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Missionary Formation of Candidates to Priestly and Religious Life in Nigeria: A Psycho-Theological Model of Formation

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Abstract: The growing number of Nigerian priests and religious who undertake mission *ad extra* is an eloquent sign of the growth of the seed sown by the early missionaries. The new generation of missionaries record huge successes in their mission. Nevertheless, the issue of quality formation has remained a great challenge over the years. In view of this, formators have not ceased to improve themselves through formators' courses and on-going formation programs. More qualified and trained personnel are now available. Many intellectuals and spiritual masters are made directors of formation. They plan and implement the programme based on the teachings of the Church bearing in mind the different cultural contexts and signs of the time. Formators have applied different models in their formative programme ranging from the institutional model to the integrative model of formation. As a result, many have gained more confidence in their missionary works and recorded more positive outcomes. Despite this fact, there are still some deficiencies in pastoral strategies that manifest pronouncedly in relational difficulties and narcissistic tendencies (sexual abuse/harassments, embezzlement, power puzzle, dysfunctional relationships etc.). These could suggest a shallow relationship with God and certain limitations in relational skills,

highlighting the need for more insight on the formation of future missionaries. A deeper question could be *what is still to be improved: the content, process, or the structure of formation?*

This paper proposes a Psycho-theological model of formation through pedagogical mediation to educate, form and accompany the candidates. It opines that for a positive missionary experience, formation should embrace not only spiritual and theological contents but also psychological contents which gear towards a deeper understanding of the human person who is called to mission. Since missionary activity has meaning only in interpersonal relationship, this paper addresses issues relating to affective maturity which is at the root of a healthy relationship.

Keywords: motivation, boundary, attraction, empathy, emotional regulation, healthy friendship.

Introduction

During the General Assembly of a women Religious Congregation, the issue of stipulating the number of years for missionary work in Europe and America took a great deal of time to resolve since some sisters tended to stay too long in such mission. The major reason for the exercise was explicitly acknowledged as to give others the opportunity of benefitting from these missions. For some sisters, mission is synonymous with gain, connections and acquisition. No doubt some who work in economically viable countries come home to exhibit material sufficiency and give impression of being mercenaries rather than missionaries. On the other hand, the book, *The Memory of Self-donation*, presents a contrary situation. The author reported the reluctance of some missionaries to stay long in a mission land. In

fact, he categorically states that “immediately they arrived in the country of their first appointment, they indicate the number of years they are willing to stay and plan for their departure”¹ These two polarities of those wishing to stay long and not wishing to stay long point towards a shallow understanding and poor integration of the concept of mission. It is obvious that lack of fulfillment of any of the above-mentioned wishes results in different types of crises. Those who are in economically-developed countries would wish to stay longer while those in developing countries would not wish to do so. Therefore, this paper is an attempt to offer some insights and suggestions on the formation of candidates to help them embrace mission wholeheartedly, while integrating the challenges therein. When there is a solid formation, and when one understands mission, one does not worry about the duration of a mission, rather, one is even happy to contribute to the spread of the Good News.

A Psycho-Theological Approach of Missionary Formation through Pedagogical Mediation

This approach considers the intrapsychic dynamics of the candidates as fundamental for missionary formation. It recognizes the fact that the human person operates on three levels: psycho-physiological (the basic needs for survival) psycho-social (the need for developing social relationships), and rational-spiritual (the need to know the truth and the freedom of self-transcendence). This is the point of departure. Therefore, the first step in formation is to assert a harmony of the three aspects of

¹ Bede U. Ukwuije, *The Memory of Self-Donation* (Lagos: Hange Publications, 2009) xix. The author reported the outcome of a General Chapter of the Spiritan in Torre D’Aguilar, Portugal 2004.

functionality of the candidate. It is important to have some information on the psychological maturity of the candidates before forming the person. When there is mild disorganization, the psychologist can address and arrest the problem so that the candidate can proceed with the formation. The significant contribution of psychology to formation in this context is more of “corrective emotional experience”² of the candidates. This renders them internally free and more disposed to internalize the formative programme. Without this fundamental task, candidates will remain at the level of proclamation of values, without integrating them in their attitudes. The values will only remain at the gratification of the ego without the capacity for transcending them. This is due to the presence of unconscious inconsistency³.

On the other hand, candidates need to have a clear concept of mission. This can be done through a theological reflection on mission and missionary activity. The Vatican II Decree on the Church’s Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, presents mission in different dimensions. It is therefore the duty of the formators to

² Irvin D. Yalom, *The Theory and Practice of Group Psychotherapy* (Fifth Edition; New York: Basic Books, 2005) 27. According to him, corrective emotional experience is an effort to expose a patient who had experienced some kind of trauma or emotional abuse to a more favorable circumstance in order to help the individual re-live the experience in a positive way. In this way the person automatically corrects the previous experience in his or her psyche. The aim is to repair the traumatic influence of previous negative experience. Intellectual insight is insufficient for this exercise, it requires emotions.

³ Amedeo Cencini and Alessandro Manenti, *Psychology and Formation: Structures and Dynamics* (Mumbai: Pauline Sisters, 2010) 186. The authors sustain that a person is influenced by unconscious inconsistency when he or she lives in a state of internal disagreement. Hence, one does not control one’s own life because an unknown motivation falsifies and contradicts his/her proclamation of values. In this case, one’s structures and contents are in a conflictual relationship among themselves and create a conflict. The individual is aware of the consequences, but unaware of its origin.

lead the candidates through the document. In addition to that, Ukwuije presents mission as "self-donation"⁴, that is, a complete self-giving and decision to replicate the actions of Jesus Christ who went about doing good. Mission is not limited to building structures, signing contracts, getting viable projects or securing projects in perpetuity. It embraces all these but goes beyond these by the missionary attitude towards the people of God. The missionary's warm and genuine relationship with the people is a fertile ground for the conversion of individual hearts. Since the candidates are drawn to priestly or religious life in faith, they should be helped to understand the true meaning of mission. Some attitudes of missionaries portray shallow theological formation. This is manifested in certain superstitious beliefs, especially in Nigeria, such as accidents being caused by enemies of progress, belief in witches and wizards, reincarnation, etc which some missionaries sometimes promote. A good theology, without prejudice to the cultural values of a particular ethnic group helps to conquer these ideologies. In fact, the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria proposed a theological formation "based on faith, animated by the Holy Spirit, guided by the Word of God, and faithful to the tradition handed down by the Magisterium of the Church"⁵. The emphasis is on providing the candidates sound teachings of the Church, so that they do not understand mission merely in terms of humanitarian work which must be in line with the culture of the place. However, it is not enough that the formators provide clear doctrines on mission (content), the process

⁴ Ukwuije 2005, xx.

⁵ Catholic Bishop's Conference of Nigeria: *Ratio Fundamental Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, no. 62

of transmitting this is also of great importance. This is done through some pedagogical mediations.

Pedagogical Mediation to Educate, Form and Accompany

The word “educate” takes its origin from the Latin word “*educare*”, meaning to bring up, to rear”. It means “to train by formal instruction and supervised practice especially in a skill, trade or profession”. It also means “to develop mentally, morally or aesthetically especially by instruction”. In other words, to educate implies “to help a person to acquire a profound and lasting knowledge of oneself in all one’s aspects, united to a mastery of one’s own person with the purpose of directing all the energies towards the realisation of constructive goals and purposes”⁶. From various definitions of education, we see that education has a lot to do with the instructor and his or her methods. In educating, the formators are to put the priorities in correct order. The educator should be enthusiastic, cheerful, have a listening ear, and be exemplary. To educate also implies working on the actual self, that is, how the candidate is, at the conscious level and the present moment. It is to help the candidate to discover his or her values, strengths and weaknesses. This task requires sincerity which leads to truth. It is to aid the candidate to begin from the subjective knowledge of him/herself to the objective knowledge of God, others and the world. It requires a formator with a balanced personality who is capable of understanding candidates beyond their observable conducts. Here there is the need for empathy, love and patience.

⁶ Amedeo Cencini and Alessandro Manenti, *Psychology and Formation: Structures and Dynamics* (Mumbai, India: Pauline Sisters, 2010) 173.

Furthermore, to 'form' automatically gives the impression of having a specific model in mind as something new and better than what one is having at present. Here the ideal self is in question. It deals with the future, what one wants to be. It creates a type of unconscious ambition in oneself. In fact, to form "carries with it tensions and dissatisfactions, it asks of one to change his/her habits and his/her old lifestyles, it pushes ahead the equilibrium of the person towards unthinkable horizons..."⁷. Formation implies that there is an object of beauty which a person admires, is attracted to and as such wishes to imitate. Therefore, the formator must be in love with the beauty or be attracted to the object of formation. The formator acts like an artist or designer who is restless until he/she produces a portrait which is representative of the original model. It is the quest to replicate the admired image that increases the enthusiasm of the formator to put in his or her best to achieve the desired goal, which is to form missionaries in the footsteps of Christ.

It is worthy of note that formation in this context does not exclude the active participation and disposition of the candidate. The candidate remains the principal agent of his or her formation.

To accompany means "to share" and to share something vital like "the bread for the journey", that is one's own faith, the memory of God, the experience of struggle, of search, of his love..."⁸ It is not enough to educate and to form the candidates; there is need to accompany the candidates in their practice of the fruits of education and formation. This is because the task of the Church is not only to discern the vocations of candidates but also to

⁷ Amedeo Cencini, *The Sentiments of the Son: A Formative Journey in Consecrated Life* (Bandra Mumbai: Paulines Publications, 2005) 58.

⁸ Cencini, *Sentiments of the Son*, 63.

“accompany” priestly vocations”⁹. In this case, the formator relates to the candidates as an elder brother or sister who accompanies them, in virtue of having more experience. The Igbo proverb which says, *onye bu mmadu uzo sibe nri, ka ya enwe nkpomkpo ite*, meaning literally, that “he or she who begins to cook early enough, has more old kitchen utensils”, explains it better. This is different from spiritual direction which all the candidates are obliged to undergo as a necessary step in formation. It calls for a kind of informal atmosphere where the candidate knows that he or she is safe even to talk about his or her failures and mistakes. Consequently, the candidate believes in the person who accompanies him or her.

The Emmaus encounter is the model here (Cf. Lk. 24: 13-35). It was an informal setting, and the disciples were freely discussing, but even in that context, the one who accompanied them gave them some insight and opened their eyes to certain realities. It is based on faith. Hence, candidates may be passing through some stressful experiences like the disciples on the road to Emmaus, but when it is shared with a senior brother sister, they gain more insight regarding those difficulties. Trust and abandonment are the necessary virtues here.

Some Psychological Approaches and Formative Principles

Psychology and theology are to be integrated in the preparation of those for missionary activities. It is worthy of note that the use of psychology does not replace the role of grace and other spiritual merits in the formative process. These approaches include paying

⁹ John Paul II, *Apostolic Exhortation Pastores Dabo Vobis* (Città Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1992) no. 42

attention to the motivational system, affective maturity, appropriate relational boundaries, healthy friendships and how candidates manage their attractions.

1. Motivational System of Candidates

The formative period is a determining period in the life of candidates to priestly and religious life. This leads to their fundamental choice. Every meaningful decision in life originates from a plurality of motives. The research of Okeke (2013), shows that the need to exhibit visible signs of success and achievement is central in the motivational system of Igbo seminarians.¹⁰ These needs are some of the unconscious motivations of candidates during the initial formation. Normally the process of the vocational journey begins with emotional or intuition evaluation. Through the process of discernment, the formators lead the candidates to “a rational motive, born of reflective evaluation.”¹¹ In fact, the initial formation should be primarily occupied with this task, helping the candidates to gain some level of freedom which will enable them to take a free and deliberate decision. The formator should be able to detect whether the candidate is motivated by compliance, identification or internalization. Hence, a candidate who is motivated by compliance works towards getting a reward or avoiding a punishment. The reward-punishment is more in a psychological sense, so that one is simply advantage-oriented, without being attracted to the vocational values. One who is motivated by identification is simply interested in boosting the self-esteem or gratifying a relationship. However,

¹⁰ Cornelius U. Okeke, *The Future of Catholic Priesthood in Igboland. Dangers and Challenges Ahead* (Abuja: GiPi Publications, 2006) 185.

¹¹ Cencini and Manenti, *Psychology and Formation*, 411.

identification may lead to internalization of some values. Finally, the formator is to lead candidates to internalize the gospel values, not simply because they are important- to-them, but because they are important-in-themselves. In this way, they become part of their value system. Although the question of mixed motivation, *apparent good* and *real good* will never be effaced, there has to be a continuous channeling, re-directing, re-shaping and re-modelling of these desires to suit that of Christ, the great missionary. For this, there is need for formators to be psychologically prepared¹².

The Centrality of Affective Maturity in Mission

The success of any missionary activity depends on the quality of relationship that exists between the missionary and the people of God. This implies that a positive relationship which has affective maturity at its root is necessary for mission. It then requires one's capacity to acquire the relational skills to express one's feelings properly. John Paul II maintains that affective maturity should lead the candidates to develop and sustain human relationships in a peaceful manner, as well as develop a strong fraternal bond among one another and personal love for Jesus Christ¹³. This fraternal love for one another and personal love for Jesus are the essentials for mission. The area of affectivity is delicate to handle in the formation house. This is due to the fragility and sensitivity of the

¹² The Guidelines on the use of psychology in the administration of candidates for priesthood states that there is "the need for every formator to possess, in due measure, the sensitivity and psychological preparation that will allow him, insofar as possible, to perceive the candidate's true motivations, to discern the barriers that stop him integrating human and Christian maturity, and to pick up on any psychopathic disturbances present in the candidate", no.4.

¹³ John Paul II, *Pastores Dabo Vobis*, no.44.

human heart which is its direct object. The antithesis of affective maturity is "the inability to understand the integrity of the human person; inability to be in touch with oneself, or knowing one's passion, needs, desires, impulses and reaction"¹⁴. The aspects of affective maturity which this paper considers fundamental to mission are: emotional regulation, management of attractions, healthy relationships and relational boundaries.

Emotional Regulation: Emotions are tools of our most profound awareness which lead to the whole functioning of the person. They lead one into a greater self-awareness which enables one to recognize the emotion at work¹⁵. Candidates are to be helped to understand that emotions are morally neutral. This disposes them to accept and handle them better. Formation should be attentive to those who are emotionally deprived or inhibited from their possibly dysfunctional homes and supply this lack. In emotional regulation, the objective is to achieve a balance between the feeling aspect of a person and the execution of this feeling or emotion. Suppression of emotions would give rise to a dull life for, when St Irenaeus said that *the glory of God is the man fully alive*, he was asserting that man in his activity, and not passivity, brings glory to God. Formators are to encourage the slow candidates or the chronically introverted to be more active. They are also to pay attention to those who deliberately choose to remain passive so that their emotions may not betray them. They are to receive emotional support proper to their age, circumstance and background, for example a pat on the back for a candidate who

¹⁴ Linus Umoren, "Human Sexuality: Crisis and Challenge in Formation" in *The Catholic Voyage* (A Publication of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria; Vol. 9, 2012) 55-83, 80.

¹⁵ Karla MacLaren, *The Language of Emotions: What Your Feelings Are Trying to Tell You* (Boulder, Colorado: Sounds True, 2010) 3.

performs well in an examination, or a hug could result in emotional upliftment for the candidate. Furthermore, candidates are to learn the traditional way of being aware of their emotions, naming them and expressing them appropriately. If Jesus could weep (Cf. Jn.11:35); was angry (Cf. Mk.3:5); filled with joy (Cf. Lk. 10:21), was indignant (Cf. Mk.10:21), it follows that those who aspire to imitate Him should learn to do the same, knowing when, and how.

Management of Interpersonal Attractions: One of the major challenges of the youth is that of handling interpersonal attractions. Attraction is a momentary state when individual experiences the elation or euphoria of inclination towards the other, with the desire to be with the person for the fulfilment of needs. Attraction, which is a natural occurrence, could interfere seriously with the normal routine of a person's life, especially romantic or sexual attractions. It has an adverse effect on the formative process of a candidate. The reasoning in physics whereby like poles repel and opposite poles attract, can no longer be applied to interpersonal relationship in the present sex-oriented world. Same-sex intense attraction is a reality even in formation houses, and sometimes between a formator and a candidate. Opposite sex attractions are not excluded either. Candidates are to be helped to discover their sexual orientation in order to accept the attraction that goes with it. The process of commitment to Christ is an antidote to intense attraction. By this, candidates feel committed to Christ whom they have left everything to follow, they resolve to be loyal in following Him. This strengthens the will towards a consistent self-giving in conscious commitment. Once they are committed to their choice, they can resist the temptation of alternatives that apparently seems to be more attractive but

which could endanger one's vocation and relationship with God. The candidates are to be encouraged to recall their initial attraction to the priestly or religious life and meditate on God's love in their lives. They are to be encouraged to write their love story or journal and recount the favours and goodness they have received; these help them to strive to return love for love. Formators are to encourage candidates to read the book of the "song of songs" in the bible and reflect on it.

Development of Empathy: Despite the difficulties and challenges associated with the task of formation (time factor, economic factor, lack of personnel and so on), which cause situational stress in formation houses, the empathic behaviour is a prerequisite for the actualization of the goals of formation. Therefore, formators should be models of empathy and influence the candidates to toe that path. Empathy is the "ability to assume the perspective of other people and understand their needs and feelings"¹⁶. In this context, it consists of the missionary's care and sensitivity to the world of his/her collaborators or the people of God. In this manner, the missionary is able to perceive their thoughts and feelings, understand them and therefore move into an active response to their needs. It is important that missionaries do not only understand the people of God but communicate this understanding through verbal and non-verbal gestures. The feeling of connectedness which empathy creates in the other is a fertile ground for healthy relationship for missionary activities. Candidates are therefore to be aided to acquire some empathic attitudes like: listening without interruption, smiling, recognizing

¹⁶ B. Weiner and F. Bornstein, *Principles of Psychotherapy: Promoting Evidence-Based Psychodynamic Practice* (Third Edition; Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley, 2009) 30.

others' perspectives, affirming them, encouraging, and being present to people.

Healthy Friendships: Apart from a close and intimate relationship with Christ which candidates must strive to develop, an affectionate relationship with people is essential for missionary work. Poor relational attitudes impoverish missionary work. Formators are to help the candidates to develop the capacity to establish and sustain healthy friendships. However, the candidate must be aware that he or she is to adopt a celibate form of relationship. That is, "to love with the style of the one who in every relationship desires to be a limpid sign of God's love that does not invade or possess but loves and loves the good of the other with the same benevolence of God"¹⁷. This implies, integrating one's sexuality in the context of a mature relationship which is conscious of its limits and possibilities. The present-day ideology that justifies the "third way"¹⁸ is also not adaptable for the candidates. It is a distorted form of friendship which diminishes the love of God. Candidates are to get these concepts clear during their initial formation. A healthy relationship does not depend on interdependence theory of costs and rewards, whereby a

¹⁷ Congregation for Institute of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *Fraternal Life in Community* (Città Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1994) no.37.

¹⁸ Third way is a type of ideology which holds that deeply emotional and heterosexual relationships are necessary means to acquire emotional and psychological maturity. With this belief, some religious men and women engage in exclusive and intimate relationships with the opposite sex. This entails a romantic dating mentality which includes a mutual personal commitment that is likened to what is obtained in marriage. The only difference is that the fruit of marriage (children) is inhibited. Therefore, candidates are advised not to initiate such relationships. It blocks them from following Christ with undivided heart, which gives room for a more missionary availability.

relationship is based on what one gains or loses. In a healthy relationship, the primary motivation is genuine and sincere love which is simply "the will to extend one's self for the purpose of nurturing one's own or another's spiritual growth"¹⁹.

Mental hygiene is a good way of preserving healthy relationships. With the use of internet by some candidates, there is the temptation of watching pornographic films. This leaves emotional residues in their psyche. Eventually, their affective memory forces them to wish to relive and practice what they watched either in their devices or with their friends. In fact, Cencini maintains that formators are to be careful of those who believe they can read everything, feel everything and see everything, discuss everything and those who refuse to control their imagination and affective needs. They are the ones that easily fall prey to unhealthy relationships²⁰. This is because the mind keeps remembering the images previously observed, which are activated at any least affective provocation. As the Latin says: *Quod oculus non videt, il cor non desiderat* - what the eye has not seen, the heart does not desire.

Appropriate Relational Boundaries: The importance of psychological and physical boundaries cannot be overemphasized in the formation house. Boundaries exist to prevent bad elements like manipulation, intimidation and harassment which impede formation. A clear boundary helps in promoting the integrity of the candidate and the formation community. It wards off and

¹⁹ Scott M. Peck, *The Road Less Travelled. A New Psychology of Love, Traditional Values and Spiritual Growth* (25th Anniversary Edition; New York: Touchstone, 2003) 81.

²⁰ Cencini, *Sentiments of the Son*, 227.

discourages inappropriate behaviors. Different types of boundaries exist, ranging from rigid, enmeshed, to clear boundaries. Rigid boundaries are restrictive and put fear on the candidates as they permit minimal contact between the formators and the candidates. As a result, candidates see formators principally as authority figures who hold one's destiny in their hands. This ignites fear in them and leads to a superficial relationship. Consequently, values are not internalized but are practiced out of the need for compliance. Although this may positively foster autonomy to an extent, it also leads to a marked disengagement of the candidates from the process of formation and give rise to false autonomy. Rigid boundaries create a lot of stress as formators lack affection and emotional support which the candidates need given the age factor²¹. Enmeshed boundaries offer closeness and support in an exaggerated manner, so to say. In this case, the formators are too involved in the lives of the candidates to the extent that the later find it difficult to operate independently. This affects their competence in doing things and affects their formation. Therefore, a clear boundary is recommended in the formation house. This enables candidates to interact freely with the formators with respect and integrity. The boundaries between a formator and the candidates must be clear, conscious and purposeful. When these boundaries are appropriately observed right from the formation house, candidates learn to implement them in their future missionary relationships. Formators are to avoid dual or overlapping role relationships, which may sometimes produce errors of judgment, biases, and distortion of objectivity.

²¹ Michael P. Nichols, *Family Therapy. Concepts and Methods* (Ninth Edition; Boston, MA: Pearson, 2010) 170-171.

In order to be motivated positively for mission and obtain a certain maturity in affectivity, the role of the Blessed Mary is indispensable.

The Blessed Virgin Mary as the Tender Guide of Missionary spirit

A true Marian devotion based on the imitation of the principal virtues of the Blessed Virgin Mary is recommended for candidates, for example her outstanding capacity and virtue of pondering, that is, of not exploding even at the height of stress. Pondering here is neither in the sense of introspective or reflective nature, nor in the Greek sense of Socrates, *unexamined life is not worth living*. It is rather in the Hebrew sense of meaning "to hold, carry, and transform tension so as not to give it back in kind, knowing that whatever energies we do not transform we will transmit²²". It is this virtue that provides the candidate the opportunity to desist from unnecessary arguments which could eventually lead to quarrels. He or she contains her own point of view in his/her heart, until it is the right time for expression. Therefore, candidates are to nurture their relationship with Mary by praying through her and developing confidence in her. As a restless Mother who desires the success of her children, she will obtain for the candidates all the graces they need for their missionary work.

²² Ronald Rolheiser, *Sacred Fire: A Vision for a Deeper Human and Christian Maturity* (New York: Image, 2014) 147.

Conclusion

This paper tried to propose the psycho-theological model for the missionary formation of candidates. In this, the formators have a significant role to play. They are to educate, form and accompany the candidates so that they may develop 'missionary enthusiasm'²³. In their educative role, they are to help the candidates understand that they are responsible for their formation. Their active participation is highly recommended. The formators are to do these more through their exemplary lifestyles. They are to avoid ambiguous lifestyles or giving impressions of 'double messages' which are not helpful to the candidates. They are to provide a clear and theological insight on mission so that candidates understand their roles as missionaries. The article recommended some psychological approaches for a better missionary formation. When candidate's motivations for entering priestly or religious life are noted, the formators will be in a better position to understand the candidate. This helps in the subsequent formation of the candidates. Also, attention is paid to the candidate's way of processing emotions, friendships, the type of boundaries kept and how he or she manages attractions which are bound to be there, the candidate will gain more resilience and confidence for missionary work. Maturity in the afore-mentioned qualities contributes a lot to mission fulfilment. It sustains the missionary even amidst emotional and spiritual desolation.

²³ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Exhortation Evangelii Gaudium* (Città Vaticano: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2013) no.8.