostles, to the brotherhood, to the breaking of bread and to the prayers, cf. Acts 2:42-47; 4:24, 32. They showed us good example of division of labour during the ordination of the first deacons in Acts 6:1-7. This respect for division of labour which prevailed among the apostles and early Christians contributed to the spreading of the Gospel message like wild fire, as their unity and mutual cooperation attracted the pagans to join the Christian Community.

It is our humble opinion therefore that "**Theology of Consecrated Life**" should be included in the Seminary Academic Curriculum, to be handled not just by any theologian but by a mature religious with years of practical, pastoral experience. The Course should have both theological and pastoral orientation and should necessarily incorporate canonical regulations on the issue of Contracts between the Dioceses and Religious Institutes as juridical persons. Besides, we recommend that all Catholic Christians irrespective of their positions should study carefully the nature of the Church in the Vatican 11 Document, Dogmatic Constitution on the

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Church, *Lumen Gentium*, 21 November, 1964. The understanding and assimilation of its contents will help to eliminate causes of discord, dissension, and disenchantment in the Church, the human elements notwithstanding.

Again, it will not be out of place if the Parish Priest and his collaborators – his vicar/s, consecrated persons (if the parish is lucky enough to have some), catechist/s, and some lay faithful make out time to prepare the parish pastoral plan together, where such does not yet obtain, subject to periodic review. Since a tree cannot make a forest, and since united we stand, there is need for honest and meaningful cooperation between all the members of the Church for the good of the Church herself as well as that of all her members.