

## EDITORIAL

**T**heologically, Consecrated Life has its origins in the mystery of Christ and of the Trinity. It stands as a sign of fraternity and Communion in the Church. Consecrated Life is built on the service of Charity, manifesting God's love in the world through prophetic witness, engagement in new fields of mission, and dialogue with everyone.<sup>1</sup> Africa is the birthplace of Christian religious life.<sup>2</sup> Of the many paradigm shifts in our historical developments, consecrated life more than once has been the first to sense the changes in history and grasp the calls of the Spirit. Today, too, the Church needs the prophetic life and visions of Consecrated life.<sup>3</sup>

The Synod of Bishops on Consecrated Life was held about thirty years ago. Since then, many important events, changes or trends in the Church and society have interpellated and still confront the Consecrated Life worldwide. Among these, we have the celebrated Year of Consecrated Life (2015) that invited Consecrated persons - as witnesses to the Gospel - to live the past with gratitude, the present with joy (passion), and the future with hope. In this way, Consecrated persons were called to "wake up the world". In 2019, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life published "The Gift of Fidelity, the Joy of Perseverance"<sup>4</sup>: this document demands looking at life as consecrated persons without closing one's eyes when problems or difficulties arise, and it aims to address what Pope Francis referred to as "'hemorrhage' that is weakening consecrated life and the very life of the Church."<sup>5</sup> Today, through the synod on Synodality, the Church calls on everyone to embrace and practice synodality through communion, participation, and mission; this is one of the vital ways of being, living, and leading people in a Church understood as the Family of God. The Church recognizes that she also "needs to let herself be questioned by the prophetic voice of consecrated life, the watchful sentinel of the Spirit's call."<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Cf. St. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 1996.

<sup>2</sup> "Africa is the cradle of the Christian contemplative life." (Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus*, n.119).

<sup>3</sup> XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops First Session (October 4-29, 2023), *Summary Report on a Synodal Church in Missio*, Part 2, No.10b.

<sup>4</sup> Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, *The Gift of Fidelity the Joy of Perseverance. Manete in Dilectione Mea (Gv 15,9) Guidelines* (2019).

<sup>5</sup> Pope Francis, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to Participants in the Plenary Assembly of the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life* (Clementine Hall Saturday, 28 January 2017).

<sup>6</sup> *Letter of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops to the People of God* (25/10/2023).

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In Africa, far from experiencing an acute lack of vocations and facing a 'haemorrhage' that weakens consecrated life and the very life of the Church, presently, there is the welcome phenomenon of a steady increase in vocations to the Consecrated Life and the Priesthood.<sup>7</sup> This phenomenon, a moment of grace, though filled with hope and promises seems to confirm "that the 'hour of Africa' has come" and it is a motive of thanksgiving to God.<sup>8</sup> However, history teaches us that the phenomenon of an increase in vocation in Africa must not necessarily be taken for granted nor presumed to be indefinite. Rather, with gratitude to God, it must be critically and carefully yet fully welcomed, assessed, promoted, and safeguarded. We must also learn lessons from other regions of the world that have once enjoyed similar experiences. Thus, observation raises the question: how can the African Church appropriate the visions and resources of this graced moment of "vocation boom" without allowing it to turn into a "vocation doom"? To foster the deepening of Christian faith and commitment to evangelization, there is the need for inculturation of faith, and also for perseverance and faithfulness to the charism and mission and to the people of God in Africa.

Therefore, the present edition of *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life* (TCV-Africa) chose to highlight this theme: "*Incultured Consecrated Life and the Growth of Vocations: Promoting and Safeguarding the Gift of Fidelity, the Joy of Perseverance.*"

With the flourishing of vocations to Consecrated Life and Priesthood, the Church in Africa has a new and unique opportunity to advance the promotion and safeguarding of the gift of fidelity and joy of perseverance in Institutes of Consecrated Life and secular institutes, while strengthening initial and permanent formation. Considering the profound importance of religious vocation in the Church, and the increasing number of entrances into Formation Houses and Seminaries, it is also alarming the rate at which some consecrated persons exit the Consecrated life. Sometimes, we need to interrogate ourselves about the retention rate of candidates admitted and the multidimensional factors leading to their separation, and about how to address the issue. This publication addresses some of the concerns while offering admonitions on how the current difficulties of members and departures in religious institutes and societies of Apostolic life as experienced in some regions can be avoided or mediated. The contributions here are suggestive templates on how we can work toward sustaining and safeguarding the fidelity and perseverance of members, young or elderly, especially in the face of some sensitive situations. They remind us about opportunities Africa has to

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<sup>7</sup> [http://www.fides.org/en/news/74319-Vatican\\_Catholic\\_Church\\_Statistics\\_2023](http://www.fides.org/en/news/74319-Vatican_Catholic_Church_Statistics_2023).

<sup>8</sup> John Paul II, *Church in Africa* (1995), n.6; John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata* (1996), n.2

learn lessons from the past, to be thankful and hopeful, and to work toward sustaining the growth of vocations.

Each author here writes on a chosen topic from the perspective of his/her research or pastoral interest. John Egbulefu, a Priest and Theologian, opens the conversation, as he examines the contribution of inculturated consecrated life to the deepening of Christian faith and fidelity to vocations. His essay, in four parts, highlights the principles relating to Consecrated Life; the practices as the application of the principles in concrete situations; the problems arising as the discrepancy between the principles and their practices due to the deviation of the practices from the principles; and proposals of some solutions to the problems partly in the light of the general theory of problem-solution.

Reflecting on the theme of Africa and the future of Catholicism, Olisaemeka Okwara, a Nigerian theologian and member of the Daughters of Divine Love, makes critical considerations on the formation of candidates for consecrated life and priesthood. She explores some of the factors that shape Catholicism today and the place of the African Church within these factors. Her essay premises this exploration on the thesis that cultivating grounded-dialogic and inculturated faith could be a credible resource for attaining the required task of Africa's role in the future of Catholicism, and that without such dialogic-grounded faith in the formation of candidates for Priesthood and Consecrated life, its enrichment of the global Church might be jeopardized.

The reflection by John Cardinal Onaiyekan, Archbishop Emeritus of Abuja, addresses a key and broader theme: *Church Life in Africa*. He gives some insights into what young people could do to make a positive impact on Africa. After making a general reflection on “the enigma that is Africa,” he presents the futile efforts that were made to make Africa rise. He invites us to look at the African church in history, and then draws attention to the church in Africa today, and to the place and role of Africa in the world church. Consequently, he offers an assessment and expectations of the African church as a witness to and in service of the African continent. The author, finally, shares his vision of the relationship between Africa and the USA Church. His article is an invitation to us all, too, as African Christians, pastors and scholars to carefully and honestly reflect on the state, the role and prospect of the Church in Africa today and in the future world church.

Reflections about vocations to Consecrated Life and Priesthood inevitably and certainly involve the question of generations. Juliana Osiyemi, a member of the Congregation of the Sisters of the Eucharistic Heart of Jesus, explores some aspects of *inter*-generational dialogue towards building of synergy in Consecrated Life in Nigeria. “Our past remains the greatest influence on how we deal with ourselves, others and God,” she claims. Noting the three key stages of human life,

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she argues that “each of the three stages of the human life is complete in itself, but one affects the other.” What would be the implications of this? She offers some suggestions on practical strategies for fostering intergenerational dialogue within the Consecrated Life.

Agnes Okoye, DDL, a Canon Lawyer, draws attention to the discernment of vocation in religious life, a complex and delicate process, especially when it concerns the challenges of departure from religious institutes. Departures from religious life nowadays are not few and insignificant. Several factors contribute to the departures. Okoye points out the ways to stop the malady and foster perseverance in religious life, as well as the value of accompaniment by a formator. Her article, first, explores the discernment of vocation to and departures from religious life in the light of recent research, and provides an overview of the discernment process; it discusses the reasons for departures and, then, offers some recommendations on how to support those called to religious life to live the life joyfully and to persevere in it. Consequently, while turning our gaze on departure from religious institutes, this study draws attention to the stable nature of religious life and the need to promote elements that foster happiness and fulfilment in Consecrated Life.

One of the major concerns of the Church in Africa in recent years is the growing phenomenon of migrants and refugees, now at a crisis level. Several religious orders and institutes are committed to this area of apostolate. From the viewpoint of Social Communications, Bishop Emmanuel Badejo of the Catholic Diocese of Oyo (Nigeria), and the President of CEPACS, focuses on “The Communicative Dimensions of the Church's Vision of Migrants and Refugees: An African Perspective”. The paper was originally delivered at a meeting of Catholic journalists and experts in social communications in Africa. It offers valuable insights into the pastoral mission of the Church, including consecrated persons and other pastoral agents who are dedicated to the service of migrants and refugees. He suggests that everyone should correctly expound the vision of the Catholic Church on migrants and refugees. We should confront the often-sad reality of migrants and refugees of the African continent with the vast possibilities of our calling as communicators of Gospel values in the Church in Africa. “We would have before our eyes not numbers, not dangerous invaders, but the faces and stories, gazes, expectations and sufferings of real men and women to listen to.”<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>9</sup> Pope Francis, *Message of His Holiness Pope Francis for the 56th World Day of Social Communications*, 2022.

The Ikechukwu Kanu, OSA draws attention to the urgent need for inculturation of consecrated life in Africa, highlighting what he calls the “logic for promoting and safeguarding indigenous gifts of fidelity”. *In faithfulness to the teachings of the Church's Magisterium, theology and Institutes of Consecrated life in Africa should pass from doctrinal and theoretical enunciations to practices as it relates to inculturation. The first African Synod (1994)* “considers inculturation an urgent priority in the life of the particular Churches, for a firm rooting of the Gospel in Africa. It is 'a requirement for evangelization', 'a path towards full evangelization', and one of the greatest challenges for the Church on the Continent “ Inasmuch as “inculturation includes the whole life of the Church and the whole process of evangelization,” *inculturation of Consecrated life is necessary and feasible. The author seeks to establish the possibility of the inculturation of consecrated life in Africa and further provide the possible areas where this inculturation could take place. the inculturation of consecrated life, he claims, is possible within the context of the evangelical vows (that is, chastity, poverty, and obedience) and community life. Inculturation is an expression of a genuine encounter between faith and the culture of the African people; despite the challenges, he asserts that there are many opportunities that this encounter promises and will hopefully be welcome.*

Finally, the reader will find, in this volume, the recent document of the Conference of Major Superiors in Nigeria (CMSN[Men]) and the Nigeria Conference of Women Religious (NCWR), titled: “*Policy on Safeguarding Minors and Vulnerable Persons for the Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life in Nigeria*”. The new norms serve to strengthen the measures of accountability, reporting, and prevention of the sexual abuse of minors and vulnerable persons, as well as those perpetrated through abuse of authority. They reflect the commitment of both Conferences to protect minors and vulnerable persons in a transparent, accountable and responsible manner.

*Enjoy reading, and spread the word! Wake up the world!*

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