

Africae Munus and Consecrated Persons

Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, OSA*

Introduction

The period before the convocation of the 1994 African Synod, was a time when Africa was described in the image of the biblical icon: the man who was on his way from Jerusalem to Jericho and fell into the hands of robbers, who robbed him, brutalized him and abandoned him half-dead (Lk 10: 30-37). It is therefore not surprising that the challenges of Africa became the dominant points in the *Lineamenta* and *Instrumentum laboris* of the 1994 African Synod: instability and political violence, armed conflicts, poor democratic representation, poor management of public affairs, weight of external debt, corruption, ethnocentrism, arms trade, the collapse of health services and public education, exponential spread of HIV/AIDS, but also the aggressive growth of religious sects and certain Christian or non-Christian fundamentalist circles against the Catholic Church. The Holy Father, Pope John Paul II, saw Consecrated persons as agents of evangelization who could contribute to the liberation of Africa from the forces that cripple her progress. The Roman Pontiff wrote,

In the Church understood as the Family of God, *consecrated life* has the particular function not only of indicating to all the call to holiness but also of witnessing to fraternal life in community. Therefore, all who live the consecrated life are called to respond to their vocation in a spirit of communion and cooperation with the respective Bishops, clergy and laity".

Focusing on local ordinaries and Consecrated persons, he wrote further,

...the leaders of the local Churches and of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and the Societies of Apostolic Life to foster dialogue among themselves, in order to create, in the spirit of the Church as Family, mixed groups for consultation which would serve as a witness to fraternity and as a sign of unity in the service of a common mission.

Sixteen years after the 1994 Synod, Pope Benedict XVI issued the document *Africae Munus* to continue the work already begun by *Ecclesia in Africa*. He wrote, "It was my wish that the Second Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops, held from 4 to 25 October 2009, should continue the work of the 1994 Assembly, "which was intended to be an occasion of hope and resurrection, at the very moment when human events seemed to be tempting Africa to discouragement and despair." It was an Apostolic Exhortation that was aimed at rekindling the fire kindled by his predecessor, Pope John Paul II. He wrote, "The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Ecclesia in Africa*

of my predecessor, Blessed John Paul II, brought together the pastoral insights and proposals of the Synod Fathers for a new evangelization of the African continent. It was appropriate, ten years into this third millennium, to rekindle our faith and hope, so as to help build a reconciled Africa by pursuing the paths of truth and justice, love and peace (cf. *Ps 85:11*).” In this new vision of Africa’s commitment to the Lord Jesus, what is the place of consecrated persons? What is their fundamental contribution towards the realization of this new vision for Africa? These and more are the burdens of this article.

The Theology of Consecrated Persons

By consecrated persons, I mean the members of the Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life. 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 church. 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”. These counsels are referred to as evangelical because the religious vows are central to the life and message of Jesus and also because religious consecration is founded on baptismal consecration. 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 Christ. 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 Church.

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’ (Lev 15:31; Ezek 14:7). 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 superiority, or complete severance from those the consecrated are called to serve. 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.” The

document continues, “The holiness of the Church is fostered in a special way by the observance of the counsels proposed in the gospel by the Lord to his disciples. An eminent position among these is held by virginity or the celibate state”. 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 sin (cf. Rm 6:11) 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 fully”.

Benedict XVI’s Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation: *Africae Munus*

Africae Munus was published after the First Special Assembly for Africa of the Synod of Bishops and gave great impetus to the growth of the Church in Africa developing, among other things, the idea of the Church as Family of God which has been beneficial to the universal Church. It aims at reinforcing this ecclesial dynamism and outlining a programme for pastoral activity for the coming decades of evangelization in Africa, underlining the need for reconciliation, justice and peace.

The document has two parts. Part one discerns the fundamental structures of the ecclesial mission on the continent, a mission which aspires to reconciliation, justice and peace, and has its origin in the person of Jesus Christ. He invites Christians to be reconciled with God, and to become just in order to build a social order where justice reigns and in keeping with the logic of the Beatitudes. Attention then turns to the paths towards reconciliation, justice and peace. These include authentic conversion, the celebration of the Sacrament of Penance, the spirituality of communion, the inculturation of the Gospel, the protection of life, migrants, displaced persons, refugees, the good governance of States, and ecumenical and inter-religious dialogue especially with traditional religions and Islam.

In part two, all members of the Church are invited to contribute to communion and peace in the Church and in society. It also identifies areas for the apostolate: the Church as the presence of Christ, the world of education, healthcare and the communications media. The Exhortation opens a horizon of hope to Africa which, by welcoming Jesus Christ, must free itself from the forces which paralyze it. According to Nicola Eterovic, as a document, it offers the Church in Africa practical guidance and suggestions for pastoral activity over coming decades. These practical guidance and suggestions, he lists as follows,

The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life

Vol. 11, 2015. ISSN: 2659-0301 (Online) 1597 6610 (Print)

1. Evangelization *ad gentes*, the announcement of the Gospel to those who still do not know Jesus Christ, is still of vital importance in Africa. It is a pastoral priority which involves all African Christians.
2. Ordinary evangelization must be increasingly promoted in the various particular Churches, through commitment to fostering reconciliation, justice and peace.
3. There is also an urgent need to work for the new evangelization in Africa, especially among people who have distanced themselves from the Church or who do not behave in a Christian fashion. African Christians, and in particular the clergy and consecrated persons, are likewise called to support new evangelization in secularized nations. This is an exchange of gifts, because African missionaries are already at work in countries which once produced missionaries who went forth to announce the Good News in Africa.
4. Saints, people reconciled with God and neighbor, are exemplary heralds of justice and apostles of peace. The Church – all of whose members are called to sanctity – must discover fresh ardour, the ardour of the many saints and martyrs, confessors and virgins of the African continent, devotion to whom should be renewed and promoted (cf. AM 113).
5. In order to find further examples of sanctity, also obtaining new intercessors in heaven, pastors of the particular Churches are encouraged ‘to recognize among servants of the Gospel in Africa those who could be canonized according to the norms of the Church’ (AM 114).
6. The bonds of communion between the Holy Father and the bishops of Africa must be strengthened, as must the bonds among Africa bishops themselves, at the national, regional and continental level.
7. It is considered important ‘for the bishops to help support, effectively and affectively, the Symposium of Bishops’ Conferences of Africa and Madagascar (SECAM) as a continental structure of solidarity and ecclesial communion’ (AM 107).
8. For a deeper appreciation of the mystery of the Eucharist and to increase Eucharistic devotion, emphasis is given to the Synod Fathers’ proposal to celebrate a continental Eucharistic Congress (cf. AM 153).
9. African countries are encouraged to ‘celebrate yearly ‘a day or week of reconciliation, particularly during Advent or Lent’ (AM 157).
10. In agreement with the Holy See, SECAM may contribute to promoting ‘a continent-wide Year of Reconciliation to beg of God special forgiveness for all the evils and injuries mutually inflicted in Africa, and for the reconciliation of persons and groups who have been hurt in the Church and in the whole of society’ (AM 157).

This notwithstanding, Anthony Akinwale avers that the essence of *munus Africae* for Africans is to allow the grace of God to reconcile us to God and to one another. Empowered by this grace, we are to strive for “that inner purification of man which is

the essential prior condition for building justice and peace.” We assume the task of reconciliation, justice and peace when we cooperate with the grace of God in Christ who re-establishes humanity in the Father through the forgiveness of sins, forming a renewed human community characterized by restoration of relationships, settlement of differences and removal of obstacles to the personal and communal experience of God’s love.

Africae Munus and Consecrated Persons

In part two, chapter one, number one of *Africae Munus*, the Roman Pontiff, Pope Benedict XVI focused on consecrated persons. The concern of the section of this work, which is the heart of it, is to focus on the relevance of *Africae Munus* to consecrated persons. Here, a couple of points would be raised in this regard: Consecrated persons as prophetic witnesses, faithful adherence to the charism of founders and foundresses and the National and Continental Conferences.

1. Consecrated Persons as Prophetic Witnesses

By virtue of their calling as Consecrated persons, the religious are prophets in a preeminent manner. The scripture speaks of the prophetic ministry in relation to the word of God and worship. The emphasis on the word of God is because the Word of God is an agent of the revelation of God’s will for mankind. The Second Vatican Council document speaks of the prophetic character of consecrated persons when it says that they belong essentially to the charismatic nature of the Church. An intimate relationship with God opens the prophet to the knowledge and ways of God granted only to a few. With such knowledge, the prophet can interpret the word of God in the daily events of life. The Roman Pontiff establishes a relationship between the evangelical counsels and the prophetic character of Consecrated Persons:

“Through the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, the life of consecrated persons becomes a prophetic witness. Hence they can be examples in the area of reconciliation, justice and peace, even in circumstances marked by great tension. Community life shows us that it is possible to live as brothers and sisters, and to be united even when coming from different ethnic or racial backgrounds (cf. *Ps* 133:1). It can and must enable people to see and believe that today in Africa, those men and women who follow Christ Jesus find in him the secret of living happily together: mutual love and fraternal communion, strengthened daily by the Eucharist and the Liturgy of the Hours”.

From the foregoing, it is obvious that Consecrated Persons are not prophets by virtue of their consecration alone, it is a life that is lived out in concrete historical circumstances. They must be living examples to the world they have been called to change, especially in the area of reconciliation, justice and peace. They should be able to live together in mutual love and fraternal communion as brothers and sisters in a world where sectionalism and tribalism has destroyed the future of many innocent men and women. This must be renewed on the fire of prayer. If this is lacking, consecrated persons would fail in the prophetic character of their calling.

2. Faithful Adherence to the Charism of Founders and Foundresses

By the charism of the Founder or Foundress, it is meant the special communication of grace, granted directly by the Spirit to an individual, in order to empower that person to found a religious institute and to configure its shape and identity. The Second Vatican Council document asserts that the religious life proceeds from a charism given to the Church so that various members of the faithful can live their Christian existence in a state of life that imitates and represents the lifestyle that Jesus chose for Himself and proposed to his followers. Through its charism, the particular congregation expresses and realizes the total and exclusive giving of oneself to God and to God's plan of salvation for humankind. The Religious life therefore, has its origin in a charism, which is a constitutive part of the charismatic dimension of the Church. Another integrating and distinctive part of the charism of Religious Life is the dimension of community. It is an essential element that represents the life of the apostles with Jesus. The charism of religious life, and the vocation that it brings with it, has a missionary, apostolic-prophetic and eschatological dimension: it bears witness to the life of Jesus and to the Gospel and, moreover, manifests the good things of heaven. It proposes a new and eternal life won by the redemption of Christ and it prefigures the future resurrection and the glory of the heavenly kingdom.

“Dear consecrated persons, may you continue to live your charism with truly apostolic zeal in the different fields indicated by your founders or foundresses! Thus you will be all the more vigilant in keeping your lamps alight! Your founders and foundresses wanted to follow Christ truly and respond to his call. The different good works that came about as a result are gems that adorn the Church. You must therefore carry them on by following as faithfully as possible the charism of your founders, their ideas and their vision. Here I would like to emphasize the important role of consecrated persons in the life of the Church and in her missionary endeavour. They are a necessary and precious aid to the Church's pastoral

activity but also a manifestation of the deepest nature of our Christian vocation.”

There are times when circumstances and persons, most times out of ignorance of the Religious Life, may try to redirect consecrated persons in a direction away from their particular charism: the Holy Father appeals that consecrated persons stick to their particular charism. For the charism of a religious institute gives her identity and thus authenticity. Only then can she truly be a germ that adorns the church.

3. National and Continental Conferences

The Holy Father has called for the different Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life to come together in solidarity to deal with common concerns, with proper cooperation with the Bishop’s Conference. He wrote:

“The meetings of the different National Conferences of Major Superiors and those of COMSAM help pool your reflections and resources, not only in order to pursue the goals of the various Institutes, while preserving their autonomy, character and individual spirit, but also to help deal with common concerns in a climate of fraternity and solidarity. It is fitting to foster an ecclesial spirit based on a sound coordination and proper cooperation with the Bishops’ Conferences”.

In this area of concern, the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria has achieved a lot. The Conference has an Annual General Assembly of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria, during which the two conferences, Male and Female, meet separately and together to discuss issues that affect the conference as a whole and the concerns of her particular members. The members of the Executive Council meet at least twice a year to concretize the solutions proffered to problems and to articulate the position of the Conference. The Conference also meets with the Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria once in two years in mutual relations, to discuss issues that border on the relationship of the dioceses and the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life. The Conference also has Justice and Peace Initiative (JPI), a body that promotes Justice, Peace and Reconciliation. At the continental level, COMSAM conferences are organized which brings Major Superiors from different countries to share experiences and learn from one another.

Conclusion

When the Holy Father speaks to Consecrated Persons as agents of evangelization, he sees the state of the Consecrated as dynamic rather than passive. *Africae Munus* understands the divine call of the Consecrated as a call to liberation, which is most characteristic of all the divinely chosen. Our 'chosenness' makes us occupy a position of spiritual leadership that must be characterized by Justice, Peace and Reconciliation. This also encompasses other divine virtues like love, compassion, forgiveness, mercy etc. The Roman Pontiff therefore reminds Consecrated persons that they are at the heart of God's life, particularly at the heart of the ministry of Jesus Christ, and this mission is about creating models of reconciled and liberating communities for the world. This witness has become urgent in the face of the religio-cultural and political crises that have besieged Africa for quite some time now. The spiritual leadership of consecrated persons is therefore to shape human history, precisely, the history of Africa. For a liberative spiritual leadership would create a positive history.

**Ikechukwu Kanu, is a member of the Augustinian Order. He Lectures in the Augustinian Institute, Makurdi. He is the Executive Secretary of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria (Men). Email: ikee_mario@yahoo.com; Phone: +2348036345466.*