

# ON FOSTERING PRIESTLY AND RELIGIOUS VOCATIONS

(Lecture delivered in Shanahan Hall, Onitsha, on 18 September, 2021)

Our Holy Mother, the Church, regards as very important the fostering of vocations to the sacred priesthood and to the religious life. These two vocations touch in a very delicate way the heart of the apostolate of the Church that the Lord Jesus founded. It is therefore fitting that today we focus attention on the theme, *On Fostering Priestly and Religious Vocations*.

We shall begin with a brief statement of what each of these two vocations means and follow it up by showing why it should be fostered or promoted. The central place in the preparation of the candidates for these two ways of following Christ is occupied by the formators in seminaries and in religious houses, and these, therefore merit primary attention. But other formators of future priests and religious have their irreplaceable roles and our reflection has to give them their due places. They are parents, priests and bishops, professed religious, parishes, Catholic organizations of the laity and schools. How the Christian community receives ordained priests or professed religious also merits a word. We shall conclude with a respectful thought on candidates who, for various reasons, do not arrive at priestly ordination or religious profession.

## **1. Essentials of Priestly and Religious Vocations**

The Lord Jesus chose twelve Apostles, made them priests and bishops, and gave them power to transmit this ministry in his name until the end of time. The Church has understood the sacred priesthood as coming by apostolic succession from the Apostles down to our times. A priest is ordained to preach the Gospel, to celebrate the sacred rites, and to gather the people of God together under the leadership of his bishop.

The way of life lived by Christ and taught by him “laid the foundation for a pursuit of perfect charity through the exercise of the evangelical counsels, and how such a pursuit serves as a blazing emblem of the heavenly kingdom” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 1). The consecrated life took many forms from the days of Saint Anthony

of Egypt (251-355) and today is canonically approved in the forms of monasteries, religious orders and congregations, secular institutes, hermits and other forms. They all take the three vows of chastity, poverty and obedience. In our present paper, we focus on the first two forms, monasteries and religious orders and congregations which in general can be called the religious. They are also the most numerous of those who live the consecrated life. The Church is grateful to God for the gifts and charisms of such great religious as Saints Benedict, Bernard, Francis of Assisi, Clara of Assisi, Bernard, Dominic, Ignatius of Loyola, Don Bosco and Teresa of Kolkata. As the Second Vatican Council puts it: “The religious state reveals in a unique way that the kingdom of God and its overmastering necessities are superior to all earthly considerations” (*Lumen Gentium*, 44).

## **2. Need to Foster these two Vocations**

As the Lord Jesus went about cities and villages teaching, preaching and working miracles, he saw crowds, had compassion for them and said to his disciples: “The harvest is plentiful, but the labourers are few; pray therefore the Lord of the harvest to send out labourers into his harvest” (Mt 9: 37-38). Divine Providence will not deny to his Church the young people needed to answer to these vocations. But God expects us to pray for this purpose and to do our part to get them realized.

Even when a young person has responded positively to these two vocations, there is still a long way to go for a proper living of them. To follow God’s call does not exempt the individual from prayer and discipline, difficulties and risks, courage and suffering and the need to learn to go against the current regarding what many members of society may be doing. The candidates and their formators are bound to engage in discernment in order to find God’s will more clearly for each candidate. This can include prayer, reflection on the candidate’s qualities, abilities and tendencies, seeking advice from parents, teachers and other wise people and examination of conscience by the candidate.

The Church should also in suitable ways make appeals to young people to embrace these ways of life. No matter how happy and abundant the response of young people may be at a particular moment to these two vocations in a local Church, like in Nigeria at the moment, there should be no presumption that this will always be so. The Church in Nigeria, for example, can learn from the situation in most parts of Europe and North America at the present. It is not superfluous to arrange organized appeals for candidates to these two vocations in schools, parish

gatherings and youth rallies. A diocese could think of practical arrangements, such as providing a mini-bus for representatives of various religious congregations for women and another for men to make such appeals. After this show of unity and harmony between the various religious institutes, individual religious can make themselves available to young people who want to consult them. On the world level, we thank God that the Church celebrates each year a day for the promotion of priestly and religious vocations, generally the Fourth Sunday of Easter.

### **3. Role of Seminary Formators**

From the days of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) the Church has seen the necessity of setting up formal seminaries for the formation of future priests. Some countries have junior seminaries for boys at the secondary school level for preparation for the sacred priesthood. Of obligation are what we in Nigeria call senior or major seminaries where candidates are formed in philosophy and theology. Most parts of the world today prepare their candidates with a year or two of vocation discernment before philosophy.

What applies to all these stages is that the priestly candidate is not just taught courses or principally tested in examinations. A much more important and deeper requirement is the all-round formation which the candidate receives in prayer life, general spiritual discipline, sacramental life, living of the Christian life by deepening in the various virtues, pastoral practice and general following of Christ with intense commitment. A key role is played by the ordained priests who cooperate with a seminary rector in the all-round preparation of the levites. That is why the Church calls these priests formators and not just professors. It would be a pity if a priest selected by his bishop for this key apostolate does not appreciate its importance and the honour being done to him, but rather prefers to teach in a university.

It follows that the Church in any country should regard the choice of priests who are to be seminary formators as a most important responsibility. It is not enough that such priests have the needed university degrees. Is it not obvious that they should be priest models, since no one can give what he does not have? They themselves need special formation in order to fulfil well their role as formators of future priests. Saint John Paul II therefore states that “the bishops first of all should feel their grave responsibility for the formation of those who have been given the task of educating future priests” (*Pastores Dabo Vobis*, 66). The Congregation for Catholic Education insists: “Formators need to be adequately prepared to carry out

a discernment that, fully respecting the Church's doctrine on the priestly vocation, allows for a reasonably sure decision as to whether the candidate should be admitted to the seminary or house of formation of the religious clergy, or whether he should be dismissed from the seminary or house of formation for reasons of unsuitability" (*Guidelines for the use of psychology in the admission and formation of candidates for the priesthood*, 2008, n.3).

Worthy of special mention in the preparation of future priests is that the seminary formators should teach the seminarians well on the vocations of the religious and the lay faithful, together with the theology that underlies these vocations. This is necessary in order to equip priests to work with religious and lay people, not to assume an attitude of domination towards them and therefore to avoid all behaviour that savours of clericalism or class arrogance.

#### **4. Role of Formators of Religious**

"The proper renewal of religious institutes depends chiefly on the formation of their members", says the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (*Directives on Formation in Religious Institutes*, 1990, n.1). Every religious congregation or order makes a careful choice of those proven members who are to be its formation personnel. It will be well if the formators of religious pay special attention to training the candidates in emotional maturity, honesty of character which avoids all pretence and duplicity, avoidance of wrong ideas on holiness such as praying in the chapel when the regulation says the novices should be playing games, exclusion of all abnormal desire to please the superior and that stubborn conviction of a candidate that he, or more often she, must live and die a religious even when all advice is that another way of life is the indication of God's will arrived at by careful discernment. In the Nigerian situation, it is also useful to help candidates to the religious life not to see themselves as superior to the lay faithful, to look down on marriage or to seek special seating in church celebrations and in social functions.

Experience has proved that both for candidates to the religious life and for seminarians, it is useful to engage the service of proven psychologists. These can help the formators to see what side of the character of each candidate needs to be attended to. They can also advise which candidates should be counseled to choose another vocation in life.

## **5. Role of Parents and Family**

Basic education, character formation and general launching into life in society are all received in the family and especially from the parents. When Bishop Giuseppe Sarto (who later became Saint Pope Pius X) showed his new bishop's ring to his mother, the latter admired his episcopal ring but also informed her son that her wedding ring was better. We may add that her wedding ring helped to fashion his episcopal ring and to lay foundations for it. Is it really necessary to assert the importance of the parents forming the children in the virtues of charity, self sacrifice, good consideration of other people, chastity, honesty, single-mindedness, prayer and love of the Church? Without these fundamental virtues, a vocation to the priesthood or the religious life is not likely.

It is right for parents to desire and pray that one or more of their children be called by God to the sacred priesthood or the religious life. This would be a great honour for the parents and for the family. The parents should be calm about what happens. It would not be correct for the parents, or relatives, to pressurize the children one way or the other. Rather if one of their children expresses the desire for the priesthood or the religious life, the parents should thank God and encourage their son or daughter to reject all half-measures and live their vocation with hundred per cent dedication. The Nigerian response to the call to follow Christ has on record a family where three daughters all became religious and another family from which five priests and sisters originate. God be praised for his grace, and may the parents be blessed now and for ever.

Some parents may be too poor to find the funds to pay for the formation courses of their children who opt for the priesthood or the religious life. An attentive parish priest can seek help from richer individuals or from parish funds. It is not right that parents or family members should expect to be enriched with Church funds just because their son or relative is a priest or a religious. It is understandable if a diocesan priest gives his parents or relatives a little money from the modest pocket money that the diocese gives him. But relatives should not tempt their priest son or relative to divert Church funds to them. Similar remarks apply to religious brothers and sisters. Rather the relatives should give them finances to promote Church works and care for the poor and the needy. Here, we must praise those parents and relatives who are doing precisely that!

## **6. The Role of Bishops and Priests**

It is obvious that bishops and priests play a key role in the fostering of priestly and religious vocations. Their personal example has fundamental importance since example attracts and convinces more than words. It is remarkable that where Blessed Cyprian Michael Tansi worked as a parish priest, many priestly and religious vocations arose. When he was at Dunukofia, from 1940 to 1945, many boys just wanted to be like him. In 1944 almost all the boys in Standard Six at Saint Anthony's school, Dunukofia, who were living in the boarding house set up by Father Tansi, took the entrance examination to the Junior Seminary. We heard later that the seminary superiors found it hard to believe that a whole class had the priestly vocation.

Bishops and priests celebrate and preach at priestly ordinations and at the profession Mass for religious. They have ample and precious opportunities to preach on these vocations and to request the people to pray for more suitable candidates. They are not to forget to explain what the religious life means for men, as different from the priesthood, because many people do not really understand the vocation of religious brothers. They think that a brother is a man who did not succeed in becoming a priest. This is wrong. It is a fundamental misunderstanding of what the religious life is all about. The religious brother or sister takes the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience in order to follow Christ more closely. This radical discipleship is different from the priestly calling which is to preach, to celebrate and to gather the people of God together.

Priests promote priestly vocations by training altar boys in discipline, silence, prayer and reverence. Seminarians on apostolic work or holidays learn from a zealous priest how to celebrate with faith, how to pray, how to work with lay people and religious and how to be detached from money and other earthly goods. Priests give to religious brothers and sisters example on how to love the Church, how to catechize and how to minister to the poor, the old and the handicapped.

Bishops and priests are also well positioned to encourage the lay faithful and the religious to contribute to the selection of seminarians and future religious and to their training. This has to include discreet ways of informing the seminary formators and the superiors of the religious about candidates who seem unsuitable for such vocations. Sometimes the lay people see what the clerics and religious may not notice regarding some candidates to these two vocations.

## **7. Role of Catholic Community**

Apart from the priests, the Catholic community in the parish or beyond it is made up of religious brothers and sisters and lay people many of whom are organized in societies such as the Laity Council, the CMO, the CWO, the CYON, the CBO and the CGO. In many ways these people contribute to the selection and training of candidates to the priesthood and the religious life. They give advice to candidates and to the formators. They work with the candidates according to what is possible in the parish or even diocesan situation. They show love and respect for the candidates. They associate these candidates with pastoral or other work, much as apprentices learn from masters. They do not forget to give respectful corrections to those who make mistakes. They make clear to candidates that the lay people are not willing to support poor quality priests or religious. Without threatening any of them, the lay people and religious are nevertheless aware that before ordinations to the diaconate and before final profession of religious, there is an announcement made in the parish that any one who knows what could be an obstacle should come forward and speak before it is too late. In this way, it has happened that lay people and religious have saved the Church from the mistake of ordaining an unsuitable person to the priesthood, or allowing such a person to make religious profession, with the embarrassing consequences that one can guess. It is very encouraging to see that some lay men and women serve in seminary commissions in some dioceses and that the CWO for many decades has been sending food items to the seminary. May God bless and reward all those lay people who are contributing in many ways to the selection and formation of future priests and religious.

## **8. Role of the School**

The school, being the institution to formalize and quicken the work of education, can contribute much to the fostering of priestly and religious vocations. If a school performs in accordance to what is expected of it, it will form its students in the basic virtues of study, discipline, punctuality, due attention for law and order, respect for established authority and acceptance of failure which examinations and sports can teach. Such attitudes are precious when it is a question of suitability for the priesthood or the religious life.

If the school is a well functioning Catholic school, then its increased capacity to orient students to such vocations is obvious. A good Catholic school offers students a living synthesis of faith, school discipline, character formation,

orientation to meaningful citizenship and dedication to serious studies, in short, integral education.

To a great extent, the teachers make the school. Many priests and religious know that they owe much in their initial formation to their school teachers at the primary and secondary school levels. My personal experience is that my teachers had joy in seeing their students grow up as serious contributors to the apostolate of the Church. Under the leadership of Blessed Cyprian Michael Tansi, I remain grateful to such primary school teachers as Matthew Eke, Christopher Nwonyugbo, Parick N. Okeke and Vincent Okolo. In the Junior Seminary, I passed through the careful hands of Father William Brolly, C.S.Sp., Charles Amasiani, Fidelis Ezemenari and others. In the Major Seminary, I cannot forget Father James O'Neill, C.S.Sp., at Enugu and Monsignor Felice Cenci in Rome. Priests and religious remain grateful to their teachers all along the line.

### **9. On Encouragement of Ordained Priests and Professed Religious**

There is a beautiful custom in Catholic communities in Nigeria, especially in Igboland, to show encouragement to a newly ordained priest or professed religious. This often takes the form of a reception arranged in honour of the person after Mass. Apart from words of praise, the Catholic community, no matter how poor, makes an effort to make visible donations. Some communities do not hesitate to give a newly ordained priest a motor car.

Such generosity has to be praised, taking into account that many of the people are not rich. Sometimes one or more parishioners volunteer to buy the vehicle. The young priest, while being obviously grateful, should resist the temptation to desire a bigger car than what the people can afford. And inter-town rivalry should not lead the parishioners to undertake more than they can afford, in an effort not to donate a car smaller than what another town gave their own new priest. It should also be remembered that gifts which religious receive, are given to their religious order or congregation and are not appropriated by the individual.

### **10. On Candidates who do not reach Ordination or Religious Profession**

The very nature of the seminary or the religious noviciate is to engage in formation to see if the candidate is suitable for priestly ordination or religious

profession. This therefore includes the possibility that a particular candidate may at the end not be found meant for that vocation. Divine Providence has a plan for every human being. Discernment is the effort to seek to know this will of God for each particular person. Studies, prayer, discussions, consultations and self examination are means towards discernment. It is not a negative thing, much less a disgrace, if at some stage of the seminary or religious formation, it becomes clear that the candidate is meant for a vocation in the lay state. The will of God for each person is more important than what that person wants, or what his parents or parish priest would prefer.

Some people who have been advised to leave the seminary or religious novitiate (I prefer not to call them ex-seminarians or ex-religious) have proved themselves to be excellent lay people who have discharged major functions in Church and society. Some have become presidents of republics, famous university dons and leading public figures. The parents of Saint Thérèse of Lisieux, Louis Martin (1823-1894) and Zélie-Marie Guérin (1831-1877) tried to become a priest and a religious respectively, but were advised that that was not their vocation and that they should live the lay state. They married. One of their daughters, Thérèse, is canonized. Another daughter is now in the process for beatification and canonization. They themselves were canonized together on 18 October 2015. God's will is the best for every one of us!

It follows that seminary staff and the superiors and formators of religious should make a big effort to help seminarians and candidates to the religious life to appreciate that the most important decision for their lives is what God wants. Those candidates who have to be advised to seek another vocation should not be sent away in a climate of rejection or failure. They are not rejected by the Church. They should remain in friendly terms with the priests or religious who trained them. They should regard as precious the formation they received in the seminary or the novitiate.

In this respect, it is sad that some ladies who are advised that the religious life is not their vocation, absolutely refuse to accept such advice. They insist that they have to live and die as religious. Some of them navigate from one other religious order or congregation to another, not excluding those in Europe or other African countries. Some congregations that accept them without due investigation, eventually after many years discover what the original congregation already knew. While there can be no mathematical certitude about the unsuitability of a particular lady for the religious life, it looks rather risky that a person who has been sent away

from a congregation now wants to found a new congregation and begins to gather some girls around herself. Bishops and priests cannot avoid the unpleasant responsibility of doing what is possible to save young girls from such toying with their lives. Sometimes it becomes necessary to make some helpful announcement to the Catholic community regarding such ventures.

One can see from such developments which are not pure fantasies, why Holy Mother Church has rather strict rules on the setting up of a religious congregation. The Church legislates on the importance of proven rules and constitutions and on the minimum number of members before the diocesan bishop applies to Rome for the green light to approve a pious union as a religious congregation.

Respected brothers and sisters in Christ, the priesthood and the religious state are gifts of the Lord Jesus to his beloved Spouse, the Church. We adore Divine Providence. We thank the Lord. May the Most Blessed Virgin Mary, Mother of the Church, intercede for us so that every one of us, each in his or her vocation, may do what in our power lies, to foster vocations to the sacred priesthood and the religious life.

+ Francis Card. Arinze.

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