

CONSECRATED PERSONS AND COLLABORATIVE MINISTRY

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Introduction

One of the most interesting images of the Church is that of the Church as ‘the body of Christ’. The theologico-Biblical basis of this ecclesiology is 1 Cor 12:12-30: “Christ is like a single body, which has many parts; it is still one body, even though it is made up of different parts. In the same way, all of us, whether Jew or Gentile, whether slaves or free, have been baptized into one body by the same spirit, and we have all been given the one spirit to drink”. The content of this text was reiterated by the Second Vatican Council:

In the building of Christ’s body there is engaged a diversity of members and functions. There is only one spirit, who, according to his own riches and the needs of the ministries, gives his different gifts for the welfare of the church¹.

This notwithstanding, a cursory glance at the reality of the Church, with many kinds of multi-polarizations, reveals that this image of the Church does not always match with concrete circumstances. The clergy are polarized into blocks, the incardinated against the *fidei donum*, the diocesan priests against the religious priests, parish priests versus assistant priests, diocesan priests against female religious, and male religious against female religious etc. According to John Aniagwu:

Where relations with female religious are concerned, the problem has been mainly one of a servant-master relationship. For some priests, it seems that religious should only be seen and not heard. They should wait on the priest to tell them what to do and do only what they have been told².

With the indices of clericalism, parochialism and individualism making their appearance, it has become important to reflect on collaborative ministry in the church, and this year being the Year of Consecrated Life, this chapter would focus more on collaboration in relation to Consecrated Persons as pastoral agents with a unique and specific role to play.

Understanding Consecrated Persons

¹ Lumen Gentium, 7

² John Aniagwu, *Collaborative ministry in the Church*. A paper presented during the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in Nigeria. 2014, 9.

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Consecrated persons are members of the Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life³. They are lay persons or clerics who assume the evangelical counsels by means of a sacred bond, and become members of an institute of consecrated life according to the law of the church⁴. They totally dedicate themselves to God with the goal of pursuing perfection in charity by faithfully embracing the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. In this sense, consecrated persons respond freely to the invitation of the Holy Spirit to follow Christ the poor, the celibate, the obedient son, more closely, thus becoming in this life a sign of the life to come. "The evangelical counsels of chastity dedicated to God, poverty and obedience are based upon the words and examples of the Lord. They were further commanded by the Apostles and Fathers of the Church, as well as by the doctors and pastors of souls"⁵. These counsels are referred to as evangelical because the religious vows are central to the life of Jesus and message and also because religious consecration is founded on baptismal consecration⁶. The consecrated life is also traceable to the post-apostolic church, especially to those early Christians who dedicated themselves to a gospel-oriented life-style, to a radical following of Jesus Christ⁷. The first person in this line was Anthony of Egypt. He was followed by a line of disciples, until it became an institution in the Church⁸.

Very significant is the idea of consecration. It is derived from the word 'holy' or 'holiness'. In Hebrew it is *qadash* and in Greek *Hagios*; these are translated to mean 'to consecrate'⁹. In Numbers 6:5-7, 12, the Nazirites were referred to as consecrated because of their vows to God. This makes the person holy, a consecration that separates the person from others. Thus the word consecration implies a setting apart or a separation. This separation does not in any way imply superiority¹⁰, or complete severance from those the consecrated are called to serve¹¹. The Second Vatican Council Document says, "The state which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, though it does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the church, nevertheless, undeniably belongs to the life and holiness of the church"¹². The document continues, "The holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the

³ Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony, *Africae Munus and Consecrated Persons*, In *The Catholic Voyage: A Publication of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria*. Vol. 11. January 2015. P.4.

⁴ canon 573.2

⁵ Lumen Gentium 43

⁶ Fleming, D. L., Understanding a theology of Religious Life. In G. A. Arburckle and D. L. Fleming (Eds.). *Religious Life: Rebirth through Conversion*. New York: Alba House, 1990, p. 22

⁷ Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony, *Africae Munus and Consecrated Persons*, In *The Catholic Voyage: A Publication of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria*. Vol. 11. January 2015. P.4.

⁸ Mary-Sylvia Nwachukwu, *Consecrated: A Vision of Religious Life from the Point of View of the Sacred*. Lagos: Change Publications, 2010, pp. 34-35.

⁹ Leviticus 15:31; Ezekiel 14:7

¹⁰ Myers, A. C. *Holiness*. The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 493.

¹¹ Myers, A. C. *Sanctify, Consecrate*. The Eerdmans Bible Dictionary. Eerdmans: Grand Rapids, 1987, p. 493.

¹² Lumen Gentium 44

counsels proposed in the gospel by the Lord to his disciples. An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state¹³. Thus, another Second Vatican Council Document exhorts consecrated person thus, “Members of each institute should recall first of all that by professing the evangelical counsels they responded to a divine call so that by being not only dead to sin¹⁴ but also renouncing the world they may live for God alone. They have dedicated their entire lives to his service. This constitutes a special consecration, which is deeply rooted in that of Baptism and expresses it more fully¹⁵.”

The Meaning of collaboration

Collaboration in the contention of Echema is the “coming together of two people or groups that are different, but who for a common purpose, must put aside their differences in order to achieve a common goal¹⁶.” This definition presents what could be understood as a general understanding of collaboration, which also indicates its necessity in virtually every sphere of human endeavour, be it civil or ecclesiastical. In the ecclesiastical circles, it is often used with the addition of the word *ministry*, giving to birth the nomenclature: Collaborative ministry. It is employed to imply the identification, release and union of all baptized persons¹⁷. This union is aimed at all the baptized making their contributions, in terms of gifts, towards the good of the Church. Collaborative ministry must involve the clergy, religious and the laity. Words that could describe the phenomenon of collaborative ministry include team ministry, group ministry, partnership, co-responsibility, co-discipleship, collegiality, shared ministry and mutual ministry.

The Theological foundations of Collaboration

In the Old Testament, precisely, the book of Genesis, the idea of collaboration is seen in the Trinity itself. When God wanted to create man he said: “Let us make man in our own image and likeness¹⁸.” When human beings prided themselves in the building of the Tower of Babel, God said, “Let us go down and mix up their language so that they would not understand themselves again¹⁹.” In the Trinity, we find the absolutely one, undivided and indivisible, although distinct, they are united in carrying out the eternal plan of God. Again, when Moses sat as judge over Israel, to avoid working himself to death, he appointed men of integrity to be in charge of tens, fifties, hundreds and thousands of people. This he did that they might be able to deal with minor cases that may

¹³ Lumen Gentium 42

¹⁴ Romance 6:11

¹⁵ Perfectae Caritatis 5

¹⁶ Austin Echema, *Priests and laity collaboration in the postmodern church*, Assumpta Press, Owerri, p. 25

¹⁷ Loughlan Sofield and Carrol Juliano, *Collaborative ministry: Skills and guidelines*. Notre Dame: Ave Marie Press, 1987, p.11.

¹⁸ Genesis 1:26

¹⁹ Genesis 11:7

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not necessarily require his attention. Beyond these texts in the Old Testament, little attention has been paid to the delegation of authority and power²⁰.

In the New Testament, the ministry of Jesus was highly collaborative. After the twelve disciples had been with him for some time, Jesus sent them out in pairs, giving them authority over unclean spirits. Jesus empowered them with the authority to teach, heal the sick and cast out demons in his name²¹. When Jesus sent out the 72 to towns that he would eventually visit, he made it clear to them that anyone who listens to them listens to him and that anyone who rejects them rejects him²². In the Acts of the Apostles, the Apostles selected from among the people seven men who were of good reputation, filled with the Holy Spirit and wisdom for the distribution of food²³. These are great examples of collaboration in the ministry from the Old and New Testaments.

In the wake of Greek neo-Platonism, the Church was seen as 'the school of truth and the fellowship of adepts'²⁴. To Roman Stoicism, the Church is principally seen as 'a well ordered community governed by laws'. In the early Church, they were referred to as 'the people of God' or 'the Church of God'. St Paul speaks of the Church as "the fullness of Christ and of fellowship"²⁵. He also speaks of the Church as "a mystery and sacrament of salvation"²⁶. The Second Vatican Council speaks of the Church variously, as 'the people of God', "Bearer of the message of salvation"²⁷, "Mystical Body of Christ"²⁸ etc. These notwithstanding, the African Synod of 1994 brought out and shared with the universal Church the richness of the African cultural concept of family when it defined the Church as the family of God. This is significant because as Cecil observes, in African culture, the family is the cradle of culture, the fundamental base of humanity and society and the sacred place where all the riches of our tradition converge²⁹. These images of the church emphasizes the circular or communo image of the church and de-emphasizes the pyramidal or hierarchical image of the church³⁰. If the church is a communion, a fellowship and a body, it can only be healthy and efficient when each part functions perfectly as interdependent dimensions.

²⁰ Exodus 18:13-27

²¹ Mark 6:7-13

²² Luke 10:16

²³ Acts 6:1-6

²⁴ Kung H. (1981). *The Church*. New York: Image Books.

²⁵ Ephesians 3:19

²⁶ Ephesians 3:4

²⁷ Gaudium et Spes (1965). In A. Flannery (Ed.). *Documents of the Second Vatican Council* (pp.903-1001). Dublin: Dominican.

²⁸ *Indulgentiarum Doctrina* (1967). In A. Flannery (Ed.). *Documents of the Second Vatican Council* (pp.62-79). Dublin: Dominican Publications.

²⁹ Cecil, M. (ed) (1995). *What Happened at the African Synod*, Nairobi: Pauline.

³⁰ John Aniagwu, *Collaborative Ministry: Priests, sisters and brothers*. Abuja: Gaudium et Spes Institute, 2001, 14.

Collaboration between Religious and the Diocesan Clergy

In 1978, the Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes and the Sacred Congregation of Bishops issued the document known as *Mutuae Relationes* in which they directed that:

Efforts should be made to renew the bonds of fraternity and cooperation between diocesan clergy and communities of religious... Great importance should therefore be placed on all those means, even though simple and informal, which serve the increase of mutual trust, apostolic solidarity and fraternal harmony³¹.

Since the diocesan priests and religious groups are distinct groups with particular charisms, the incorporation of religious in the different dimensions of the evangelical ministry of the diocese would help the fostering of all areas that require attention. Therefore, the *Mutuae Relationes* goes further to say:

In order that the diocesan presbyterium express due unity and that the various ministries be better fostered, the bishop should with all solicitude exhort the diocesan priests to recognize gratefully the fruitful contribution made by religious to their church and to approve willingly their nomination to positions of greater responsibility, which are consonant with their vocation and competency³².

During any kind of collaboration between the religious and diocesan clergy, it is necessary that due respect be given to the character and purpose of each Religious Institute and the laws of foundations³³, this is to help them remain faithful to the grace of their vocation³⁴. However, for this to be realized, diocesan priests and the religious must learn to dialogue together for "Openness to dialogue is the Christian attitude inside the community as well as with other believers and with men and women of good will. Dialogue is to be practiced first of all within the family of the Church at all levels"³⁵. From the teaching of *Ecclesia in Africa*, collaborative in evangelization, catechesis, policy formation and decision making in the diocese and parish, therefore, becomes a kind of dialogue. And for dialogue to bear fruit, there is need for knowledge. The diocesan priest needs to know the religious and the religious needs to understand the diocesan priest. As such, *Ecclesia in Africa* teaches that "better reciprocal knowledge will result if the theology and spirituality of consecrated life are made part of the theological preparation of diocesan priests, and if adequate attention to the theology of the particular church and to the

³¹ *Mutuae Relationes*, no. 37.

³² *Mutuae Relationes*, 38.

³³ Code of Canon Law, No. 680

³⁴ Code of Canon Law, No. 676

³⁵ *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 65

spirituality of the diocesan clergy is included in the formation of consecrated persons”³⁶.

While the diocesan clergy has a role to play in collaboration, consecrated persons “For their own part... will not fail to cooperate generously with the particular churches as much as they can and with respect for their own charism, working in full communion with the bishop”³⁷. They need to understand that they are not strangers of birds of passage in the diocese.

Collaboration among Religious Men and Women

Since the religious life bears witness to the life of heaven, and with her emphasis on community life, it would be expected that there should be more collaboration among religious than among other groups in the church. Having been called to restore beauty and purpose, truth and peace to a broken world, it would be scandalous to discover that the religious are themselves the harbingers of division and strife. Consecrated persons, therefore, particularly leaders of Religious Institutes must stimulate fidelity and commitment to mission, promote a sense of well being among members and encourage unity so as to inspire creativity and vitality in the apostolate given the particular religious institute. In order to promote collaboration among members, leaders must stay close to them, listen to them and dialogue with them. Once there isn't unity and understanding among a community of brothers or sisters, there can hardly be collaboration in ministry.

Members of Religious Institutes must learn to accept each other and relate amicably as true brothers and sisters who are engaged in the same one mission of Christ. Relationships must be permeated by mutual respect and fraternal charity. Religious who are in-charge should treat their associates and collaborators as co-workers and not subordinates. Responsibilities must be defined and everyone given the opportunity to carry out his or her responsibility as a free and responsible agent. As a requirement of natural justice, religious authorities must cater for the needs of the members of their communities. Wherever, this fails, it has its effect on collaboration.

Collaboration between Religious and the Laity

Consecrated persons cannot do everything for themselves and by themselves. Following the nature of the apostolates they engage in. The laity are indispensable agents in the missionary activity of the church, thus, the church teaches that “the church is not truly established and does not fully live, nor is it a perfect sign of Christ unless there is a genuine laity existing and working alongside the hierarchy”³⁸. Moreover, the laity constitutes the majority among the people of God with about 99% while the clergy and religious constitute

³⁶ *Ecclesia in Africa*, no. 50

³⁷ *Vita Consacrata*, no. 49

³⁸ *Ad Gentes* No. 21

about 1%³⁹. In the various ministries of consecrated persons, ranging from schools, hospitals, houses for the care of the aged, businesses, accommodations, pastoral centers etc., if the laity are kept out of it would be isolated from the creative currents of the times. They are the link or the point of intersection between the church and the world. They are at the front line⁴⁰ and therefore need to have a clear consciousness of their being the Church⁴¹. Without the laity, the contributions of the consecrated persons would remain in the convents and rectories without reaching the world.

Conclusion

This chapter has studied the Biblical and theological foundations of collaborative ministry in the Church, precisely, among Religious and between the Religious and Diocesan priests and the lay faithful. It understands collaborative ministry as an indispensable instrument for effective witnessing. To avoid the discussion of collaborative ministry only at a theoretical level without praxis, some basic realities will have to be known. The first is spiritual maturity; where there is no spiritual maturity, there cannot be the exercise of ministry in a collaborative manner. Spiritual maturity like any other maturity requires time, for we are always learning, always finding and always challenged. It actually requires dying to the self, multiple deaths and burials, and the resurrection of a new self that is open to people, free from fear and anxiety over loss of control and competition, respectful etc. It is not to be understood as a principle to be applied while at the office or while in the church, it is a way of life to be lived out from the smallest sociological unity to the largest. It has no limit to its practice, from the home, places of business to the church. The result of collaboration in the Church is that it would make the ministry of evangelization more effective, and Religious Institutes more relevant to the contemporary world.

³⁹ Echema, A. *Autonomy of the local churches of Africa and the question of foreign aid*. In JIT 9, 2007, 61.

⁴⁰ Peter Schineller, *The role of the laity in moral transformation of Nigeria*. In Lucerna 6, January-June, 1986, 12.

⁴¹ Pius XII, Address to the college of Cardinals, 20 February 1946