

CONSECRATED LIFE IN THE STRUCTURE OF THE CHURCH

B. E. ETAFO

The on-going clarification of the "vocation and mission" of the laity elicits and stimulates questions regarding the theologico-juridical status of the other "different ranks", namely the religious and clerics. Certainly the Council Fathers expressly affirm "Hence it is that the people of God is not only an assembly of various people, but in itself is made up of different ranks". (ex variis ordinibus). This diversity among its members is either by reason of their duties—some exercise the sacred ministry for the good of their brethren—or it is *due to their condition and manner of life*—many enter the religious state and, intending to sanctity by the narrow way, stimulate their brethren by their example."

As members of the "new people of God", the laity, religious, and clerics, constitute one communion. Lumen Gentium therefore states categorically: "The Spirit is for the Church and for each and every believer, the principle of their union and unity in the teaching of the apostles and fellowship, in the breaking of the bread and prayer"². In spite of this unity there is the need for a clearer differentiation of the various ranks or segments. This is healthy both for the groups as such and for the entire communion in the Church.

This article sets out therefore, to study the rank or segment referred to as the consecrated life or rather the "religious state". It will focus on the nature of the Church. We do not in any way intend here to tackle all the many questions this topic could refer to. Our study will however, attempt to situate the consecrated life within the various ranks of the Church and clearly indicate the nature and importance of the state of consecrated life in the Church. This is expected to be a theologico-juridical enquiry and consequently our method will be determined accordingly.

I would therefore like to study this theme under the following headings:

1. The terms, Religious, Consecrated life, Religious and secular institutes.
 2. The life and structure of the Church.
 3. Religious consecration.
 4. Conclusion.
-
1. The Terms "Religious", "Consecrated life", "Religious Institutes" and "Secular Institutes".

This term "Religious" as it is used in the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church calls for clarification. The Doctrinal Commission deliberately

refrained from giving a technical definition of the term "Religious"³. It was with much difficulty that the Council Fathers decided to adopt this expression "Religious"⁴. The term "Religious" in Lumen Gentium and consequently in the 1983 Codex Iuris Canonici, is accorded a broad meaning. It is a terminology applied to include not only those who make profession by vows, but also those who are bound by other ties to a life according to the same three evangelical counsels of poverty, obedience and chastity. The term is intended to include members of Secular Institutes⁵. In fact a "Secular Institute" is a type of consecrated life with its peculiar characteristic based on secularity.

Right after the Council the expression "Consecrated life" was adopted and this entered into common usage in both theological writings and in post-conciliar documents. The 1983 Codex Iuris Canonici opted for this same expression⁶. The common element in the concept "Religious" and the expression "Consecrated life" is the "condition and manner of life". The "Consecrated life" or the "Religious state" can be understood primarily as particular kind of life lived in chastity, poverty, and obedience. It is a life which is not to be understood in terms of the objectives services it renders but in the attitudes and conviction it expresses. Basically the "consecrated life" is characterized by the desire to follow Christ more closely (*pressius sequentes*) through the profession of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience and in this way be a witness of the eschatological nature of the Church.

The "consecrated life" is necessary, indeed indispensable to the Church. The theological essence of "consecrated life" is an inalienable part of the fullness and splendour of the Church's life and her charismatic structure. This life is intelligible mostly within the frame-work, of the redemptive mystery of Christ. Consecrated life as such by the profession of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience for the sake of Christ and the gospel, display and attests to a "sign" of the transcendence of God's kingdom and its goods and their eschatological fulfilment⁷.

Canon 573 art. I gives a rich doctrinal resume of the objective substance of consecrated life⁸. The essence of this life is the dedication or total reservation of oneself to God: a dedication willed by God and accepted by the believer, through which one wanting to belong wholly and exclusively to God, chooses the bond and the practice of the evangelical counsels. This form of life is a practical translation of the desire to be for God wholly and exclusively. The evangelical radicalism of gift required by God is expressed in various ways through the centuries and now concretized in the three classical counsels.

The counsels, more than any thing else, are a result of the consecration realized by God through the divine call of the person. This call and response is realized, received, made in and through the Church who confers a particular juridical status of consecration on the religious or member of the secular institute.

The profession of the evangelical counsels constitutes in the Church also a radical limitation and following of Christ as indicated in the Gospel. The three counsels are the clearest and most conspicuous sign of totally belonging to God. Intrinsically, consecration is not the work of the three counsels, rather the counsels are a result of this consecration.

The Code of Canon Law helps further in this clarification. It provides some essential elements for further clarification of the concepts "Consecrated life" Religious Institute" and "Secular Institute". From the Code it is evident that "Consecrated Life" is the generic term while "Religious" and "Secular" Institutes are two kinds of "consecrated life". Religious life is essentially of "religious consecration" while "secular institute" is of "secular consecration".

The consecrated life has both *theological* and *juridical* elements which help determine the category of persons within the structure of the Church. Briefly these theological elements are:

1. Following Christ more closely (Pressius sequentes);
2. The action of the Holy Spirit, from which this particular vocation originates and preceeds;
3. The total consecration to God, who is loved above every other thing;
4. A consecration by a new and special title perfective of that consecration acquired from baptism (L.G. 44);
5. A profession of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience;
6. A deep desire for the perfection of charity to which the observance of the evangelical counsels are means of expression;
7. The public witness of the eschatological character of the Church.

On the other hand the juridical elements are:

1. The stable form of life;
2. The canonical erection of the institute by the competent ecclesiastical authority;
3. The free and voluntary acceptance of this form of life by Christ's faithful;
4. The obligation regarding the observance of the evangelical counsels through vows or any other sacred bond.

The Religious Institute or the Religious life is a type of consecrated life. This is the total consecration of a person to God, in Christ, through the three evangelical counsels. This life manifests in the Church that wonderful spousal union, established by God, as a sign of the life to come. It entails a sacrificial witness. The Religious state makes one's

life an uninterrupted expression of the worship of the Lord in the effective charity towards God and neighbour. This spousal and sacrificial character of the religious life was reaffirmed by Pope John Paul II in his Apostolic Exhortation, "Redemptionis donum"¹⁰

Secular Institute which constitutes the second mode of Consecrated life, has its proper characteristic based on *secularity*. The consecrated life, referred to earlier on in this study, is in fact an essential and integral part of the Secular Institute. Secularity is the element which concretizes the secular institute. In this state of life community living is absent and members are to be truly immersed in the world. This secularity permeates the life. The apostolate exercised by members is more by being involved in and working in the world like a leaven (ad instar fermenti), through the work and activities proper to their secular condition.

This brief analysis of these concepts leaves us to maintain that the expression "Consecrated Life" is comprehensive enough to signify the members of the people of God this study has in mind. They are those Christian faithful who give themselves totally to God by consecration, religious or secular consecration, in order to live exclusively for God. These same people are also designated simply "Religious" in this study without the intention of excluding those of secular Institute.

2. The Life and Structure of the Church

Having made these clarifications concerning the nature and features of consecrated life, Religious and secular Institutes, it is opportuned to address ourselves to a pertinent question. Is this form of life by divine constitution or is it merely an ecclesiastical establishment? In other words does consecrated life exist as a divine constitution distinct from the hierarchical constitution which we are very familiar with? Our study now takes us to show that according to the teaching of the Council Fathers in Lumen Gentium, the consecrated life exists in the Church as part of the divine constitution distinct from the hierarchical one which is also of divine constitution.

To explain the place of consecrated life in the structure of the Church let us consider the two following statements from Lumen Gentium.

1. "This form of life has its own place in relation to the divine and hierarchical structure of the Church. Not, however, as though it were a kind of middle way between the clerical and lay conditions of life. Rather it should 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"¹¹

2. "The state of life, that, which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, while not entering into the hierar-

chical structure of the Church, belong undeniably to her life and holiness."¹²...

These statements emanating from the same council Fathers in the same instance, one right after the other, indicate strongly the fact that the theology on the consecrated life was still developing at the time they were made. It is however, clear from these texts that there is not just one divine constitution in the Church. There is the other dimension—the pneumatic dimension. Here the text says the consecrated life of the Church belongs to the "life and to the holiness of the Church", (L.G. 43)

Commenting on these statements Frs. P. Molinari and P. Gumpel state: "It is then asserted that the state of consecrated life belongs to the very life and holiness of the Church; and thus to all that pertains to her deepest being. Worth noting also is the addition of the adverb 'inconcusse', indicating something which cannot be removed, alienated, separated from. This is, then, as good as saying that this state of life belongs intrinsically to the life and holiness of the Church".¹³

It is abundantly clear therefore that the state of the consecrated life enters properly into everything that pertains to the life of the Church. This state of consecrated life belongs to the very essence of the Church and therefore to the Church's divine structure. Because it belongs "inconcusse" to the life and holiness of the Church it pertains to the divine origin and nature of the Church.

The corollary here is the point that this state of life is never merely of ecclesiastical origin. According to *Lumen Gentium* the state of consecrated life hinges essentially upon the counsels "which the Lord proposes to his disciples in the Gospel for them to observe" (L.G. 42) and particularly on the "precious gift of divine grace given by the Father to some. . ." (L.G. 42). It is the Lord who proposed the counsels and the gift of vocation is itself an action of God. It is consequently of divine origin. By implication institutes of consecrated life find their origin in God.

In conclusion we could say that on the basis of the divine and pneumatic constitution of the Church, a constitution which is also very real, there are the religious, men and women, who bind themselves in a stable and perpetual manner to tend to holiness by effective and radical living of the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty and obedience. There is also another constitution—the divine and hierarchichal constitution. Here we have the clergy as distinct from the persons who do not belong to the orders—the "laity. These two bases are essential to the one Church and both are of divine origin.

There is another point which is pertinent here. In the institutes of consecrated life the witness to God through consecration is prior to all other forms and this constitutes the specificity of this state of life. This is true for all forms of consecrated life. In this sense the religious life

is valued in the Church more for its being (esse) than for what it does (facere). The Religious or a member of consecrated life is not to be valued on the basis of other forms of life in the Church. This form of life should only be considered according to its proper form of life and that is according to the extent of the "being" of this life. Though Religious would find themselves participating in the evangelization apostolate of the Church, nonetheless, their proper relevance is estimated on the quality of what they are: consecrated persons. This mode of being can still be a perfect fulfillment of their own vocation even with no organised pastoral action (cf. CC. 673 and 674)

3. The Religious Consecration

This noun, *consecratio (onis)* is used at least 24 times in the documents of the Second Vatican Council ¹⁴. In this paper we shall limit our study to the pertinent texts from *Lumen Gentium* and *Perfectae Caritatis*. These texts speak of "baptismal consecration" and "religious consecration". In *Perfectae Caritatis* we read: "They have dedicated their whole lives to his service. This constitutes a special consecration, which is deeply rooted in their baptismal consecration and is a fuller expression of it."¹⁵

It is proper here to briefly indicate what really baptismal consecration is and then explain the consecration of a religious. Baptism initiates and contains all the forms of Christian life. The consecration of the Christian commences with baptism. It is a basic consecration which resembles what took place when the divine person became flesh. The humanity of Christ was thus radically consecrated as far as that humanity of Christ is concerned. Christ is the sacrament of encounter with God. But his sacramentality and his mediation is realized in the Church. The Church is the sacramental reality in which we encounter Christ. In baptism we are united to the death of Jesus in order to walk with him in the new life (Rom. 6:4). This dynamism invests the Christian life with the potentialities it needs from the beginning to its consummation. The grace of Christ and the gift of the Spirit, received during our initiation, contains all the pluralism of the Christian life.¹⁶

Consecration reveals the dynamic and religious aspect of a total belonging to God, lived as a witness of the faith in God. Therefore consecration is a type of holocaust of the person in constant motion towards divinity. This demands a kind of separation or detachment from nature, actuated in the measure and in the manner that the respondent answers the specific charism. Consecration moves one necessarily towards a certain distance from the things of the world, the goods and values, which the world offers but do not assist directly the reign of God. Every total consecration to God is the result of a triple movement: a detachment from creatures (ascetical dimension), a full attachment to God (mystical dimension), and a return to the brethren (apostolic dimension).¹⁷

Religious consecration is typical for it explains in a more explicit manner the baptismal commitment. The consecration proper to the religious

life is not "ontological" as that conferred by the sacraments which impose a character. However, this religious consecration is rooted in the baptismal consecration. The religious consecration is therefore a prolongation or a particular explicitation of the baptismal consecration. Thus the religious life is not different in nature or in order from that of the Christian life, but it is a continuation and a maturation of the same.

There is however a significant difference between both lives: Christian life and religious life. This is mainly in the aspect of the obligation of the latter. The Religious life is a form of relationship with God which assists in the purifying of heart, towards a spiritual freedom, and spurs on towards charity. In a way it conforms the Religious more fully to the poor and virginal life of Christ and his mother.¹⁸ This does not imply another class of life. Rather it is a particular state of life within the Christian life—a state in which members choose directly and immediately the service of God, observing in a more radical manner the detachment from temporal goods.¹⁹

Both the Christian life and the religious life have the same origin which is baptism and like all other states in the Church they have the same goal—perfection of charity. These, however, differ in the means they apply: Christian life is by precepts while religious life with its eschatological perspective pursues the perfection of charity through the evangelical counsels.

In matters like baptism, sacrament of Holy Orders, and Consecration of a Religious, many want to know who effectively realises the consecration asserted to have taken place. Very many insist that they were baptised or ordained or professed by God. There is much sense in this assertion. God is the first agent or actor in the profession of a religious. It is however the profession which really consecrates the person. Religious profession of the evangelical counsels detaches one from temporal goods and at the same time deposes that person to the service of God. When then these evangelical counsels are professed, they become public vows through the efficacious intervention of the Church. This action of the Church consecrates the individual in an official manner. This particular action of the Church illustrates, in a very clear way, the liturgical aspect and content and the social and ecclesial dimensions of the religious life; and at the same time it confers on the Religious the title of public person who consequently represents the Church. The action of the Church confers on the religious a sacred nature and on the part of the faithful a particular obliging position.

But we should acknowledge the objection of some scholars who hold that every Christian is already consecrated by God in baptism, and as such there cannot be a new and special consecration in the sense intended by the Council. We must remark here that such an assertion is due to a serious error of theological methodology. It is inadmissible in theology to take one concept and so exaggerate the wealth of its content as to

obscure or even negate other theological truths. To attribute to baptismal consecration a content which excludes any further consecration being effected by God, then we can no longer safeguard the theological truth—a dogma for that matter—that even the sacrament of orders confers a new consecration. It must also be said: that it is in an *analogical* manner that we talk of special consecration in the institutes of consecrated life. Members of institutes of consecrated life are truly and really consecrated. They are consecrated by God Himself.

However from the teaching of the Second Vatican Council it seems this consecration is limited in a proper way to those members who are totally and irrevocably given over to the service and honour of God by means of "perpetual" or "final" profession. According to Frs. Molinari and Gumpel: "This total donation is the condition 'sine qua non' for the special consecration of which the Council speaks. Hence one cannot legitimately invoke the Council's teaching on this consecration in reference to those who undertake only temporary obligations. The Council formally excluded such a possibility saying that 'with only temporary vows the sacrifice is not total', because 'there is a holocaust only when the person offers everything that he has to God, as St. Thomas says'.²⁰

Conclusion:

By way of conclusion it must be emphasised that according to the formal teaching of the Church, especially in *Lumen Gentium*, there are two divine structures or constitutions in the Church. The Religious constitutes the pneumatic or charismatic structure which is also divine. As Religious they are the faithful who build themselves in a stable and perpetual manner to tend to holiness through the bonds of the evangelical Counsels.

As regards the place of Religious in the Church, they belong inseparably to the divine constitution of the Church. This is on the basis of the divine and pneumatic constitution. Religious belong to the "charismatic" or "pneumatic" structure of the Church. The hierarchical constitution does not exhaust the divine constitution within the Church. Consequently, religious life is to be understood and evaluated according to the proper form of life of this state, the attitudes and values it expresses within the Church. This state, constituted by profession of the evangelical counsels, belongs inseparably to the life and holiness of the Church.

It has also become clear that the rank of the Religious cannot be considered a rank configured merely by the Christian consecration. Through the action of the Church the Religious is truly and really set apart for the honour and service of God. This we refer to as "religious consecration". It is God who consecrates and this is realized within the Church.

The on-going theological reflection and study of Christ's faithful, especially in the Nigerian Church, would need to spend more time in

assisting in the attempt for a better clarification of the various segments in the Church. The laity, religious, and clerics, are all equally members of the one Church of Christ. The Religious would however require special attention if only to help promote their unique nature and their essential role required for the proper establishment of any Church.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. *Lumen Gentium*, 13. It does seem that the language and meaning of this text does not lend the phrase "*variis ordinibus*" to be given other interpretations than what the Council Fathers intended, namely, the different categories within Christ's faithful. Consequently, it does not refer to the varied ranks in the sacrament of Holy Orders. We are concerned in this paper with the members of the People of God who are differentiated by reason of "their condition and manner of life" and we prefer to use the term "rank" with this intended meaning.
2. *Ibid.*
3. The Doctrinal Commission stated "*Neque placuit stricte dictum 'Religiosi' proponere*." in *Schema Constitutionis De Ecclesia*, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1964 Relatio de n. 43, P. 161, cf. *Acta Synodalia*, Vol. III, pars I, 316)
4. Cf. P. Molinari and P. Gumpel, *Chapter VI of the Dogmatic Constitution "Lumen Gentium" on "Religious Life"* (Rome 1987) PP. 17—19
5. *Perfectae Caritatis*; "While it is true that secular institutes are not religious institutes, at the same time they involve a true and full profession of the evangelical counsels in the world, recognized by the Church. This profession confers a consecration on the people" (P.C. II).
6. C. I. C. —cc. 573—730.
7. L. G. 44. "The profession of the evangelical counsels shines before them as a sign which can and should effectively inspire them to do so. For the people of God has here no lasting city but seeks the city which is to come. . . ."
8. Can. 573, par. 1. "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 as they foretell the heavenly glory."
9. The 1983 Code of Canon Law describes "Consecrated life" in C. 573, par. 1 & 2, "Religious Institutes" in C. 607, and "Secular Institutes" in C. 710.
10. Cf. John Paul II, Apostolic Exhortation, *Redemptionis donum*, March 25, 1984, nn. 7—8.
11. *Lumen Gentium*, 43.

12. *Ibid.* 44.
13. P. Molinari and P. Gumpel, *Op. cit.* P. 22—23
14. X. Ochoa, *Index verborum cum documentis Concilii Vaticani Secundi*, Roma, 1967, P. 107.
15. *Perfectae Caritatis*, 5.
16. A. Bandera, "*La Consacrazione a Dio per mezzo dei consigli evangelici*," *Vita Consacrata* 7 (1971) 7, P. 613.
17. Cf. E. Gambari, *Vita Religiosa Oggi*, Edizioni Monfortane, Roma, 1983, PP. 87—95.
18. *Lumen Gentium*, 45.
19. C. 573 specifically states "By a new and special title they are dedicated to seek the perfection of charity in the service of God's Kingdom. . . ."
20. *Relatio Generalis, Schema Constitutionis De Ecclesia*, No. 44, in *Acta Synodalia*, Vol. III, P. 162, Typis Polyglottis Vaticanis, 1964.

Rev. Dr. B. E. Etafo is the Registrar and a lecturer in Canon Law at the Ss Peter & Paul Seminary, Ibadan, Nigeria.