



## MISERANDO ATQUE ELIGENDO: THE CONSECRATED LIFE AS THE MISSION OF MERCY

KANU, IKECHUKWU ANTHONY, Ph.D.

Augustinian Institute, Makurdi

### Abstract

*Consecrated life is a gift to the Church, it is born of the Church, it grows in the Church, and it is entirely directed to the Church. Thus, it is not an isolated or marginal reality, but deeply a part of her. It is at the heart of the Church, a decisive element of her mission, inasmuch as it expresses the deepest nature of the Christian vocation and the yearning of the Church as the Bride for union with her sole Spouse. It, therefore, belongs absolutely to the life and holiness of the Church. The strong connection between Jesus the eloquent manifestation of God's mercy and the consecrated person, and the nature of the call of the consecrated person as a call out of mercy is at the heart of this paper's argument that the consecrated life is a mission of mercy. This work submits that the consecrated person's understanding of his vocation as one that God has mercied and called has a way of transforming his or her witnessing to the gospel.*

**Keywords:** *Miserando, Atque, Eligendo, Consecrated Life, Mission, Mercy.*

### Introduction

The Second Vatican Council Document, while speaking of Consecrated men and women, teaches that, "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"<sup>1</sup>. 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"<sup>2</sup>. Thus, another Second Vatican Council Document exhorts

<sup>1</sup> Lumen Gentium 44

<sup>2</sup> Lumen Gentium 42

consecrated persons 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 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"<sup>3</sup>.

The members of the Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life, by virtue of their consecration, have 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"<sup>4</sup>. 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 consecration<sup>5</sup>.

The understanding of the consecrated life, although substantially comprehended, continues to reflect new circumstances and contexts. On March 13<sup>th</sup> 2015, Pope Francis I, at the second anniversary of his election as the 266<sup>th</sup> successor of Saint Peter, announced that he would be convoking the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. The Feast began in December 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, the feast of the Immaculate Conception to end on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King. The question at the heart of this piece is: During this Jubilee Year of Mercy, what new understanding of the consecrated life can be gained? Using the lens of Matthew's experience, this piece sees the consecrated person as one whom God had pitied upon and chose, and thus should be transformed into an instrument of mercy.

---

<sup>3</sup> Perfectae Caritatis 5

<sup>4</sup> Lumen Gentium 43

<sup>5</sup> Fleming, D. L., Understanding a theology of Religious Life. In G. A. Arbuckle and D. L. Fleming (Eds.). *Religious Life: Rebirth through Conversion*. New York: Alba House, 1990, p. 22

consecrated persons 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 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"<sup>3</sup>.

The members of the Religious Institutes and Societies of Apostolic Life, by virtue of their consecration, have 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"<sup>4</sup>. 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 consecration<sup>5</sup>.

The understanding of the consecrated life, although substantially comprehended, continues to reflect new circumstances and contexts. On March 13<sup>th</sup> 2015, Pope Francis I, at the second anniversary of his election as the 266<sup>th</sup> successor of Saint Peter, announced that he would be convoking the Extraordinary Jubilee Year of Mercy. The Feast began in December 8<sup>th</sup> 2015, the feast of the Immaculate Conception to end on 20<sup>th</sup> November 2016, the Solemnity of Christ the King. The question at the heart of this piece is: During this Jubilee Year of Mercy, what new understanding of the consecrated life can be gained? Using the lens of Matthew's experience, this piece sees the consecrated person as one whom God had pitied upon and chose, and thus should be transformed into an instrument of mercy.

---

<sup>3</sup> Perfectae Caritatis 5

<sup>4</sup> Lumen Gentium 43

<sup>5</sup> 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

### ***Miserando Atque Eligendo (Mathew 9: 9-13)***

Right from the beginning of the pontificate of Francis I, mercy has occupied a central place in his teachings and actions. His Papal motto is the same with the one he had as the Archbishop of Buenos Aires: *miserando atque eligendo*: By having mercy on him, he chose him; this motto is taken from Matthew's experience of Jesus' call to discipleship. Matthew was a tax collector, a sinner, however, when Jesus passed by the tax office, he had mercy on him, and in spite of his sins and sinfulness, he called him to be a disciple saying to him: *follow me*.

The phrase "Miserando atque eligendo" comes from a homily by St. Bede an English eighth-century Christian writer and doctor of the church. St. Bede's homily looks Mt 9:9-13 in which Jesus saw the tax collector, Matthew, sitting at a customs post and said to him, "Follow me." St. Bede explained in his homily, "Jesus saw Matthew, not merely in the usual sense, but more significantly with his merciful understanding of men."

"He saw the tax collector and, because he saw him through the eyes of mercy and chose him, he said to him: 'Follow me.' This following meant imitating the pattern of his life -- not just walking after him. St. John tells us: 'Whoever says he abides in Christ ought to walk in the same way in which he walked.'" St. Bede continued: "This conversion of one tax collector gave many men, those from his own profession and other sinners, an example of repentance and pardon. Notice also the happy and true anticipation of his future status as apostle and teacher of the nations. No sooner was he converted than Matthew drew after him a whole crowd of sinners along the same road to salvation."

The Roman Pontiff, thus, sees himself in the light of Mathew the tax collector whom Jesus mercied and chose. It is from this context that the Consecrated Life is understood in this work. The consecrated person has not been called because he is the best, but because God in spite of his unworthiness, God had mercy on him or her and called the person to the religious life. And being a recipient of mercy, the consecrated person has been called to be a witness to mercy. Apart from being a recipient of mercy, the mission of the Consecrated persons in relation to mercy is tied to their close relation with Jesus. This relationship is based on the fact that the Consecrated Life is a vocation to conform one's life to Jesus Christ through living as He did in Chastity, Poverty and Obedience. It is a life that involves dedicating oneself to God for the service to the Church

and for the salvation of the whole world. By a new and special title consecrated persons are dedicated to seek the perfection of charity in the service of God's kingdom, for the honour of God, the building of the Church and the salvation of the world. They are splendid signs in the Church, as they foretell the heavenly glory"<sup>6</sup>.

As consecrated persons, Jesus calls us to "be with him and he sends us to preach" (cf. Mk. 3:14). Thus, while a call, the consecrated life is also a mission:

*By the action of the Holy Spirit who is at the origin of every vocation and charism, consecrated life itself is a mission, as was the whole of Jesus' life. ...Indeed, more than in external works, the mission consists in making Christ present to the world through personal witness. This is the challenge, this is the primary task of the consecrated life! The more consecrated persons allow themselves to be conformed to Christ, the more Christ is made present and active in the world for the salvation of all. ...Thus it can be said that consecrated persons are "in mission" by virtue of their very consecration, to which they bear witness in accordance with the ideal of their Institute<sup>7</sup>.*

He called us out of mercy and sends us to witness to mercy; he has incorporated into his life and mission, intimately linked us to his person. We cannot separate his person from the mission. Moreover, the mission is to proclaim Him, and this is impossible without knowing him, without being with Him, without having shared his sentiments, without having made our own his preferences to the point of identifying with Him. "Now it is not I who live but it is Christ who lives in me." (Gal. 2:20). The mission requires us to be in profound communion with Jesus, because "without me you can do nothing" (Jn. 15:5).

### **The Consecrated Person and the Witness to Mercy**

In our world ravaged by hunger, war, disease, among other vices, the consecrated person is sent as a word that encourages, a hand that lifts us, a compassionate embrace for all those who suffer, a defense of all those whose

---

<sup>6</sup> CIC 1983, c. 573 § 1

<sup>7</sup> John Paul II, Post-Synodal Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, No. 72.

lives are threatened<sup>8</sup>. His mission is to humanize, to proclaim the worth and the dignity of each person. Pope Francis expresses very profoundly the sense of the mission:

*Mission is at once a passion for Jesus and a passion for his people. When we stand before Jesus crucified, we see the depth of his love which exalts and sustains us, but at the same time, unless we are blind, we begin to realize that Jesus' gaze, burning with love, expands to embrace all his people. We realize once more that he wants to make use of us to draw closer to his beloved people. He takes us from the midst of his people and he sends us to his people; without this sense of belonging we cannot understand our deepest identity.<sup>9</sup>*

God is not only the compassionate and merciful God, but the Mercy that has made himself history, face, word, and flesh in Christ. His way of speaking and acting is mercy, and we are the prolongation of his speech and action. We are the mission of Mercy<sup>10</sup>.

### **Authority and Mercy**

The Jubilee Year of Mercy provides a context for a reflection on the exercise of authority. This is very important as varied questions have arisen as regards the exercise of authority by Major Superiors. In the spirit of the Jubilee Year of Mercy, the authority of superiors is understood not as a personal authority, but as an authority received from God through the ministry of the church, and thus is to be exercised by them in a spirit of service. Since this authority has come from God, in fulfilling their office, they are to be docile to the will of God, and

---

<sup>8</sup> Inmaculada Fukasawa aci, *The Mission And Service Of Consecrated Persons: Witness Of Divine Mercy*. <http://www.congregacion-aci.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Charla-H.-I.-Fukasawa-Madrid-October-3-2015-Ing1%C3%A9s.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> POPE FRANCE I, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii Gaudium*, 2013, 268

<sup>10</sup> Inmaculada Fukasawa aci, *The Mission And Service Of Consecrated Persons: Witness Of Divine Mercy*. <http://www.congregacion-aci.org/en/wp-content/uploads/2015/10/Charla-H.-I.-Fukasawa-Madrid-October-3-2015-Ing1%C3%A9s.pdf>.

govern those subject to them as brothers and sisters or as children of God. By their reverence for the human person, they are to promote voluntary obedience. They are to listen to those they are in charge of or called to serve and foster their cooperation for the good of the institute and the Church, without prejudice however to their authority to decide and to command what is to be done<sup>11</sup>. The code of canon law highlights the obligation of the Superiors with special reference to listening to members and of fostering voluntary Obedience. Apart from this, it also makes clear the personal authority of the superior for discerning and initiating what will be done. This notwithstanding, the personal authority of the superior calls for respect on his part, for the members of the institute as well as consultation with them<sup>12</sup>.

The vow of obedience has committed consecrated persons to cooperate with legitimate authority within the limits defined by our various constitutions. And by legitimate authority, it is meant the entire governance structure of the particular religious Institute: the chapter, the Provincial and his Council, regional assemblies, regional leaders, local coordinators and those who hold delegated authority<sup>13</sup>. The relationship of a particular religious with the legitimate authority requires a sustained dialogue and an ongoing relationship. Obedience in this case would, therefore, imply openness, prayer, discussion and dialogue<sup>14</sup>. However, if relationship with authority have been untrustworthy and deceptive, obedience and discernment would become difficult without prejudice. To avoid this kind of scenario that makes obedience difficult and insincere, leaders of religious institutes must strive to provide a leadership that stimulates fidelity to the charism of the particular institute and commitment to mission<sup>15</sup>. Where there are imbalances in dialogue, it is incumbent on the more

---

<sup>11</sup> CIC 1983, c. 618

<sup>12</sup> MODDE, M.M., "Religious Houses and Governance," in *A Handbook on Canon 573-747*, edited by J. Hite, -S. Holland, -D. Ward, Minnesota 1985.

<sup>13</sup> Janet Ruffing, *Discernment and our vow of obedience*. The MAST Journal, vol. 14, No. 1. 2004, 22

<sup>14</sup> Janet Ruffing, *Discernment and our vow of obedience*. The MAST Journal, vol. 14, No. 1. 2004, 22

<sup>15</sup> Kanu, Ikechukwu Anthony, *Echoes of Hope: The stand of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria on Issues of Faith and Life*. Nigeria: CMSN. 2013, 39.

powerful to create the conditions of safety that foster dialogue and integrity of word and deed.

### Preaching and Mercy

Consecrated persons have the responsibility of communicating their spiritual experience and encounter with God in a simple but profound way with beautiful images and practical examples. Many theologians have intellectualized and complicated the Christian message so much that a great number of people are no longer touched by or interested in the teaching of the Church. Addressing a University community, Pope Francis spoke these strong words: "Your intellectual commitment, in teaching and in research, in study and in the most comprehensive formation, will be all the more fruitful and effective the more it is animated by love for Christ and for the Church, the more the relationship between study and prayer is strengthened and made more harmonious (God or Nothing, 113)." According to Francis, "Theology must be on its knees," that is, it must be more merciful and centred on prayer. Theology must not focus so much on rules and regulations but on meeting the faithful wherever they are to help them reach holiness and salvation. We must, therefore, seek new ways of expressing unchanging truths in a language that brings out their abiding newness and lead people to God. In consecrated persons, the world must see credible witnesses of mercy, heralds of reconciliation and an inn for the wounded. Her language and her gestures must transmit mercy, so as to touch the hearts of all people and inspire them once more to find the road that leads to the Father.

### Community and Mercy

The idea of mercy presupposes a community, because mercy is relational. The Latin word for mercy is *misericordia*. Thomas Aquinas interpreted the word in its linguistic sense: to have one's heart (*cor*) with the unfortunate (*miseri*), to have one's heart with those who are suffering. It has something to do with feeling with or suffering with (compassion): *miserum cor haben super miseria alterius* (having an unhappy heart on account of the misery of another).<sup>16</sup> This spirit that thinks of the other is obvious in the first early Christian community:

---

<sup>16</sup> WALTER KASPER *Mercy: The Essence of the Gospel and the Key to Christian Life* (New York, Paulist Press, 2014) translated by William Madges 23.

*The whole community of believers were one in heart and mind. No one considered as his own what belonged to him; but rather they shared all things in common. ... There was no needy persons among them, for those who owned land or houses, sold them and brought the proceeds of the sale. And they laid it at the feet of the apostles who distributed it according to each one's need. (Acts 4:32, 34-35).*

Jordan of Saxony identifies four main characters of religious community life from this text of Acts of the Apostles: (a) Living together. (b) Oneness of Spirit – living in one mind and one heart (c) Sharing of temporary goods (d) Proportional distribution.<sup>17</sup> In a true community there has to be a deep and true human contact with one another<sup>18</sup>, and the persons who make up this community have to be united in mind and heart. Again, true communion is expressed when things are owned and shared in common. The modalities for owning and sharing may differ from community to community, but at the foundation of every form of community life should be the willingness to share what one possesses.

Van Bavel states that a true community presupposes "... a sense of belonging together, mutual solidarity, willingness to make sacrifices, deeper knowledge of each other, trust in one another"<sup>19</sup>. A community exists and survives by the presence of the people who make it up. The availability of persons enhances meetings, dialogue, communication and even a true sharing of goods in common. It is when people live together that a true sharing of each other's life and faith is possible. For this to be realized, it would require a graduation from the "me" to the "us". This graduation entails sacrifice, selflessness and personal conviction on the part of the members. A community is not formed by decree but by the collective free, open and mature persons who personally delight in

---

<sup>17</sup> Jordan of Saxony, OSA. *The Life of the Brethren ( Liber Vitasfratrum)*, translated by Gerard Deighan, edited by John E. Rotelle, OSA. Villanova: Augustinian Press, 1993. Pp. 63-64.

<sup>18</sup> Van Bavel T.J. OSA. *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, p. 140.

<sup>19</sup> Van Bavel T.J. OSA. *The Basic Inspiration of Religious Life*, p. 140.

interdependence, interrelationship and intercommunication. Community starts to exist when the "us" becomes paramount in the mind and action of the persons that make it up<sup>20</sup>.

### **Service and Mercy**

There is a very strong connection between community life and service. The serve that consecrated persons offer to the society is done through the community. And thus, the quality of community life lived by consecrated persons affects the quality of service which she offers to the society. This would mean that if mercy and love are not first experienced in the community, it would be difficult to give mercy and love in our services. 'No one can give what he does not have', says the old Latin adage. It is also said that 'Charity begins at home'.

### **Conclusion**

The primary question that this piece has attended to is how the consecrated life can be a witness to mercy. Mercy is first of all an attribute of God which is eloquently seen in Jesus, the Son of God. This work has argued that since the Consecrated Life is a vocation to conform one's life to Jesus Christ through living as He did in Chastity, Poverty and Obedience; a life that involves dedicating oneself to God for the service to the Church and for the salvation of the whole world, they cannot, therefore, but be signs of the mercy of God to the world. It becomes even more interesting if it is understood from the angle of the fact that consecrated persons have been called as a result of God's mercy- God had mercy on them and called them at a time when they were undeserving of the privilege of service to God and humanity. When this is understood and appreciated, it obliges consecrated persons to become witnesses of God's mercy. This witnessing is expressed in the exercise of authority, living of the community life, proclamation of the good news of salvation and in the service of the consecrated person to the community. This work strongly believes that the consecrated person's understanding of his vocation as one that God has mercied and called has a way of transforming his or her witnessing to the gospel.

---

<sup>20</sup> *Formation Plan of the Order of St. Augustine: Ratio Institutionis*, Rome, 1993, no. 28.