

The Consecrated Life and Witnessing in the Face of Crisis and Violence in Nigeria

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Abstract

Consecrated persons are those who are conscious of having received a special call from God to love Jesus Christ and the following of him through spreading the gospel of joy and peace. They live out their vocation and unique charism in the human society. Hence crisis and violence and crisis may affect their mode of operation. Nigeria has become the buzzword of most media houses in recent time. This is for rather obvious reason, the radical Boko Haram (Bandit/Herdsmen), causing havoc in some part of the country and an air of uncertainty now surrounds the future of the nation. No doubt, this has sent shockwaves round the world. Fortunately, the country is still under the semblance of a democratic government. However, every part of the country has had or is having its fair share of violence and crisis. This is where consecrated persons as expected to work. The questions that loom large here are: what do consecrated persons do? How do these situations challenge persons of consecrated life? Can a consecrated person or group offer any help in controlling violence and crisis in Nigeria? Consequently, this paper discusses the role of consecrated persons in witnessing amidst the challenges that confront them in situations of violence. It proceeds by way of identifying some forms of violence that persons of consecrated life are confronted with and then a panoramic view of the Nigerian context is given consideration with a view to establishing the prophetic role persons of consecrated life are called to play.

Keywords: Christianity, Consecrated Persons, witnessing, violence.

1. Introduction

In his Letter to Consecrated Persons titled “Rejoice” on the occasion of the Year of Consecrated Life, 2014, the Holy Father Pope Francis emphasised that Consecrated Persons are to radiate

joy and gladness always.¹ According to him, “I want to say one word to you and this word is **Joy**. Wherever Consecrated Persons are, there is always **Joy**! “Given the spate of violence and oppression in Nigeria, is it possible for consecrated persons in this country to radiate joy? The crisis of insecurity and the violence of terrorism are two major concerns of the world today that cannot be treated with kid gloves. However, the unprecedented height it has attained, particularly in Nigeria, is worrisome and requires urgent attention from the Government, concerned Institutions and well-meaning individuals. The activities of the Islamic sect (Boko Haram) have led to loss of lives and properties in the country, especially in the Northern part of Nigeria.² The unresolved herdsmen and farmers crises leave the West and Middle-belt in disarray. Thus, kidnapping for ransom, rape, armed robbery and political crises have become major challenges to everyone in Nigeria.

Given that it is within such a space that is saturated with ethnic, political and religious tensions and violence that persons of consecrated life are called to witness and minister, certain questions loom large. For instance: What should be the response of consecrated persons to the crisis and violence that now characterise the Nigerian space? Can they offer any help in ameliorating violence and crisis in Nigeria? Apart from prayers for the nation, how much more can they offer? These questions and others that may arise constitute the content of this paper. The aim of this paper is to clearly articulate the meaning of the Consecrated Life according to Scripture, *Lumen Gentium*, *Vita Consecrata*, and emphasise thereof, their responsibility to witness to hope, joy, and peace in the face of crisis and violence in Nigeria. To this end, this paper is sectioned into three: the first section describes the notion of violence; the second section highlights some impact of violence on the consecrated life within the Nigerian setting. And the third

¹Cf. Pope Francis Letter to Consecrated Persons, “Rejoice”, 2014 accessed August 12, 2021, Rejoice! - A letter to consecrated men and women (2 February 2014) (vatican.va)

² O. Ewetan, and E. Urhie, “Insecurity and Socio- Economic Development in Nigeria,” *Journal of Sustainable Development* 5, no.1 (2014), 17.

section explicates how consecrated persons can witness in the midst of the violence in Nigeria.

2. Violence in Nigeria

The Merriam Webster Dictionary defines violence as “the use of physical force to harm someone, to damage property etc.” explaining it further “as the use of physical force to injure, abuse, damage or destroy.” The Anthropologist, David Riches, expresses a similar view, that violence is “an act of physical hurt deemed legitimate by the performer and illegitimate by (some) witnesses.” What seem operative in these definitions are “physical force” and “physical hurt.”³ Both definitions carry an underlying assumption that violence is always fully and entirely physical. This assumption has been called into question in academic circles because it lacks the cognition of other non-physical hurts which come within the purview of violence.

Contrary to the definitions above, the American psychological Association conceives violence as an extreme form of aggression such as assault, rape or murder.⁴ Following this line of thought, Michael Levi, Fiona Brookman, and Mike Maguire, hold that violence is “a slippery term which covers a huge and frequently changing range of heterogeneous physical and emotional behaviour, situations and victim-offender relationships.”⁵ Inherent in this definition is the idea that violence is both overt and covert, both physical and non-physical which makes it more comprehensive and suitable for use in this paper.

According to Olisaemeka R. Okwara, the scope of violence in Nigeria is broad and as such there are divergent manifestations, nonetheless, a tripartite categorisation of violence can be given.⁶ These, according to her include: Violence of Everyday life, Victimisation and Religiously Aligned violence.

³ David Riches (ed.), *Anthropology of Violence* (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1986), 8.

⁴ “Violence,” <https://www.apa.org/topics/gun-violence-crime>

⁵ Michael Levi *et al*, “Violent Crime,” in *The Oxford Handbook of Criminology*, ed. Mike Maguire *et al* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), 796.

⁶ Okwara, “Witnessing the Identity and mission,” 121.

2.1 Violence of Everyday Life

This form of violence is a social in nature and perpetuated by the oppressive and unjust social order that is operational in Nigeria.⁷ It is subtle because it has become normalized by many years of misrule and maladministration. Its various manifestations can be seen in the scourge of unemployment, homelessness, hunger, pain and so forth. These experiences are now etched in the fabric of our national life and therefore, it is often overlooked, while it quietly provides willing hands for crime and terrorism in the land. Hence, Kate Meagher argues that the rise of Boko Haram in Nigeria cannot be dissociated from the profound poverty and deprivation in the Muslim North of Nigeria. The violence of Everyday life violates human dignity and the moral order which calls on persons of consecrated life to be alert to the scourge of this form of violence.

2.2 Religiously Aligned Violence

This is the form of violence associated with religious clashes between rival religious groups. Although Nigeria is a notoriously religious country, it is also deeply divided along religious lines. Issues about religion, especially as it relates to politics, are always very explosive. This accounts for most of the religio-ethnic crisis that rock Nigeria today. Some scholars argue that religious conflicts in Nigeria are essentially a battle for who owns and controls the 'soul' of Nigeria as major religious groups seek religious dominance. According to Toyin Falola, "proponents of Christianity and Islam seek to unseat the rival religion, to impose their own values, and to control the state. This has become a major problem, and the struggle for political power has come to entail the manipulation of the symbols and beliefs of Islam and Christianity."⁸ Falola rightly speaks to the tension that has become palpable in Nigeria over the fears of Islamisation of the nation. Such religious tensions have the capacity to affect the witnessing of consecrated persons.

⁷ Okwara, "Witnessing the Identity and Mission," 122.

⁸ Toyin Falola, *Violence in Nigeria: The Crisis of Religious Politics and Secular Ideologies* (New York: University of Rochester, 1998), 2.

2.3 Victimisation

The violence of victimisation illustrates man-made source of violence and injustice. It is the kind of violence that emanates from the lack of consideration of the other and the common good. This form of violence is rampant, such that at one point or the other, persons of consecrated life may have experienced or may experience them. If they are not the direct victims, members of their communities, families, parish and so forth, experience them. As long as it affects even one person, consecrated persons, and indeed, everyone has a duty to challenge and combat such structures of violence. The question of interest to this paper is, how can the persons of consecrated life respond to the violence of victimisation and other forms of violence? It is apposite to articulate what the consecrated life is about to better position our understanding of how consecrated persons can respond to the violence around them in Nigeria.

3. The Vocation of the Consecrated Life

Consecrated persons are grouped into three categories; those who belong to (i) religious institutes, (ii) the secular institutes and (iii) the societies of apostolic life. The 1983 Code of Canon Law combines religious institutes and the secular institutes under institutes of consecrated life since “both are committed to the practice of the evangelical counsels.”⁹ The difference between the two lies in a common (community) life of the religious institutes.¹⁰ The Code considers them to be similar to the institutes of consecrated life. Persons in the society of apostolic life may or may not make explicit commitment to the evangelical counsels. Moreover, they pursue, “each in its own particular way, a specific

⁹Cf. M. R. Jurado, “Consecrated Life and the Charisms of the Founders,” in *Vatican II Assessment and Perspectives: Twenty-Five Years After (1962-1987)*, ed. R. Latourelle, (New York: Paulist Press, 1989), 4. See also, 1983 Code of Canon Law, § 731.

¹⁰John Paul II, The Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on Consecrated Life, *Vita Consecrata*, United States Catholic Bishops Conference, Washington DC, 1996, 9-10.

apostolic or missionary end” while living a common life.¹¹ The consecrated life, each in accordance with its specific nature, strive to live a life dedicated to the perfection of charity through the practice of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity, and obedience; lived within a community and remains integral to Christian witness in the world. Therefore, consecrated persons as members of the Church, share in the mission of the Church. As such, reference to “consecrated life” here designates the three forms of life: the religious institutes, the secular institutes and the societies of apostolic life. Nonetheless, the discourse on witnessing in the context of crisis and violence will take into perspective the life and vocation of people in the consecrated life

In biblical economy, consecrated life can be traced to the presentation of the Child Jesus in the temple. The Evangelist Luke narrated that the Holy Family came to do with Jesus what the law required of every first male child (Cf. Luke 2:17-25). The law required an offering to accompany the presentation; in this way, Consecrated Persons are those who present themselves and thereafter, offer themselves in whole to the service of God through his Church in a world where everyone longs and yearns to be free. Over the years, the consecrated life has come to connote a self-offering which resonates Jesus’ words that there are some who on account of their love for God’s kingdom would do away with marriage (Matt19:10-13). In this understanding, the consecrated life is the offering of oneself to God professing the evangelical counsels for the sake of the Kingdom of God.

In the documents of the Second Vatican Council (VC II), *Lumen Gentium* used the word religious life in place of consecrated life to describe persons set aside by the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience.¹² By the bond of these evangelical counsels, a consecrated person is dedicated to God and his work. Thus, he/she is set aside to the honour and service of God under a new and special title. Even though it is the case that through baptism a person dies to sin and is consecrated to God, in a special

¹¹ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 11.

¹² Cf. Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*: Dogmatic Constitution On the Church, 1965 no. 44.

way, consecrated persons make himself/herself available to derive more abundant fruit from this baptismal grace. Thus, he/she intends, by the profession of the evangelical counsels to free himself/herself from those obstacles, which might draw him/her away from the fervour of charity and the perfection of divine worship. By the profession of the evangelical counsels, consecrated persons are more intimately dedicated to divine service.

Commenting on the consecrated life, the Fathers of the Second Vatican Council state that,

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 way may be of some advantage to the salvific mission of the Church.¹³

To further clarify the identity of consecrated persons, Pope St. John Paul II writes that: "The consecrated life by its nature is neither lay nor clerical. The 'consecration' of both men and women constitutes a state which in its profession of the evangelical counsels is complete in itself ... for the individual and the Church."¹⁴ Therefore, we can understand the consecrated life as a state of life that is complete in itself. In other words, being a male or female religious, for instance, is not an intermediary stage towards another state, like, the clerical state. In this regard, Deem Rich writes that consecration refers to a state of being in special relatedness to the divine, wherein one is set aside for purposes of sacred service.¹⁵

Cecil McGarry in his reflection on John Paul II's *Vita Consecrata* claims that, "Consecrated persons are those who are conscious of having received a special call from God to make Jesus Christ and the following of him the central and immediate tasks of their lives

¹³ Vatican II, *Lumen Gentium*: Dogmatic Constitution On the Church, 1965, no. 43.

¹⁴ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, 1996, no. 60.

¹⁵ Rich Deem, "Consecration," accessed August 12, 2021, <http://www.catholic.org/encyclopedia/view.php?id=3282>

in a form which has been recognised and ratified by the church.”¹⁶ Given the foregoing analysis, the “consecrated life is a call to incarnate the Good News, to follow Christ, the crucified and risen one, to take on Jesus’ way of living and acting as the Incarnate Word in relation to God and in relation to his brothers and sisters.”¹⁷

The idea of a consecrated life has been questioned over the years. Some persons have asked what the point is in a religious life when everyone is called to holiness of life, and as noted in *Lumen Gentium*, all are called to mission and to model Christ in the world (Cf. Matt. 28:27-29)? More so, when other people do these same works and pray, sometimes even better, what is the essence of a consecrated life? What reasons justify a consecrated life? Joan Chittister responds to this by alluding to the “quest for the sacred,” which is a quest for union with God to which all are called. For her, this is the central preoccupation of religious life.¹⁸ While all are called to seek God in contemplation as activity, the consecrated persons are called to lead the way. In this regard, *Perfecta Caritatis* states that at the heart of the religious life is the perfection of charity (love).¹⁹

4. The Consecrated Life and the Predicament of Violence

As social beings, we feel the impact of events around us and they influence our perceptions and choices in life. Hence, it is plausible to claim that the violence in and around Nigeria influences the general wellbeing of consecrated people in the country. Some of them have been victims of some forms of violence, like:

¹⁶ Cf. Cecil McGarry, *The consecrated life: A simplified text of the Pope John Paul II’s Apostolic Exhortation, Vita Consecrata* (Nairobi: Pauline Publications, 1996), 6.

¹⁷ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), *Rejoice: A Letter to Consecrated Men and Women on the Year of the Consecrated Life. A message from the Teachings of Pope Francis* (Lagos: St Paul Publication/Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2014), 19.

¹⁸ Cf. Joan Chittister, *Fire in these Ashes a Spirituality of Contemporary Religious Life*. Kansas: Shield and Ward, 1995.

¹⁹ Cf. Vatican II, *Perfecta Caritatis: Decree on the Adaptation and Renewal of Religious Life*, 1965.

kidnapping, robbery, assault, victimisation, among others. Either directly or indirectly they experience violence when their relations, friends, and benefactors become victims of violence as well. Sometimes, there are tensions arising from violent conflicts and victimisation in some religious communities in the day-to-day life of the “weak and helpless” members in the community. Usually these acts of violence are offshoots of intolerance, lack of forgiveness and ‘test’ of powers.

Violence, especially religiously aligned type, puts the perspectives of the consecrated life under suspicion and doubt. It questions the very essence of the values of the consecrated life. Indeed, violence in all its shades mocks the essence and relevance of the life of virtue.²⁰ The memory of violence touches the basic aspects of the gospel counsels of obedience, chastity and poverty, such, it raises questions about the Christian option. For instance, if patience, tolerance, avoidance of revenge, etc., are not forms of weakness and cowardice. One of the enigmatic issues about these violent acts ‘with religious undertone’ is the practice of legitimising violence with religion or in God’s name.

5. Consecrated Life and Witnessing in the Face of Violence and Crisis

History and experience have shown that violence is blind. By this I mean that violence does not select its victims. Perhaps, no group in Nigeria can attest to this better than priests and consecrated persons. Over the years, the local media have been awash with news of kidnapping, maiming and killing of priests and religious. When they are not the direct victims, they experience it through the sufferings and pains of those around them. How are they to respond to such situations? Are they to seek ‘an eye for an eye’? Or are they to ‘turn the other cheek’? The answers to these questions are not as simple as the questions seem. Perhaps the best response persons of consecrated life can give in the face of violence in Nigeria would begin with the question: what would Jesus do if he were to be in the same situation?

²⁰ Okwara, “Witnessing the Identity and Mission,” 127.

In the Gospel of John 18:22-23, Jesus experienced violence from a Roman soldier; in response, Jesus questions the soldier, “Why do you strike me?” Jesus did not strike in return; neither did he *literally* turn the other cheek for more strikes. To strike back would have been to confront violence in a language it understands. But then, do two wrongs make a right? To literally and meekly turn the other cheek may signify permitting evil. Like Archbishop Fulton Sheen once said, justice without love is tyranny and love without justice is evil permitted. Analysing Jesus’ response, “why do you strike me?” Uzochukwu Njoku avers that it is a more proactive way to respond to evil. It challenges every Christian to never be passive in the face of evil, injustice and oppression.²¹ Sequel to this, it is apposite to opine that in the face of crisis and violence, the witnessing of consecrated persons should include:

5.1 Listening to the Word of God

The Second Vatican Council insists on the primacy of the Word of God both in evangelisation and studies. *Dei Verbum* no. 24 speaks of the word of God as the soul of theology, and thus, encourages all priests and consecrated persons to befriend it, and reflect on it prayerfully.²² Emphasising this position, John Paul II, affirms the importance of listening to the word by consecrated persons saying that,

The word of God is the first source of all Christian spirituality. It gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God and with his saving and sanctifying will. It is, for this reason, that from the very beginning of Institutes of Consecrated Life, and in a special way in monasticism, what is called *Lectio Divina* has been held in the highest regard. By its means, the word of God is brought to bear on life, on which it projects the light of that wisdom which is a gift of the Spirit.²³

²¹ Uzochukwu Njoku, “Clouds of Evil and the Challenges of Contemporary Religious Vocation,” *Oche Amamihe Wisdom Journal of Theology and Philosophy* 2 (2011), 47.

²² Cf. Vatican II, *Dei Verbum: Dogmatic Constitution on the Word of God*, no 24.

²³ Cf. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 94.

The emphasis on listening to the word of God is necessitated because in witnessing, consecrated persons do not speak their word, but the word of God. It is therefore, of great benefit for consecrated persons to meditate regularly on the Gospel texts and the New Testament writings which describe the words and example of Christ and Mary and the *Apostolica Vivendi Forma*. Founders and foundresses were inspired by these texts in accepting their vocation and in discerning the charism and mission of their Institutes. According to Joseph Ratzinger in his masterpiece, *Jesus of Nazareth* Volume II, listening to the word brings about purification. Reflecting on Jesus' high-priest-prayer, "You are already made clean by the word which I have spoken to you" submit that the word of God penetrates the hearts, transforms the intellect, the will, and the heart, and opens it up in such a way that it becomes a seeing heart."²⁴To Witness effectively, you are to listen to the word, discern what Jesus would do in your present situation and do same.

5.2 Be in Communion with Christ to Witness Effectively

According to Thomas Aquinas, a Dominican and a Scholastic theologian, no one gives what he does not have. More so, "whatever we received is according to the mode of the receiver."²⁵ We cannot receive more than we are open to receive. Every form of witnessing is a proclamation of Christ; therefore, it is expedient that those who bear witness to Christ should be in communion with him especially when their space of witnessing is a tough and rough place that is facing crisis and violence. John Paul II, aware of the need for consecrated persons to be in communion with the Lord if they are to be effective witnesses in a society facing crisis and violence writes that,

By its very nature, the Eucharist is at the centre of the consecrated life, both for individuals and for communities. It is

²⁴ Joseph Ratzinger, *Jesus of Nazareth*, vol. II (San Francisco: Ignatius Press, 2011), 56.

²⁵ Cf. *Summa Theologiae*, 1a, q.75, a.5;3a, q.5.

the daily viaticum and source of the spiritual life for the individual and the Institute. By means of the Eucharist, all Consecrated Persons are called to live Christ's Paschal Mystery, uniting themselves to him by offering their own lives to the Father through the Holy Spirit. Frequent and prolonged adoration of Christ present in the Eucharist enables us in some way to relive Peter's experience at the Transfiguration: "It is well that we are here."²⁶

He emphatically added that in the celebration of the mystery of the Lord's Body and Blood, the unity and charity of those who have consecrated their lives to God are strengthened and increased. The Liturgy of the Hours which is intimately connected with the Eucharist, along with the latter, call consecrated persons to raise their hearts in praise and intercession. The Eucharist is also closely connected with the commitment to continual conversion and necessary purification, which consecrated persons bring to maturity in the Sacrament of Reconciliation. By their frequent encounter with God's mercy, they purify and renew their hearts, and through the humble recognition of their sins achieve openness in their relationship with him.²⁷

5.3 Prophetic Witnessing

In the face of crisis and violence, the witnessing of consecrated persons must be prophetic. That is, it must rebuke all forms of ills that are the root cause(s) of the crisis and violence. Like the prophets of the Old Testament, they are to speak the commanding word of God, rebuke unjust government and system. Like the Deuteronomist, they are to remind the people of what true value are. Nigerians are very forgetful; the consecrated persons must, therefore, witness as reminders so that the negative experiences of history are not repeated. On the need to recall history as a means to move forward, Chinua Achebe, insisted that Nigerians stand in great need of reminders. Further, he added that there is, indeed greater danger in choosing not to remember, and suppressing history because in so doing, we lose the redemptive opportunity

²⁶ Cf. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 95.

²⁷ Cf. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 95.

history offers.²⁸ As George Santayana submits, if we cannot remember the past, then we are condemned to repeat it. In his book, *Witness to Justice*, Matthew Hassan Kukah noted the problem of willed forgetfulness, and admonished that to move from this state and situation, Nigerians must remember everything because only when we do can we hold those responsible accountable.²⁹ No matter the hurt, Nigerians must rise to remember and tell the tale of how we got here. Here lies the witnessing of the consecrated persons, to remind the people, by echoing daily, true values and rebuking ills.

John Paul II insisted that prophetic witnessing takes the shape of a special form of sharing in Christ's prophetic office, which the Holy Spirit communicates to the whole people of God. According to him, there is a prophetic dimension that belongs to the consecrated life which results from the radical nature of following Christ and the subsequent dedication to the mission characteristic of the consecrated life. He states,

The Consecrated Persons proclaim that word with their lives, with their lips, and with their actions, becoming people who speak for God against evil and sin. Prophetic Witnessing is also expressed through the denunciation of all that is contrary to the divine will and through the exploration of new ways to apply the Gospel in history, in expectation of the coming of God's Kingdom.³⁰

5.4 Witness to Hope

Amid the surging crisis and violence in Nigeria, many people have lost their faith, some have given up hope, and thus become despair. Whence, consecrated persons must thus, become the agent of hope, prophesying of a new dawn, assuring the people of a new beginning where God will be all in all. John Paul II notes this when he writes that in our world, where it often seems that the signs of God's presence have been lost from sight, a convincing prophetic

²⁸ Chinua Achebe, *Morning Yet on Creative Day* (London: Heinemann, 1975), xiii.

²⁹ Matthew Kukah, *Witness to Justice: An Insider Account of Nigeria's Truth Commission*.

³⁰ John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 84.

witness on the part of consecrated persons is increasingly necessary. In the first place, this should entail the affirmation of the primacy of God and eternal life, as evidenced in the following and imitation of the chaste, poor, and obedient Christ, who was completely consecrated to the glory of God and the love of his brethren. The fraternal life is itself prophetic in a society which sometimes without realising it, has a profound yearning for a brotherhood that knows no borders. Consecrated persons are to bear witness everywhere with the boldness of a prophet who is unafraid of risking even his life. According to John Paul II, “Consecrated persons will be faithful to their mission in the Church and the world if they can renew themselves constantly in the light of the word of God. Thus will they be able to enrich the other faithfully with the charismatic gifts they have received and, in turn, let themselves be challenged by the prophetic stimulus which comes from other sectors of the Church.”³¹

5.5 Radiate Joy

In their witnessing, because there is so much anger, tension, anxiety, and sadness among the people, consecrated persons must radiate and proclaim joy, and more so, rejoice. They are not to be like mourners, nor bereaved, but the agent of God’s Joy. In this regard, the Holy Father, Pope Francis, in a letter to consecrated persons encourages them to radiate joy and to always rejoice. According to him, “There is no holiness in sadness.” Quoting St. Paul (1 Thess. 4:13), he writes, “Do not grieve like others who have no hope.”³²

Joy is a necessary phenomenon that provides a foundation for a well lived human life. Daily, every man and woman tries to attain joy and abide in it with the totality of his/her being. In today’s world, especially in Nigeria, there is some much lack of joy because of the pervasive violence in the society. Thus, consecrated persons called to accomplish the epic feats of witnessing to the joy that

³¹ Cf. John Paul II, *Vita Consecrata*, no. 85.

³² Cf. Pope Francis, Letter to Consecrated Persons, “Rejoice,” 2014. Rejoice! - A letter to consecrated men and women (2 February 2014) (vatican.va) Accessed August 12, 2021. no. 8.

arises from the certainty of knowing that we are loved by the heavenly Father (God).³³ By their lives, they should show to Nigerians that despite the daily struggles, pains and sad news in the country, we still have reasons to be joyful as long as we live right in God's presence.

5.6 Witness to Justice

In the face of crisis and violence, consecrated persons' witnessing must enhance justice. The root cause of crisis and violence is injustice, thus, like the Prophet Amos, consecrated persons are to rebuke every form of unjust structures. They are to encourage the people to create a just society where everyone is given his/her due, with respect to human rights and the common good. Just like the environment of Amos, the Nigerian society is prevalent with injustice. To appropriately witness in this society, we must echo justice, and the people should be consoled and comforted. In this regard, the witnessing of consecrated persons must bring, not just justice, but deep consolation and comfort.

The Congregation of Institute for Consecrated Life and Apostolic Life (CICLSAL) calls on consecrated persons to comfort the people.³⁴ In this regard, CICLSAL refers to the biblical text of the Deutero-Isaiah 40, which calls on all to comfort Israel, who at that time was in bondage and exile in Babylon. This becomes very appealing to Nigeria's situation. The text states:

Comfort, Comfort my people says the Lord is a plea to come to the help of Israel in exile, shut up inside an empty memory of failure. The historical context belongs to the prolonged exile of the people in Babylon (587-538 BC), with all the consequent humiliation and the sense of powerlessness to escape. However, the disintegration of the Assyrian empire under the pressure of the new emerging power of the Persians, guided by the rising star of Cyrus, enabled the prophet to foresee that an unexpected liberation might come about. The prophet, inspired by God, voiced this possibility publicly, interpreting the political and military developments as actions guided

³³ CICLSAL, "Rejoice," no. 3.

³⁴ CICLSAL, "Rejoice," no. 7.

mysteriously by God through Cyrus. He proclaimed that liberation was at hand and that the return to the land of their fathers was about to take place.³⁵

5.7 Witness to Fidelity

Crisis and violence are symptoms of infidelity on the part of the people; infidelity among themselves, and infidelity to God like in the days of the prophet Hosea. The most common complaint against God is that he does not use his power to rid the world of evil and suffering. Should it not be easy for him? If he is both good and all-powerful, should he not be able to remove evil at a stroke? Countless theological students have sweated over essays on this so-called 'problem of evil'. Given the context of Hosea's experience, the problem of evil takes a different dimension when viewed from the dilemma that faces God.³⁶ From this perspective, it challenges all superficial human expectations as to how God and humans should respond to the presence of evil. More than any other prophet, Hosea conveys not just God's anger at the failures of his people, but also his sadness, and even weariness.³⁷ Hosea's life was a parable for his message: he married a prostitute who was unfaithful to him but took her back. Consecrated persons in their witnessing must, therefore, become the Hosea of the Nigerian community, calling Nigerians back to God, and more so speak of God's unfailing love in the face of Nigeria's infidelity.

5.8 Witness to Mercy and Love

History has shown that in the midst of crisis and violence, some wounds are healed with love and forgiveness. In witnessing, consecrated persons must strive to call for forgiveness among Nigerians, and beckon on them to love truth and seek it. The issue that keeps the crisis and violence in Nigeria ever new is but the consciousness and divisions into tribal and religious enclave within the country. Consecrated persons must witness to a unity in

³⁵ CICLSAL, "Rejoice," no. 7.

³⁶ Prophecy Today UK, The Message of the Prophets: Hosea www.Prophecytoday.UK (Accessed August 13, 2021)

³⁷ Prophecy Today UK, The Message of the Prophets.

diversity among Nigerians by calling them to love and forgive one another. In today's Nigeria, "we live in a paradox where our allegiance goes first to our various enclaves, and yet everyone professes patriotism as a religion, and this is a terrain where the fault lines can even be seen by the blind."³⁸ This situation is very precarious, it incapacitates and makes witnessing difficult. Hence, Efeturi Ojakaminor explains that, because of this allegiance to ethnicity and religion, it becomes very impossible to say anything about any of our leaders without members of their tribe or religion coming out to defend them and thereafter accuse you of wanting to pull him or her down. It doesn't matter whether your observations are right or not.³⁹ The attack on the person of Bishop Kukah because of his 2020 Christmas message is a clear evidence of this tribal and religious allegiance. The worst is that learned Nigerians are guilty of this ethnic cleavage and allegiance. Should we withdraw from witnessing because of this? No consecrated persons, like Jesus, must remain sign of contradiction, speak the truth, witness to it, and call for mercy among Nigerians that there may be healing.

6. Conclusion

Most of the evils inhuman existence can be fought, prevented and corrected if people are willing to let go of their personal gain and develop their interest for the common good. Nancy Scheper-Hughes rhetorically asks, "When lives are dominated by hunger, what becomes of love? When assaulted by daily acts of violence and untimely death, what happens to trust?"⁴⁰ Hunger and violence are scourges in the Nigerian society of today, given that these are situations that have been spoken to in the Christian mission, consecrated persons, who share in the mission of the Church have an obligation and responsibility to witness to the virtues of love and trust regardless of the scourge of hunger and

³⁸ Efeturi A. Ojakaminor, *Nigeria and our President said: "I don't Give a Dam!"* (Italy: Edizioni Lanteri, 2015), 2.

³⁹ Cf. Efeturi, *Nigeria and our President said*, 2.

⁴⁰ Excerpt from the online University of California press website book description, <http://www.ucpress.edu/book.php> (Accessed on the 18/08/21).

violence in Nigeria. It is in this regard that this paper explored how the crisis of insecurity and the violence of terrorism in Nigeria, influence the life and mission of the consecrated persons. The paper also considered the various forms of violence under the auspices of socio-religious dilemmas. And notes that since consecrated persons are not removed from the happenings in the society, they too are victims of violence and insecurities, which touch core aspects of their life and mission. Therefore, the paper urges consecrated people to witness authentically through prayer, dialogue, and option for the poor and the victimized in the Nigeria by living out their call to be a sign of joy, hope and love, while advocating for justice and fidelity to the common good.