

THE NATURE OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND THE QUESTION OF PROLIFERATIONS OF NEW FORMS IN IGBOLAND

Samson Ejiofor Asadu¹

ABSTRACT

The consecrated life has evolved in the Church as an aspect of her life and mission in the world. When the Church entered Igboland, it also came with this aspect of the ecclesial life. Since then, the consecrated life has blossomed in Igboland with the emergence of indigenous institutes. In fact, there is a proliferation of private associations of Christ's faithful either pretending to be institutes of consecrated life or seeking ecclesiastical erections in various dioceses in Igboland. These associations admit young people who feel called to consecrate themselves to the service of God and the Church by way of the profession of the evangelical counsels. This situation in Igboland calls for evaluations and consequently a clear yardstick for authenticity of charisms and determination of what constitutes an institute of consecrated life. The Church which sees herself as communion and is always reforming (*Ecclesia semper reformanda*) continues to evaluate the nature of consecrated life and its role in the mission and life of the Church. This article tries to x-ray the nature of consecrated life especially from the Vatican II Council onwards vis-à-vis the proliferation of institutes in Igboland: what makes an association to become an institute of consecrated life? This article has two basic objectives: **to provide young persons who feel called to live a life consecrated to God by way of profession of the evangelical counsels with a yardstick for evaluating different associations of Christ's faithful which**

¹ Samson Ejiofor Asadu is PhD student, Faculty of Canon Law, Pontifical Lateran University, Rome.

parade themselves as institutes of consecrated life; and also to invite founders to a change of heart and attitude, a *metanoia*—compunction of heart about their errant ways which includes a firm purpose of amendment and reformation (Mk.1:4;Cf.Mt.3:7-10) and not merely *metamelomai* (used of Judas in Mt.27:3) to indicate a futile regret.

Introduction

By divine institution, the church is divided into clergy and laity; and from these two divinely constituted hierarchical structures are drawn both laity and clergy who profess the evangelical counsels either through vows or other sacred bonds approved by the church and they promote the mission of the church (cf. can. 207). The total consecration of a person to the service of God by way of professing the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience (Cf. cann.599-601) has its evolution in the church but it is almost as old as the church itself. But considering that its divine origin is debated: many say it has only an ecclesiastical origin while others recognise a third but pneumatic structure; also, considering that there is a geometric proliferation of associations of Christ's faithful which portray themselves as new forms of consecrated life and/or duplications of already existing ones, one may begin to ask questions about the future of Consecrated life in Igbo land.

In the Igbo Traditional Religion, there were men and women who were specifically chosen by some deities or who willingly submitted themselves to some deities and dedicated their entire lives to the service of those deities. So, the idea of the total dedication of oneself to a deity was not entirely new to the Igbo people of Nigeria. When Christianity came into Igbo land, it did not take much time for vocations to the priesthood and religious life to grow, in that, the practice of dedicating oneself to a deity existed in the traditional religion prior to the advent of Christianity. The traditional practice could be seen as a historical predisposition. In this tract, I will try

to present a theologico-canonical understanding of the nature of the concentered life in *Lumen gentium*⁴⁴ and the current proliferations and/or duplication of associations of Christ's faithful parading as institutes of consecrated life vis-à-vis a possible future and gloomy prognosis.

The Nature of the Consecrated Life

Prior to Vatican II, the expressions, "state of perfection", "life of perfection" were commonly used to refer to all those who professed the evangelical counsels. The "state of perfection" or "life of perfection", as it was called then, was understood as having various origins: from the New Testament itself in the form of consecrated widowhood and virginity²; from the eremitical forms of monasticism in the 3rd century; from the mendicancy characterized by poverty, preaching and works of charity; from the apostolic life offering fruits of meditation to apostolic services; and from the secular institutes serving as hidden leaven in the world.³ I would not bother you with a detailed analysis of the ecclesiastical documents in the historical evolutions of the consecrated life in the church prior to Vatican II, suffice it to say that the prevalent view was that the Church is hierarchically divided into clergy and laity by divine institution.⁴ In trying to x-ray the nature of consecrated life, I would

² VATICAN II COUNCIL, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, 1, October 28, 1965, in AAS 58 (1966), 702. (all English translations of all the official documents of the Church are taken from the website of the Holy See: www.vatican.va unless otherwise stated).

³ R. M. McDERMOTT, *Commentary on canons 573–746*, in J. BEAL, J. CORIGEN & T. GREEN (eds.), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, Theological Publications in India, Bangalore 2003, 741.

⁴ Three sources prior to Vatican II are very relevant here: CIC/17, c. 107: *Ex divina institutione sunt in Ecclesia clerici a laicis distincti, licet non omnes clerici sint divinae institutionis; utriusque autem possunt esse religiosi*. Cf. AAS 9/II (1917), 28; Pius XII, apostolic constitution, *Provida Mater Ecclesia*, February 2, 1947, in AAS 39 (1947), 116: *Res sane digna quae attente ponderetur: dum alii duo canonicarum personarum ordines, scilicet clericorum et laicorum, divino iure, cui ecclesiastica adiungitur institutio (cc. 107, 108, § 3), ex Ecclesia petuntur, quatenus ipsa est Societas hierarchice constituta et ordinata; haec media, inter*

only focus on the Vatican II and the current code of canon law, however with focus on the general principles of canonical traditions and opinions of learned authors (Cf. cann. 17 & 19).

While the “state of perfection” continued to feature in the earliest drafts of the Vatican II documents, by the end of the council, it had already given way to the term “consecrated life”. This implies that although some persons already dedicated themselves to the service of God by professing the evangelical counsels, the term “consecrated life” became popular only after 1964. The council fathers were basically divided along two lines of thought concerning the nature and place of the consecrated life in the Church. On the one hand, some were of the view that consecrated life is not part of the divinely constituted essential structures of the Church, even though it constitutes some kinds of structure: it is a structure in the Church, not a structure of the Church. On the other hand, others were of the view that seeing the consecrated life as not of divine origin implies a lack of respect and appreciation for a way of life that had contributed so much to the Church over the centuries not only in their call to holiness but also in their activities which have been fruitful and necessary to the life of the Church. For this line of thought, the Church is not only hierarchical but pneumatic/charismatic and the evangelical counsels are of divine

clericos et laicos, religiosorum classis, quae utrisque clericis et laicis communis esse potest (c. 107), ex arcta peculiarique relatione ad Ecclesiae finem, sanctificationem nempe, efficaciter, rationibusque adaequatis prosequendum, tota desumitur;; and PIUS XII, allocutions Annus sacer, December 8, 1950, in AAS 43 (1951), 27-28: Ante omnia iuvat Nos paucis perstringere, quinam religiosorum Ordinum et Congregationum in Ecclesia sit locus. ... Quocirca divino ipso iure statutum est, ut clerici distinguantur a laicis. Inter duos hos gradus religiosae vitae status intèricitur, qui, ecclesiastica origine defluens, ideo est atque ideo valet, quia arcte proprio Ecclesiae fini cohaeret, qui eo spectat, ut homines ad sanctitatem assequendam perducantur. NB: The above three sources agree that by divine law, the Church is a hierarchical society consisting of two categories of Christians: the clergy and the laity. The consecrated life was recognised as a state established by ecclesiastical law which is intimately connected to the Church’s goal of drawing persons to holiness and actually recruits people from both the clergy and the laity.

origin.⁵ At the end, on November 21, 1964, the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen gentium*, was promulgated. It has 8 chapters with an entire chapter (Chapter 6) dedicated to the consecrated life. The expression which is very important for our consideration here appears in the 4th and concluding paragraph of article 44: “The state of life, then, which is constituted by the profession of the evangelical counsels, while not entering into the hierarchical structure of the Church, belongs undeniably to her life and holiness.”⁶ It is noteworthy that the promulgated constitution, *Lumen gentium* does not include the expression “**divine pneumatic/charismatic structure**” which was in the earlier drafts and which some of the council fathers insisted on and merely observes that **consecrated life definitely belongs to the life and holiness of the Church**. This is the heart of the description of the nature of the consecrated life in *Lumen gentium*.

In the period between the Vatican II Council and the promulgation of the 1983 Code, part of the statement in question, “belongs to the life and holiness of the Church”, was mentioned in some documents of the church, the details of which I would not bother you with: the 1969 post-conciliar instruction on religious formation, *Renovationis causam*⁷ by Sacred Congregation for the Religious and Secular Institutes; and *Mutuae relationes* 1978⁸ Directives for the Mutual Relations between Bishops and Religious in the Church, jointly issued by the Sacred Congregation for Religious and for Secular Institutes and the Sacred Congregation for the Bishops. Both documents while maintaining that consecrated life is not part of the divine hierarchical structure of the Church agree that it belongs to her life and holiness and also insist that this does not imply that those

⁵ N. A. BAUER, *The State of Consecrated Life: Vita et Sanctitas Ecclesiae*, in *The Jurist* 75 (2015), 76-93.

⁶ VATICAN II COUNCIL, dogmatic constitution *Lumen gentium*, 44, in AAS 57 (1965), 51.

⁷ SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND SECULAR INSTITUTES, Instruction *Renovationis causam*, January 6, 1969, in AAS 61 (1969), 103.

⁸ SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND FOR SECULAR INSTITUTES AND SACRED CONGREGATION FOR BISHOPS, Normae *Mutuae relationes* 34, May 14, 1978, in AAS 70 (1978), 493.

in the state of the consecrated life are outside the scope of the hierarchical authority. This was the immediate historical background to the revision of the 1917 code.

In the code review process, the statement concerning the nature of religious life in *Lumen gentium* appears as canon 81 in 1977 schema of *De Populo Dei*; as canon 202 in the 1980 schema; as canon 207 in the 1982 schema and eventually as canons 207, §2 and 574, §1 in the 1983 Code of Canon Law⁹:

Can. 207 §1. By divine institution, there are among the Christian faithful in the Church sacred ministers who in law are also called clerics; the other members of the Christian faithful are called lay persons. §2. There are members of the Christian faithful from both groups who, through the profession of the evangelical counsels by means of vows or other sacred bonds recognized and sanctioned by the Church, are consecrated to God in their own special way and contribute to the salvific mission of the Church; **although their state does not belong to the hierarchical structure of the Church, it nevertheless belongs to its life and holiness.**¹⁰

Can. 574 §1. **The state of those who profess the evangelical counsels in institutes of this type belongs to the life and holiness of the Church** and must be fostered and promoted by all in the Church. (emphasis is mine).

The immediate source of this statement in the 1983 Code is article 44 of *Lumen gentium* as noted hereinbefore. At all the levels of the

⁹ Cf. E. N. PETERS, *Incrementa in Progressu 1983 Codicis Iuris Canonici, with a Multilingual Introduction (English, Français, Italiano, Español, Deutsch, Polski)*, Wilson & Lafleur, Montréal 2005, 147.

¹⁰ It is important to note that can. 207, §1 has CCEO, can. 323, §2 as its equivalent but can. 207, §2 has no equivalent in CCEO.

code revision process (1977, 1980, 1982 and eventually the canons 207 and 574 in the promulgated 1983 code), a very important word in *Lumen gentium* was excluded, namely, “*inconsusse*”- “undeniably” or “definitely” without any known reason.¹¹

The first paragraph of canon 207 makes a distinction between the ordained and non-ordained in the Church as the two categorizations of persons in the Church. But our concern here is the meaning of the expression, “belongs to the life and holiness of the Church” in the second paragraph. Although, the meaning of this expression is not found in *Lumen gentium* or in the 1983 Code, Bauer was able to glean the meaning from the preceding discussions in sessions of the Vatican II Council: **According to her, belonging to the life of the Church refers to the presence of those in the consecrated life in the activities of the Church, that is, her apostolic services such as education, healthcare, and social services. Belonging to the holiness of the Church implies that profession and observance of the evangelical counsels in an institute of consecrated life not only contribute to the holiness of those who make this profession but also to the holiness of the rest of the faithful who witness this example.**¹² Since it is not arguable that the consecrated life belongs to the life and holiness of the Church, our doubts concerning its divine origin notwithstanding, can.574§1 orders its promotion and encouragement by all the faithful. This would include, of course, prohibitions of any act that diminishes the dignity of the state.¹³ That the consecrated life does not belong to the hierarchical structure of

¹¹ VATICAN II COUNCIL, *Lumen gentium*, 44 in AAS 57 (1965), 51: “*Status ergo, qui professione consiliorum evangelicorum constituitur, licet ad Ecclesiae structuram hierarchicam non spectet, ad eius tamen vitam et sanctitatem inconcusse pertinet.*” (emphasis is mine); compare with can. 207, §2 of the 1983 code of canon law in AAS 75/2 (1983), 33: “*Ex utraque hac parte habentur christifideles, qui professione consiliorum evangelicorum per vota aut alia sacra ligamina, ab Ecclesia agnita et sancita, suo peculiari modo Deo consecrantur et Ecclesiae missioni salvificae prosunt; quorum status, licet ad hierarchicam Ecclesiae structuram non spectet, ad eius tamen vitam et sanctitatem pertinet.*”

¹² Cf. BAUER, *The State of Consecrated Life: Vita et Sanctitas Ecclesiae*, 90.

¹³ Cf. McDERMOTT, *Commentary on canons 573 – 746*, in J. BEAL, J. CORIGEN & T. GREEN (eds.), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, 744-745.

the Church does not imply that it is structureless. The consecrated life, even though not belonging to the divinely constituted hierarchical structure of the Church has a structure and its place and mission in the church as the constitution clearly states:

From the point of view of the divine and hierarchical structure of the Church, the religious state of life is not an intermediate state between the clerical and lay states. But, rather, the faithful of Christ are called by God from both these states of life so that they might enjoy this particular gift in the life of the Church and thus each in one's own way, may be of some advantage to the salvific mission of the Church.¹⁴

Just like the Church, it is in the very nature of the consecrated life to have structure without which no society would be able to achieve its ends. Thus canon 573, §1 defines consecrated life as a stable form of life:

The life consecrated through the profession of the evangelical counsels is a stable form of living by which the faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God who is loved most of all, so that, having been dedicated by a new and special title to His honour, to the building up of the Church, and to the salvation of the world, they strive for the perfection of charity in the service of the kingdom of God and, having been made an outstanding sign in the Church, foretell the heavenly glory.

Thus, the consecrated life is a reality in the Church of those gathered in common pursuit of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity

¹⁴ See LG 43; see also LG 12.

and obedience in a manner recognised by competent ecclesiastical authority and undertaken by profession of vow or another sacred bond (can. 573, §2). This form of life is lived following the example of the divine Master who was chaste, poor and obedient. In the course of the history of the church, different forms of consecrated life have evolved: religious institutes (can. 607), secular institutes (can. 710), eremitical life (can. 603), order of virgins (can. 604) and other new forms (can. 605). Further, institutes of consecrated life can either be clerical or lay: it is clerical when it is governed by clerics and involves the exercise of Holy Orders (can. 588, §2);¹⁵ it is lay when by its nature it does not include the exercise of Holy Orders (can. 588, §3). Very closely associated with and approximate to consecrated life is the Society of Apostolic life (can. 731). But all these forms of Christian life and vocations exist in the same Catholic church which is understood as communion. Thus, *Lumen gentium* and subsequent magisterium situate consecrated life by the profession of the evangelical counsels within the broader framework of an ecclesiology based on the concept of communion.¹⁶

The Consecrated life and Communion in the local church

One of the fundamental ecclesiological principles of the Vatican Council II is that the Church is *communio*. Ecclesiastical laws find their origin in the Church which is *communio* and exist to build up that same *communio*. This Church is constituted and organised in the world as a society and subsists in the Catholic Church governed by the successor of Peter and the bishops who are the successors of the apostles (cann. 204, §2; 330). By virtue of baptism, all Christ

¹⁵ In the Rescriptum ex audientia of 11th February, 2022, which came into force on 18th May, 2022, the Holy Father, pope Francis changed the 1983 Code's regulations which allowed only clerics to become superiors in clerical institutes in order to allow religious brothers who are not priests to lead their religious communities with the written consent of the Congregation for the Institutes of Consecrate Life and Societies of Apostolic Life on individual cases. Cf. Holy See Press Office, "RESCRIPTUM EX AUDIENTIA SS.MI: Rescritto del Santo Padre Francesco circa la deroga al can. 588 §2 CIC" in Bolletino, n. 0371 of 18th May 2022.

¹⁶ Cf. LG 43-45.

faithful are in full communion with the Church when they “are joined with Christ in its visible structure by the bonds of the profession of faith, the sacraments and ecclesiastical governance” (can. 205). Through baptism, God invites the faithful to participate in the intra-trinitarian communion of Father, Son and Holy Spirit and to share in the threefold *munera* of Christ as priest, prophet and king. It follows that all the baptized are “placed in communion with God, with all the other baptized, and with the Catholic Church in which the Church of Christ subsists (can. 204, §2).”¹⁷ It is this understanding of the Church as communion that provides the underlying unity of the different vocations, states of life and ministries existing in the same Catholic Church and the Holy Spirit is “*always the dynamic principle of diversity and unity in the Church*”.¹⁸

The Catholic Church, which is communion, as we have seen, principally exists and functions as diocese and its equivalents in law.¹⁹ In paragraph 42 of *Vita Consecrata*, Pope John Paul II situated the mission of the members of the institutes of consecrated life in the Church as an eloquent sign of the mystery of ecclesial communion: “The fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion. It is practised with special care in Religious Institutes and in Societies of Apostolic Life, where community living acquires special significance. Nor is the dimension of fraternal communion alien to Secular Institutes, or even to forms of the consecrated life lived individually. Hermits, in their profound solitude, do not withdraw from ecclesial communion but serve that communion by their specific charism of contemplation. Consecrated virgins in the world live out their consecration in a special relationship of communion with the particular and universal Church. The same is true of consecrated

¹⁷ R. J. KASLYN, *Commentary on canons 204-223*, in BEAL, CORIGEN & GREEN (eds.), *New Commentary on the Code of Canon Law*, 243.

¹⁸ JOHN PAUL II, apostolic exhortation *Christifideles laici*, 20, December 8, 1988, in AAS 81 (1989), 425: “*Unus ergo idemque Spiritus dynamicum semper est principium tum varietatis tum etiam unitatis in Ecclesia et Ecclesiae.*”

¹⁹ Cf. *Christus Dominus* 11; cann. 368; 369.

widows and widowers.”²⁰The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life also presents religious communities as expressions of ecclesial communion: “Religious community is a visible manifestation of the communion which is the foundation of the Church and, at the same time, a prophecy of that unity towards which she tends as her final goal”.²¹One can, therefore, say without fear of contradiction that the consecrated life undeniably belongs to the life and holiness of the Church. The reason is that the different institutes are present in the activities of different dioceses such as education, healthcare, and social services; and the profession and observance of the evangelical counsels by the members of the institutes not only contribute to their own holiness but also to the holiness of the rest of the faithful in the dioceses who observe this example of total dedication to God in the Church (LG 44; cann. 207, §2; 574 §1). The church teaches that “[A] sure sign of the authenticity of a charism is its ecclesial character, its ability to be integrated harmoniously into the life of God’s holy and faithful people for the good of all”.²² The recent letter of the Congregation of the doctrine of faith also affirms that different charisms and groups are expressions of ecclesial communion: “... groups of the faithful, ecclesial movements, and new communities propose renewed forms of following Christ in which the *communio cum Deo* and the *communio fidelium* are deepened,”²³ thereby

²⁰ JOHN PAULL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita Consecrata* 42, March 25, 1996, in AAS 88 (1996), 415.

²¹ Cf. THE CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, instruction *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor*, 10, February 2, 1994, available on http://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/ccsrlife/documents/rc_con_ccsrlife_doc_02021994_fraternal-life-in-community_en.html (accessed on 14th May, 2018).

²² FRANCIS, Apostolic Exhortation *Evangelii gaudium*, 130, in AAS 105/12 (2013), 1074-1075.

²³ CONGREGATION FOR THE DOCTRINE OF THE FAITH, Letter “*Iuvenescit Ecclesia*” to the Bishops of the Catholic Church Regarding the Relationship Between Hierarchical and Charismatic Gifts in the Life and the Mission of the Church, no. 2, available at https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/congregations/cfaith/documents/rc_con_cfaith_doc_20160516_iuvenescit-ecclesia_en.html (accessed on 20/10/2021)

locating different charisms and states of life within the mystery of the church as communion.²⁴For the reason and necessity of ecclesiastical communion, institutes of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life can only legitimately exist either under pontifical right (established or approved and supervised by the Holy See, Cf. cann. 589, 593) or diocesan right (established or approved and supervised by the diocesan bishop, Cf. cann. 589, 594). Since this tract is situated in Igboland, our interest is on the diocesan right institutes of consecrated life.

As noted hereinbefore, it is the prerogative of the competent ecclesiastical authority to establish institutes of consecrated life as a stable form of life in the church, to interpret the evangelical councils, to make laws about their practice, to ensure that the institutes grow and flourish in accordance with the spirit of the founder and sound traditions (Cf. can. 576). At the level of the particular church, it is the competence of the diocesan bishops to establish institutes of consecrated life within their own territories by a formal decree. The process of this erection of institutes of consecrated life by the diocesan bishops has undergone some modifications since 1983 such that it is important to cite the exact canon of the 1983 code and trace the evolutions of the modifications. Canon 579 states: “Provided that the Apostolic See has been consulted, diocesan Bishops can, by formal decree, establish institutes of consecrated life in their own territories.” This canon implies that the diocesan bishop can initiate the process of erecting an instituted of consecrated life in his territory, but in most cases, an institute of consecrated life begins gradually, even as a private association of Christ’s faithful (can. 215, 299, LG 45). The diocesan bishop (or through his delegate) can study this association to evaluate its nature, usefulness and availability of resources for it but bearing in mind always that it has been the concern of the church that institutes are not duplicated. If the association is adjudged to be useful and possesses unique features different from already existing ones, the bishop, after consultations with the Holy See can erect such association as institute of consecrated life by a formal decree. It is only at this level that members can make vows with the consent of the bishop (can. 1192, §1). The process is meant to control

²⁴ *Ibid*, no. 13.

proliferations and duplications of institutes²⁵ as the church has always been concerned about the supervisions of associations of Christ's faithful (can. 305). The clause "Provided the Apostolic See has been consulted" did not really control the proliferations of institutes in different local churches. The reason was that canon 579 does not state clearly whether "the prior consultation with Holy See" is for validity or legality. Pope John Paul II had to set up a commission to deal with the issue of the proliferating new forms of consecrated life.²⁶ The trend of this new forms seems to have continued such that on 4th April, 2016, The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life, after considering the view of the Pontifical Council for Legislative Texts sought audience with the Holy Father to give a stricter interpretation of "prior consultation with the Holy See". The Congregation acknowledging "the need to prevent new institutes from being established on the diocesan level that lack the proper discernment and to ascertain the true origin of each charism that would define the specific features that would receive consecration by the profession of the evangelical counsels and that would identify its scope for development" ... requested the Holy Father to redefine its role as established by canon 579 of the 1983 Code. At that audience, the Holy Father Pope Francis "set forth that prior consultation with the Holy See is to be understood as necessary *advaliditatem* before establishing of a diocesan Institute of consecrated life, otherwise risking nullity of the decree of establishment of this said Institute."²⁷ This rescript entered into force on 1st June, 2016. Even at this, the Holy Father was still concerned about the fact that diocesan right institutes transcend the boundaries of the diocese when erected by the diocesan bishop, in fact, they are gifts to the universal church. As such the Holy See should have the final say. Thus, on 4th November, 2020, the Holy Father Pope Francis modified and replaced the entirety of canon 579 of the 1983 Code of Canon thus: "*Episcopi dioecesani, in suo quisque territorio, instituta vitae consecratae formali decreto valide erigere possunt, praevia licentia*

²⁵ Cf. *Perfectae Caritatis* 19, *Vita Consecrata* 12.

²⁶ Cf. *Vita consecrata* 62.

²⁷ Rescript ex Audientia concerning canon 579 of the Code of Canon Law on the erection of a diocesan Institute 11th May, 2016: available on https://www.vatican.va/roman_curia/secretariat_state/parolin/2016/documents/rc_seg-st_20160511_parolin-rescritto-can579cdc_en.html (accessed on 29th May, 2021).

Sedis Apostolicae scripto data.” - The diocesan Bishops in their territory, can validly erect institutes of consecrated life by a formal decree, subject to a written permission of the Apostolic See.²⁸ This modification came into force on 10th November, 2020.

The above historical evolutions of canon 579 show that the control of the proliferations of new forms of consecrated life has been a herculean task for the competent ecclesiastical authorities. It also shows that some of the so-called institutes of consecrated life we have in Igbo land could best pass as private associations (cann. 299, 321). While the competent ecclesiastical authorities can, with difficulties, control and approve new institutes of consecrated life, it is almost impossible to control private associations of Christ’s faithful in that it is the right of the faithful to freely establish and direct associations that serve charitable or pious purposes (Cf. can. 215). **The important thing, however, is for both those who gather young people together and those who are gathered together to know the truth that there is no institute of consecrated life prior to ecclesiastical erection by a formal decree, notwithstanding the beautifully sewn uniforms (or if you like call them “habits”). They are, at best, members of private associations of Christ’s faithful.** It is also important to kill the “I-must-be-a-priest-syndrome” or “I-must-be-a-religious-syndrome” which is in vogue in Igbo land. As a result of this syndrome, ex-seminarians and ex-religious constitute a sizeable number of those who join the proliferating new forms. The ease with which one can move from one institute to another at the slightest provocation is alarming!

The local church in Nigeria is not silent about this development. The Catholic Bishops Conference of Nigeria (CBCN) in 2014 published the “*Guidelines and Directives on Founding Religious Institutes and Lay Associations in Nigeria*” to assist diocesan bishops and founders through the different stages of the formation of the institutes of consecrated life to its erection by ecclesiastical decree. This document is concerned about founders and founding, charism, spirituality, apostolate and the process and different stages of founding a new foundation in the Catholic Church in Nigeria up to

²⁸ FRANCIS, Apostolic Letter, m.p. *Authenticum charismatis* of 1st November 2020 in *Bolletino* N. 201104b of 4th November, 2020 which came into force on 10th November 2020 (The English translation is mine).

the point of approval. The *Guidelines* recognise charism as gift of the Holy Spirit for the service of the church through the founder and note that the Holy See does not permit duplications of same charism within the diocese. The *Guidelines* also emphasize the supervisory role of the diocesan bishop as the competent authority to ensure that the founder strictly follows the spirituality and apostolate of the association before and even after its official erection as an institute of consecrated life by a formal decree.²⁹ The above regulations from both the universal and particular churches show that the challenge of the control of the proliferation of private associations of Christ's faithful which pretend to be institutes of consecrated life is basically not one of lack of laws or guidelines but that of implementations.

Conclusion and Mind Searching Question

From the ongoing, it is clear that the evangelical counsels *per se* do not constitute the consecrated life but the profession of the evangelical counsels in a stable form of life approved by the Church. Were the evangelical counsels identical with the consecrated life, it would be unquestionable to conclude that “belongs to the life and holiness of the Church” could be equivalent to saying that the consecrated state belongs of the essence of the Church since it has the same divine origin as the evangelical counsels. Contrariwise, canon 576 and *Lumen gentium* 45 say that it is the ecclesiastical authority that historically set up these stable forms of life which are called institutes of consecrated life.

Considering the above, canonists have difficulty reaching a consensus affirmation that the particular form of living the evangelical counsels has divine origin and is, therefore, constituted as an essential part of the Church such that the Church cannot be

²⁹ A critical and informed commentary on the CBCN's *Guidelines* was made by Rev Fr Charles Ukwe, O.P. in his article *The Foundation of New Religious Institutes: A Brief Commentary on the Guidelines and Directives of the Catholic Bishops of Nigeria*, in *The Catholic Voyage: African Journal of Consecrated Life* Vol. 14, 2018, pp. 146-160 available at <https://www.nigerianjournalonline.com/index.php/CVAJCL/article/view/434> (accessed on 20/10/2021).

Church without the consecrated life. In his 1996 Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation, *Vita consecrata*, St Pope John Paul II may have calmed down those agitated by *Lumen gentium* and 1983 Code. According to him, “Consecrated life, present from the beginning, can never fail to be one of the Church’s essential and characteristic elements, for it expresses her own nature” and “The conception of a Church composed only of sacred ministers and laity does not therefore conform to the intentions of her divine Founder, as revealed to us by the Gospels and other writings of the New Testament.” (*Vita Consecrata* 29). The position of the pope noted, it is important to remind us that neither the pope nor *Lumen gentium* or the 1983 Code affirms that in addition to hierarchical structure, there is another ecclesiastical structure (pneumatic or charismatic) to which consecrated life belongs. These documents merely state that it belongs (undeniably) to the life and holiness of the Church. It is very clear that the Church cannot still be Church without sacred ministers and the laity. But the question is (and not an idle one, considering the depletion of the number of those in consecrated life, especially religious institutes in some parts of the world): **“Can the Church still be Church without consecrated life?”** In Igboland, this question becomes even stronger, not as a result of lack of vocation to the consecrated life but as result of proliferations and duplications of different associations which portray themselves as institutes of consecrated life without any defined orientation or even apostolate nor ecclesiastical approval. **If in a diocese, there is no form of consecrated life at all, would that diocese still be church?** It is clear that a diocese cannot be church without clergy and laity but is the existence of consecrated life essential to the definition of church, *a sine qua non*? Can the local church ban all forms of consecrated life and still remains church? Of recent we have witnessed the suppressions of some public associations of Christ’s faithful on grounds of non-compliance to law and the guidelines of competent ecclesiastical authorities.³⁰

³⁰ In his decree of suppression of 19th February, 2022, the archbishop of Onitsha, Most Rev Valerian Okeke, after stating clearly seven reasons which border on non-adherence to due canonical process and grave lack of clear vision of charism and apostolate decreed, “I hereby decree as follows: 1. The Public

Although the consecrated life is not yet accepted as a third structure of the divinely hierarchical structure of the Latin Church, the importance of the consecrated life in the life and mission of the Church cannot be over emphasized. According to the Vatican II Council: “The more fervently, then, they [those in the consecrated life] are joined to Christ by this total life-long gift of themselves, the richer the life of the Church becomes and the more lively and successful its apostolate.” (*Perfectae Caritatis*, 1). Even in mission territories, the Church is not fully established until it is adorned with the divine charisms of religious life. Thus, the local church can establish forms of consecrated life in its territory to adorn the church, (with a prior written permission of the Holy See, Cf. the modified canon 579 as we have noted above). If this is so, and as Pope John Paul II emphatically said that the conception of a Church consisting only of the clergy and laity is not in accordance with the intention of the Divine Founder, one would clearly infer that the argument on the nature of the consecrated life in the sessions of the Vatican II Council preceding the dogmatic constitution, *Lumen gentium*, is not yet settled. One would immediately envision a possible revision of the double-pronged hierarchical structure of the Church to include a third and pneumatic structure, not just as a structure in the Church but as a structure of the Church.

As we continue to seek more insights into the nature of consecrated life and the distinctive roles of lay religious in the church, it is the duty of the local pastors especially the bishops to discern new forms of consecrated life and guide the faithful accordingly. When properly discerned and guided, the new forms ought to be actually gifts with which the Holy Spirit adorns the local church and indeed the universal church. This duty becomes so imperative considering that there is an astronomic proliferation of private associations which admit candidates as though they were institutes of

Association of the faithful "The Missionary Daughters of Blessed Michael Iwene Tansi" recognised by the Archbishop's decree of 3rd May 2014 in the Archdiocese of Onitsha is hereby SUPPRESSED and can no longer operate in the Archdiocese of Onitsha as a Public Association of the faithful, effective from today, 19th day of February 2022." Earlier, the bishop of Ijebu-Ode, Most Rev Francis Obafemi Adesina in his decree of suppression of 23rd August, 2021 suppressed the Order of the Little Lamb of the Cross for similar reasons.

consecrated life. The faithful have the right to know the stand of the church on the new forms of consecrated life. Quoting *Perfectae caritatis*, 19, the Holy Father Pope Francis reminds the pastors of local churches of the right of the faithful to be warned thus: “The faithful have the right to be warned by the Pastors about the authenticity of charisms and the reliability of those who present themselves as founders. Discernment about the ecclesial nature and reliability of charisms is an ecclesial responsibility of the Pastors of the particular Churches. It is expressed in close care for all forms of consecrated life and, in particular, in the decisive task of assessing the advisability of establishing new Institutes of Consecrated Life and new Societies of Apostolic Life. It is right to respond to the gifts the Spirit awakens in the particular Church, welcoming them generously with thanksgiving; at the same time, it must be avoided that communities may be needlessly brought into being which are useless or which lack sufficient resources” (m.p, *Authenticum charismatis*). **It is also important to let young men and women understand that one can still live a fulfilled Christian life in the world as a single man or a single lady, and faithfully developing his or her charisms for the service of the church and the society without necessarily joining any association which is not recognised by competent ecclesiastical authority.** Considering the importance of marriage in Igbo land, a catechetical transformation of the mental outlook of the faithful is also important so that those who wish to live a single life in the world can do so with peace of mind and are free from societal encumbrances, which in most cases push some persons to join one of the proliferating associations: for the argument is always – “how can you remain single and you are neither a reverend father nor a reverend sister?” With the importance of the consecrated life in the church and the current and confused proliferations of different forms of private associations of Christ’s faithful pretending to be institutes of consecrated life, and which continue to admit young people without ecclesiastical approvals, it is now very necessary for the local church in Igboland to strictly implement the CBCN’s *Guidelines and Directives on Founding Religious Institutes and Lay Associations in Nigeria* in order to bring about the necessary change of hearts and attitude and adherence to due canonical process; a strict application of the guidelines that will coerce a *metanoia* – compunction of heart of the founders about their errant ways which includes a firm purpose of amendment and reformation, and strict adherence to laid down rules.