



Negotiating the Impacts of Economic Limitations on the Nigerian Economy and Their Effects on Consecrated Life: Analysis and Solutions.

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Abstract

This article examines the complex relationship between economic conditions and the practice of consecrated life across Africa, especially in Eastern Nigeria. Through a qualitative interpretive approach utilizing in-depth interviews with 18 religious sisters from two congregations, this research documents how economic instability such as poverty, funding inadequacies, rising insecurity, global economic forces and cultural tensions, directly affects consecrated life members. The research reveals that economic pressures significantly impact vocational formation, community sustainability, and the prophetic witness of consecrated persons. It also reveals other significant challenges, which include the negotiation of cultural identity between Western religious formations and Nigerian communitarian values, and security concerns limiting apostolic work. This research contributes to the ongoing scholarly discussion on inculturation and economic sustainability of Consecrated Life in Africa by providing empirical evidence from the Eastern Nigerian context and proposing recommendations for more culturally-grounded and economically viable forms of religious life. It proposes a tripartite solution: fostering economic empowerment through professional formation and collaborative initiatives, implementing strategic structural reforms for financial accountability and sustainability, and deepening the authentic inculturation of the evangelical counsels

within the African socio-cultural context. It concludes that a proactive and theologically coherent response to economic challenges is indispensable for the vitality and future of Consecrated Life in Eastern Nigeria and Africa at large.

Keywords: Consecrated Life, Africa, Economic Conditions, Poverty, Financial Sustainability, Inculturation, Religious Life, Vocational Formation, Solutions.

1. Introduction

The landscape of Consecrated Life in Africa presents a fascinating paradox of vibrant growth amid significant socio-economic challenges. Nowhere is this paradox more evident than in Africa, especially Nigeria, which has been described as experiencing a "vocation boom in Africa".¹ Despite this growth, religious communities navigate a complex terrain of economic instability, rising insecurity, and cultural tensions that shape their identity and mission. This paper examines how these conditions specifically impact consecrated life in Eastern Nigeria, a region characterized by both strong Christian heritage and significant contemporary challenges. The socio-economic context of contemporary Nigeria presents formidable challenges to all forms of communal life, including religious communities. With Nigeria recently classified as "the third most afflicted by terrorism in the 2020 Global Terrorism

¹ Eze, C., Lindegger, G. C., and Rakoczy, S. Losing One's Culture: The Narrative Identity of Nigerian Catholic Religious Sisters. In Culture and Identity. Ed., Wilfred Isake April. Doi:10.5772/intechopen.72473 (2 May 2018)

Index"² and grappling with rampant inflation, currency devaluation, and widespread poverty, the environment in which religious communities strive to live out their mission is increasingly precarious. Economic factors are not merely external circumstances but powerful forces that shape vocational choices, community life, mission priorities, and the overall witness of the consecrated life. Understanding these dynamics is not a marginal concern but essential for the authentic incarnation and future of consecrated life in Africa and especially in Nigeria.

This paper argues that prevailing economic conditions which are characterized by widespread poverty, economic instability, and limited resources pose significant challenges to Consecrated Life in Africa in general and Nigeria in particular, impacting on vocation, formation, community living, and apostolic mission. However, these challenges also present a *kairos* moment for a prophetic re-imagination of religious life that embraces economic wisdom and deepens the inculturation of the evangelical counsels. The analysis will proceed by first examining the specific economic pressures facing religious institutes, then exploring how these conditions affect internal vocation, community life and formation, and finally, proposing a multi-faceted way forward that is centered on empowerment, structural reform, and theological renewal.

² Abdulkarim Yusuf and Saidatulakmal Mohd, "Growth and Fiscal Effects of Insecurity on the Nigerian Economy." *African Review of Economics and Finance* 14, no. 1 (April 19, 2022): 1–27. Doi: 10.1057/s41287-022-00531-3

2. Research Methodology

This study employs a qualitative interpretive approach designed to capture the rich, lived experiences of consecrated life in Eastern Nigeria. This methodology is particularly appropriate for exploring complex phenomena where subjective meaning-making is central to understanding the phenomenon. The research is grounded in the assumption that "the participants' act of meaning making regarding 'who they are' and 'who they are becoming' is a subjective experience" that requires in-depth engagement with their narratives.³ The study utilizes semi-structured interviews as the primary data collection method, allowing for both focused exploration of key themes and flexibility to follow emerging narratives. This approach aligns with similar successful research on religious identity in African contexts, such as the doctoral research by Eze that examined identity construction among Nigerian Catholic religious sisters.⁴ Additionally, the research incorporates limited participant observation in select religious communities to contextualize the interview data.

2.2 Participant Selection and Sampling

Participants were selected using purposive sampling to ensure representation of diverse experiences within Consecrated Life. The study recruited 18 consecrated men and women from five congregations in Eastern Nigeria, two men congregation of both priest and brothers, two female religious congregations and one

³ Eze, C., Lindegger, G. C., and Rakoczy, S. "Losing One's Culture."

⁴ Eze, C., Lindegger, G. C., and Rakoczy, S. *Losing One's Culture: The Narrative Identity of Nigerian Catholic Religious Sisters*. In *Culture and Identity*. Ed., Wilfred Isake April. Doi:10.5772/intechopen.72473 (2 May 2018)

female secular institute. The selection of these five congregations provides interesting comparative dimensions showing how different groups of consecrated life members navigate socio-economic challenges.

2.3 Data Collection and Analysis

Data collection occurred through in-depth interviews lasting 60-90 minutes, conducted via google meet. Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed verbatim, and supplemented with notes. The interview protocol explored themes of economic challenges, security concerns, and adaptive responses.

2.4 Ethical Considerations

The research protocol adhered to rigorous ethical standards including informed consent processes, confidentiality protections, and sensitivity to the vulnerable position of participants within religious structures. Particular attention was paid to power dynamics, especially in interviews with temporary professed sisters, ensuring they could speak freely without fear of repercussion. The research proposal received approval from appropriate institutional review boards before commencement.

3. Historical and Economic Context of Consecrated Life in Africa-Nigeria.

The Consecrated life according to the Canon law 573. 1 is a

“stable form of life by which the faithful, following Christ more closely under the action of the Holy Spirit, are totally dedicated to God who is supremely loved. By this new and special title, they are dedicated to seek the perfection of charity in the service of God’s kingdom, for the honour of

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God, the building up of the Church, and the salvation of the world. They are a splendid sign in the Church, as they foretell the heavenly glory.” 5

This definition of the consecrated life portrays clearly the interaction between the consecrated life and the society. It points out the main focus of consecrated persons which is to seek “the perfection of charity” for the glorification of God’s name, is only achieved by the daily interaction of consecrated persons with the people whom they serve. Doing this entails mingling with the society and its economic situation. It therefore, requires preparing one’s self adequately for the world’s situation, ensuring that the consecrated persons are fully and well equipped to be able to assist others whom they are called to show perfect charity, such that the spiritual food they give is followed up by a physical food and encouragement.

Looking at the economic dimensions of consecrated life in Nigeria, it is pertinent to note its deep historical roots in the missionary movements that established Christian presence across the continent. From a historical perspective, the economics of missionary expansion in Africa reveal that Christian missions were often established in "healthier, more accessible, and richer places before expanding to economically less developed places."⁶ This historical pattern of locating in more economically viable areas underscores the long-standing relationship between economic

⁵ Code of Canon Law, no. 573□ 1

⁶ Remi Jedwab, Felix Meier zu Selhausen, and Alexander Moradi, "The Economics of Missionary Expansion: Evidence from Africa and Implications for Development," *Journal of Economic Growth* 27, (2022): 150, <https://link.springer.com/article/10.1007/s10887-022-09202-8>.

logistics and religious institutional presence. However, contemporary consecrated life in Africa, for instance, in Nigeria, particularly in its diocesan and indigenous forms, is often deeply embedded in economically marginalized areas, thus, they face these pressures from within.

4. The Nigerian-African Economic Context: Poverty, Unemployment, and Insecurity

This section analyzes some critical aspects of economic challenges such as: challenges of poverty, unemployment, and insecurity, demonstrating how they create a particular context that necessarily influences consecrated life practice.

To understand the environment in which Consecrated Life exists in Africa, especially in Nigeria, it is essential to examine the prevailing economic conditions that shape daily realities. The complexity of social issues in Africa cannot be overstated. Africa is noted to be the world's second largest continent, and a land of vast potential and diversity with a rapidly expanding population of over 1.3 billion inhabitants.⁷ Despite its economy, rich in resources and human capital, it has always faced complex challenging situations ranging from high levels of poverty, economic instability, corruption, unemployment/ joblessness etc. In Eastern Nigeria, there is a significant presence of complex economic landscape that directly impacts consecrated life and their mission. The region experiences the same national economic challenges, including "currency devaluation," "inflation," and "high unemployment and business struggles", but with particular regional characteristics. The

⁷ <https://www.africansahara.org/addressing-social-issues-in-africansahara.org/addressing-social-issues-in-africa-challenges-and-solutions/>

industrial base of cities like Enugu, Onitsha, and Aba has been significantly affected by "the removal of fuel subsidies and other economic policies, though intended for long-term stability, which have worsened immediate financial burdens".⁸ This economic instability affects religious communities in multiple ways. First, it increases operational costs for their institutions, particularly schools and healthcare facilities. Second, it reduces the resources available to the populations they serve, increasing demand for charitable services while diminishing local capacity to support religious works financially. Third, it affects vocational patterns, with some young women potentially drawn to religious life as a form of security in uncertain times, while others may be discouraged by the economic challenges of sustaining religious communities.

4.1 Examination of Concrete Challenges Facing Consecrated Life in Africa with emphasis on Eastern Nigeria

i. The Pervasiveness of Poverty

Poverty and economic inequality are pervasive issues in Africa, with a large portion of the population living below the poverty line and facing limited access to basic necessities.⁹ This has significantly affected the living conditions of the people as according to report, millions of people live on less than the international poverty line defined by the World Bank which is \$ 1.90 a day. Economic inequality in Africa is not merely a matter of income disparity, but also encompasses access to education, healthcare, resources and opportunities. According to UNESCO, approximately 30million

⁸ Abiodun Jemilohun, Faith in Hard Times: Thriving Amid Nigeria's Economic Challenges, February 12, 2025

⁹ <https://www.afsic.net/key-facts-about-the-african-economy/>

children are not enrolled in primary school with girls disproportionately affected.¹⁰ This poor condition of Africa also affects the state of life and choices of life which the people make and in turn shapes the situation of consecrated life in Africa.

In Nigeria for instance, the situation is particularly acute. Despite being Africa's largest oil producer, Nigeria has recently been classified as the poverty capital of the world, with extreme poverty rates exceeding 40% of its population. The resource curse phenomenon where natural resource wealth correlates with underdevelopment and poverty is vividly exemplified in Nigeria's situation, where petroleum extraction has benefited a small elite while leaving the majority in precarious economic circumstances.¹¹ The pervasive material poverty experienced by many African communities directly impacts the daily lives of consecrated persons and the sustainability of religious communities. When religious institutes struggle to provide for basic needs of their members, including adequate food, shelter, healthcare, and education the human dignity of consecrated persons can be compromised and their capacity for prayer, community life, and mission diminished. This economic precarity creates significant challenges for living the evangelical counsels joyfully and sustainably.¹²

¹⁰ <https://www.africansahara.org/addressing-social-issues-in-africansahara.org/addressing-social-issues-in-africa-challenges-and-solutions/>

¹¹ Abdulkarim Yusuf and Saidatulakmal Mohd, "Growth and Fiscal Effects of Insecurity on the Nigerian Economy." *African Review of Economics and Finance* 14, no. 1 (2022): 1–27.

¹² Peter Mutua Maurice, "The Impact of Christianity on the social-Economic Life of Sub-Saharan Africa" *ShahidiHub International Journal of Theology and Religious*

ii. Unemployment and Economic Dislocation

Unemployment, particularly among youth, represents another critical challenge affecting African economies. In Nigeria, youth unemployment has reached crisis proportions, with estimates suggesting rates exceeding 30%. This economic dislocation has profound social consequences, as noted in studies on insecurity: "high unemployment rate, domestic capital formation, foreign direct investment, government spending on education and security are negatively affected by the growing level of insecurity and consequently retarded growth in the long and short run".¹³

The relationship between unemployment and consecrated life is complex. On one hand, economic precariousness may make religious vocations appear more attractive as they offer a form of social security. On the other hand, the same economic conditions may strain the resources of religious communities, limiting their capacity to support new members. Furthermore, the educational aspirations of youth often conflict with economic realities, creating a generation caught between expectation and experience.

iii. Insecurity and Economic Consequences

The escalating insecurity in many African nations, like Nigeria, creates a destructive feedback loop with economic conditions. Research using data from 1980-2019 demonstrates that "high unemployment rate, domestic capital formation, foreign direct investment, government spending on education and security are

Studies, Vol. 2 No. 1 (2022): 72-88.

<https://www.shahidihub.org/shahidihub/index.php/ijtrs/article/view/73>

¹³ Abdulkarim Yusuf and Saidatulakmal Mohd "Growth and Fiscal Effects of Insecurity on the Nigerian Economy." 23.

negatively affected by the growing level of insecurity and consequently retarded growth".¹⁴ Nigeria's classification as "the third most afflicted by terrorism in the 2020 Global Terrorism Index, trailing only Iraq and Afghanistan"¹⁵ illustrates the severity of the situation.

The economic impact of insecurity extends beyond direct destruction to include other direct and indirect effects such as: Destruction of infrastructure, human capital loss, reduced productive capacity, skills depletion and other indirect effects like; increased security costs, reduced investment and other systemic effects like Institutional weakening, social capital erosion, diminished governance capacity, community fragmentation.¹⁶ This environment of insecurity presents practical challenges to Consecrated Life mission restricting mobility, increasing operational costs, and creating dangerous contexts for service, while also raising theological questions about God's providence in situations of violence and instability. In Eastern Nigeria, the security environment has deteriorated significantly in recent years, with particular implications for religious ministry. While the Northeast has borne the brunt of the Boko Haram insurgency, Eastern Nigeria has experienced growing violence from "unknown gunmen", herdsmen and other various militant groups. The situation has reached the point where "people in their area sleep with one eye open because of the

¹⁴ Abdulkarim Yusuf and Saidatulakmal Mohd, "Growth and Fiscal Effects." 6

¹⁵ Abdulkarim Yusuf and Saidatulakmal Mohd, "Growth and Fiscal Effects." 20

¹⁶ Abdulkarim Yusuf and Saidatulakmal Mohd, "Growth and Fiscal Effects." 25.

daily reoccurrences of insecurity such as kidnapping and armed robbery cases".¹⁷

This climate of fear directly impacts consecrated life persons and their mission in several ways. Apostolic travel becomes more dangerous, particularly for rural ministries. Educational institutions face security threats, with some forced to close or implement extreme security measures. The psychological toll of constant vigilance affects community life and personal spirituality. Additionally, religious communities must allocate scarce resources to security measures rather than mission activities.

5. Empirical Insights from African Consecrated Life

Recent empirical studies focusing specifically on religious life as a branch of consecrated life, have begun to shed light on its concrete challenges. A comprehensive study of Catholic sisters in West Africa, Nigeria, identified economics as an underlying cause of many difficulties. The research highlighted "inadequate funding" as a major inhibitor of a good initial and ongoing formation programs, a general shortage of well-trained formation personnel, and limited access to updated theological and spiritual reading materials. Furthermore, the study noted that the "stress of balancing religious life responsibilities of prayer, community life and apostolate" often leads to exhaustion and burnout among sisters, a situation

¹⁷ Peace N. Ngwoke, Gladys N. Akabike, "Insecurity and its implication for Sustainable development in Nigeria: The Role of Religion," *Theologia Viatorum: Open Access Scholarly Journals with Global Impact* Vol 78, No. 1 (October 28, 2022) Durbanville, Cape Town, South Africa aosis.co.za publishing.

exacerbated by economic pressures to remain in income-generating ministries.

In Nigeria, research carried out on impact of intellectual formation, shows that economic inadequacy is one among the major reasons of lack of intellectual formation of consecrated women which in turn affects the vocation and lived experience of some.

5.1 The discussion of the findings of the interview questions used.

This methodology aims to understand the lived experiences, meanings, and perceptions of consecrated persons regarding economic challenges. The questions are open-ended, probing, and structured to align with the topic.

Interview Protocol: Economic Conditions and Consecrated Life in Eastern Nigeria

Research Purpose: To understand the lived experiences and interpretations of consecrated persons in Eastern Nigeria regarding the impact of economic conditions on their vocational, community, and apostolic lives, and to explore their insights on sustainable solutions.

Participant Profile: Consecrated persons (male and female) in diocesan, secular and religious institutes across various states in Eastern Nigeria. There are 18 consecrated men and women from five different congregations in Eastern Nigeria, two male congregations of both priest and brothers, two female religious congregations and one female secular institute)

Introduction for Interviewee: "Thank you for participating in this research. I am exploring the relationship between economic conditions, like poverty and financial instability, and the practice of consecrated life in Eastern Nigeria. There are no right or wrong

answers. I am interested in your personal experiences, perceptions, and insights. The interview will be confidential, and your identity will be anonymized in the research. Do I have your permission to record this conversation?"

This is a summary of the interview section held with 18 consecrated persons from 5 different communities, hence, their answers will not appear one by one but will be summarized.

Section A: Opening and Context (Warm-up)

1. Could you please describe your vocation story and your current role within your religious community?

ANSWERS: All the participants described their vocation journey as a thing of faith, in which admits their struggles, they are encouraged by a total trust in God. 3 of the participants are formators in 3 different religious congregation; 1 male and 2 females.

2. In your own words, how would you characterize the general economic environment in your local community?

ANWERS: All participants accepted that things are very difficult now as the price of goods in the market continue to multiply.

Section B: Lived Experience of Economic Pressures

1. Community Sustainability: How does the economic reality of Nigeria directly affect your community's ability to meet basic needs (e.g., food, healthcare, utilities, and formation costs)?

ANWERS: All participants affirmed that the economic meltdown in Nigeria, has affected them drastically, as even with increased allowance, they still are not able to afford all their necessary needs. 2 formators indicated that they have had to change their meal menu

many times and other timetables like study time due to high cost of fuel and other things.

2. Vocational Formation: Can you describe how economic factors influence the initial and ongoing formation of members in your institute? (e.g., quality of programs, access to books, ability to send members for professional studies).

ANSWERS: We were unable to get any superior general for interview. Although, some 10 participants agreed that the economy is really affecting them as the cost to bring in books from outside the country is on the extreme. 1 formator affirmed that in years back, like about 4 years ago, the congregation used to buy the Divine Office for formandees but recently, the practice is dropping.

3. Apostolate and Mission: How do economic pressures shape the apostolic works and ministries of your community? Have you had to start, stop, or modify missions for financial reasons?

ANSWERS: 1 sister affirmed that their school has reduced the number of scholarships which they give and another sister also said that the number of drugs which they usually give free in the past has been reduced due to lack of sponsors.

Section C: Deeper Interpretation and Meaning-Making

(This section uses an interpretative approach to uncover underlying meanings and tensions)

1. Dependency vs. Autonomy: Many institutes rely on external funding or remunerated work. How does this reality influence your sense of autonomy and your community's ability to discern its mission freely?

ANSWER: 6 sisters accepted that this has really affected their mission and charism because since their charism which births their

mission is on helping the poor, and they depend on charity to do this well, the charity in different ways has been affected, both schools, hospitals etc.

2. Family Obligations: Could you share your experience of balancing your religious commitment with cultural and familial expectations of financial support? How is this negotiated?

ANSWER: All participants said it is a difficult scenario, sometimes they have to continue to remind their family families of their vow of poverty which has never been easy.

4. Leadership Challenges: (For Superiors/Formators) From your perspective, what is the most difficult economic decision you have had to make for your community? What made it so difficult?

ANSWERS: The three (3) formators said to cut down the food of the formandeas in order to have money for other needs and two (2) said to reduce the times in which the generator is being put on, which affected their study time, personal time and other programmes in the community.

Section D: Solutions and the Way Forward

1. Economic Empowerment: What is your view on the idea of consecrated persons receiving training in financial literacy, project management, or social entrepreneurship?

ANSWER: All participants agreed that this idea is not new to them and their congregations, though it may need modification, updating and probably extending hands into other spheres of enterprise.

2. Collaboration: How open is your institute to practical economic collaboration with other religious communities (e.g., joint projects, shared resources)? What are the potential barriers?

ANSWERS: All participants agreed that due to some unforeseen fears, it may be a difficult venture but it is not something that cannot be tried by the major superiors.

3. Structural Reform: If you had the power to change one structural or financial policy within your institute to improve its sustainability, what would it be and why?

ANSWERS: 10 sisters said they would suggest that different religious communities should develop specific apostolates to assist the communities feeding in particular combined with the fund given to the communities from the central government.

4. Prophetic Role: In the face of economic injustice and corruption, what do you believe is the most powerful prophetic statement a consecrated community can make?

ANSWERS: All said "In God we trust"

Section E: Closing and Final Reflections

1. Looking to the future, what gives you the most hope for the sustainability and vitality of Consecrated Life in Africa amidst these economic challenges?

ANSWERS: All participants agreed that reading through history, consecrated persons in the past have always helped to sustain economy which is linked to the fact that they are industrious, innovative, intelligent, contemplative and above all, always depended on God's direction, hence, they in imitation of the Fathers and Mothers of consecrated life, consecrated persons will always find ways to sustain economy.

2. Is there anything crucial about this topic that we haven't discussed, or any final thought you would like to share?

ANSWERS: NIL.

6 Analysis of Economic Effects on Consecrated Life from the findings.

- i. The impact of economic conditions on Consecrated Life in Africa is profound and multifaceted, affecting everything from individual members to the institutional viability of religious institutes. Generalized Poverty & Funding Inadequacy: Insufficient funds for formation, healthcare, and mission projects. Reinforces dependency on external donors; diverts energy to fundraising over mission. This affects the attention of the congregations to be shaped by financial need rather than charism.

ii. Community Life and Personal Witness

Economic hardship places a significant strain on the fabric of community life. The studies on African congregations revealed that financial insecurity can lead to practices contrary to the spirit of evangelical poverty, such as "individual hoarding of salaries or finding alternative ways of procuring funds for private use". This erodes the witness of poverty and undermines the common life.¹⁸

¹⁸ Marcel Izu Onyeocha, "The Future of the Consecrated Life: World, Africa and Nigeria Realities" in *The Discipleship and renewal publication of Consecrated life series*, ed., Onyenocha Izu. M. and Amadi Charles I. (Independence Layout Enugu: SNAAP PRESS LTD)

Furthermore, the pressure to generate income leads to exhausting work schedules, leaving little time or energy for prayer, community building, and personal renewal. The economic context, therefore, becomes a direct contributor to vocational crisis and personal struggle for consecrated persons.

iii. Formation

The formation of new members is critically hampered by economic limitations. The research points to a "lack of available well-educated lecturers for theology, spirituality and human development courses" and "few congregations have updated libraries". This results in a formational gap, where aspirants and young religious may not receive the intellectual and spiritual depth required for a mature and resilient consecrated life.

There is also a worrying trend where congregations, fearing the "loss of temporary or even final professed sisters who leave the congregation once they have obtained degrees," may hesitate to invest in higher education for their members. While understandable, this risk-aversion can create a capacity trap, limiting the pool of well-formed leaders and professionals within the congregation, thus perpetuating a cycle of dependency and underdevelopment.¹⁹

iv. Leadership

Due to the rate of poverty in many African countries, some leaders in some consecrated life communities develop the tendency to commandeer the community resources for their

¹⁹ Onyeocha, "The Future of the Consecrated Life," 57.

personal use or send it home to their families leaving their communities to suffer lack which brings about erosion of common life and witness of poverty; internal conflicts, mistrust and divided loyalties for consecrated persons.

7 Proposed Solutions and the Way Forward

In his second letter to the Thessalonians, saint Paul points out, that he is showing example to the Christian community to work for what they will eat and not depend on others and so he himself also does a work despite the fact that he could rightly depend on the people.²⁰ This serves as a good and awaking example on the need to consider the economic state of one's own religious community.

*“consecrated persons are sent forth to proclaim, by the witness of their lives, the value of Christian fraternity and the transforming power of the Good News, which makes it possible to see all people as sons and daughters of God and inspires a self-giving love towards everyone, especially the least of our brothers and sisters. Such communities are places of hope and of the discovery of the beautitudes, where love, drawing strength from prayer, the wellspring of communion is called to become pattern of life and source of joy. In an age characterized by the globalization of problems and return of the idols of nationalism...”*²¹

In this, *Vita Consecrata*, further invites all consecrated persons to stand out as examples to African nations in tackling economic

²⁰ New Bible Dictionary 2nd ed., s.v. “John the Baptist”.

²¹ Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, no. 51.

situations and other challenges. Addressing the economic challenges facing Consecrated Life in Africa requires a multifaceted approach, holistic, courageous, and theologically grounded strategy that considers the unique circumstances of each country and moves beyond mere crisis management to sustainable empowerment. It requires African consecrated life communities' especially diocesan and indigenous forms to involve in a deep theological and sociological study to understand how the early fathers and mothers, founders and foundresses were able to manipulate economic situations of their time.²²

The implications for economic life are significant. Where Western economic models often prioritize individual accumulation, traditional African system tend to emphasize collective wellbeing and reciprocal obligation. This perspective aligns well with the communitarian dimensions of Consecrated Life, suggesting potential for more culturally-grounded economic practices within religious communities.²³

The challenge lies in adapting these traditional values to contemporary economic realities, where urbanization, monetization, and global economic integration have transformed social and economic relationships. For Consecrated Life, the task involves discerning how to embody authentic communitarian witness in increasingly individualistic economic contexts.

²² Louis Dunia, Aimable Amani Lameke, Nathan Nunn, Max Posch and Raul Sanchez de la Sierra, "On the Importance of African Traditional Religion for Economic Behaviour," NBER Working Paper 31430 (July 2023), [https:// doi.org/10.3386/w31430](https://doi.org/10.3386/w31430).

²³ Rafal Pokrywinski, "Catholic Church in selected African Countries. Historical-pastoral perspectives", 2021

Other ways/suggestions to enable consecrated persons include:

1. Fostering Economic Empowerment and Collaboration

The first pillar of a solution is a deliberate shift towards economic empowerment. This begins with a paradigm shift in formation. For instance, The "Sowing Bountifully" study in Zambia highlighted the need for "established economic policies that could help guide sisters in use of congregational funds and resources".²⁴ Formation programs must, therefore, include training in financial literacy, ecclesiastical accounting, project management, and social entrepreneurship. This will equip consecrated persons not just to be job-seekers, but job-creators and wise stewards of resources.

Furthermore, congregations must move beyond isolation and embrace strategic collaboration. The conference of major superiors should prioritize trying out joint economic initiatives. This could include collaborative agricultural projects, shared investment in viable small-scale industries, or the establishment of collective trust funds for education and healthcare. As the African proverb states, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together." Collaboration is the key to breaking the cycle of dependency and achieving economies of scale.

2. The second pillar involves intentional structural reform within religious institutes. Consecrated persons need to develop a long-term economic vision and plan that is integrated with its charismatic mission. This includes:

- a. Diversifying Income Sources: Reducing over-reliance on remunerated apostolates or external donors by developing

²⁴ Study of East African congregations finds gaps that challenge religious life

self-sustaining projects aligned with the congregation's charism.

- b. Professionalizing Financial Management: Instituting clear financial policies, and transparent accounting practices. This can be achieved by training members in courses on ecclesiastical accounting and other accounting methods.
- c. Prudential Investment in Education: Viewing the professional and intellectual formation of members not as an expense, but as the most critical investment for the future. This requires trusting in vocations and creating conditions that make professed members want to stay and contribute.

3. Deepening the Inculturation of Evangelical Counsels

The most profound response is a theological and pastoral renewal of the understanding of the evangelical counsels within the African context. The vow of poverty, in particular, needs to be re-imagined not as a passive state of destitution but as a prophetic choice for simplicity, solidarity, and wise stewardship. It must be articulated in a way that dialogues with African concepts of community wealth and responsibility, rejecting both destitution and consumerist materialism.²⁵ This involves a critical inculturation that addresses the very real tension between religious commitment and the cultural obligation to support extended family. Communities need to develop clear, compassionate, and theologically sound guidelines that allow consecrated persons to honour their familial relationships without compromising their vocational commitment or creating unsustainable financial burdens on the community. These can help to reduce internal tension and create stronger vocational identity.

²⁵ Richard Kuuia Baawobr, *Consecrated Life in Africa: Chances and Challenges*

8. A Framework of Catholic Social Teaching for African Consecrated Life

Following the “who” and “what” the consecrated life is and represents in the world ‘splendid signs’, the consecrated persons are therefore encouraged to be at the forefront leading the African nations in maximising the economic condition to produce reasonable changes and thus they become examples to others. To fully understand the economic pressures on Consecrated Life in Africa and to formulate a theologically response, it is essential to situate this analysis within the rich tradition of Catholic Social Teaching (CST). The universal encyclicals *Rerum Novarum*, *Populorum Progressio*, and *Laudato Si'*, when read in dialogue with the post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Africae Munus*, helps to examine the topic and portrays the examples to which African consecrated communities must emulate in order to overcome the poor economic conditions of Africa.

Together, these documents provide Consecrated persons in Africa with a powerful mandate. From *Rerum Novarum*, it draws the principle of defending workers' dignity; from *Populorum Progressio*, the vision of integral human development; from *Laudato Si'*, the understanding of the interconnectedness of crises and the call to care for our common home; and from *Africae Munus*, the specific African ecclesial context of service to reconciliation and justice.

a. *The Foundational Call for Justice: Rerum Novarum and Populorum Progressio*

The Church's modern social doctrine, inaugurated by Pope Leo XIII's *Rerum Novarum* (1891), provides foundational principles that remain critically relevant to Africa's economic landscape. The

encyclical's forceful defence of the dignity of the worker and the right to a just wage offers a prophetic critique of the exploitative labour conditions and precarious informal economies that characterize many African nations.²⁶ *Rerum Novarum*'s support for the right of workers to form associations provides a theological mandate for consecrated persons to actively promote and participate in cooperatives, credit unions, and other community-based economic initiatives that protect human dignity.²⁷

Building on this foundation, Pope Paul VI's *Populorum Progressio* (1967) directly addresses the global economic divide, making it uniquely pertinent to the African context. Paul VI famously argued that authentic development is not merely economic growth but must be "integral," directed toward the good of every person and the whole person.²⁸ He critiqued economic systems that create a "widening gap" between the rich and the poor, and he specifically identified the vulnerability of nations reliant on a "one-crop economy at the mercy of sudden, wide-ranging fluctuations in market prices"²⁹ a reality still experienced by many African economies today. For Consecrated Life, this principle of integral development redefines its mission: apostolates in education, healthcare, and social services are not mere charities but essential

²⁶ Leo XIII, *Rerum Novarum* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1891), no. 20, https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiii/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_l-xiii_enc_15051891_rerum-novarum.html.

²⁷ Dennis Coday, "Rerum Novarum Still Speaks to Globalized Economy", May 6, 2011

²⁸ Paul VI, *Populorum Progressio* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 1967), no. 14, https://www.vatican.va/content/paul-vi/en/encyclicals/documents/hf_p-vi_enc_26031967_populorum.html.

²⁹ *Populorum Progressio*, no. 57.

contributions to a development that is truly human, challenging economic models that reduce people to mere producers or consumers. Thus, they are mission.³⁰

b. Integral Ecology and the Interconnected Crises: Laudato Si'

Pope Francis's encyclical *Laudato Si'* (2015) brings a critical and contemporary dimension to the analysis by explicitly linking the economic crises to the ecological crises. The concept of "integral ecology" posits that environmental degradation, economic injustice, and social fragmentation are deeply interconnected.³¹ Francis states that the "cry of the earth and the cry of the poor are one,"³² a reality starkly evident in Africa, where communities on the front lines of climate change (experiencing droughts, desertification, and erratic rainfall) are often the same populations suffering from deep poverty.³³

For Consecrated Life in Africa, *Laudato Si'* presents a dual call. First, it demands an "ecological conversion," urging religious communities to adopt sustainable practices within their own institutions like; conserving water and energy, cultivating gardens, and reducing waste as a tangible witness to a world obsessed with

³⁰ Cyril Obanurie, "Catholic Social Teaching: Relevance of Populorum Progressio to the Nigerian Situation," (Lecture, Institute of Consecrated Life, Abuja, May 16, 2025).

³¹ Francis, *Laudato Si* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2015), no. 137, https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/encyclicals/documents/papa-francesco_20150524_enciclica-laudato-si.html.

³² *Laudato Si*, 49.

³³ Fredrick Nzwili, Ten years after Pope Francis' *Laudato Si*, Catholic ecologists assess its impact on Africa. July 28th, 2025

consumption.³⁴ Second, it calls for Prophetic advocacy, highlighting the "ecological debt" owed by the Global North to the Global South and supporting calls for "ecological reparations."³⁵ This framework empowers religious communities to address the root causes of poverty and migration, recognizing that the defence of the environment is a work of justice intrinsically linked to their commitment to the poor.

c. The African Ecclesial Vision: Africae Munus

While the universal social encyclicals provide the principles, Pope Benedict XVI's *Africae Munus* (2011) offers the specific ecclesial vision for their application in Africa. This post-synodal exhortation builds upon the earlier *Ecclesia in Africa* and serves as a pastoral blueprint for the Church on the continent. *Africae Munus* explicitly calls the Church in Africa to be "salt of the earth and light of the world" in the midst of its socio-political and economic challenges.³⁶ The document's central themes are directly applicable to the economic dimensions of Consecrated Life such as:

- i. Its call to service to Reconciliation, Justice, and Peace: Pope Benedict XVI directly links the Church's mission of evangelization to the "promotion of reconciliation, justice and peace." He calls for a Church that is actively engaged in "the service of the common good," which necessitates

³⁴ *Laudato Si*, 216-221.

³⁵ *Laudato Si*, no. 51-52.

³⁶ Benedict XVI, *Africae Munus* (Vatican: Libreria Editrice Vaticana, 2011), no. 1, https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/apost_exhortations/documents/hf_ben-xvi_exh_20111119_africae-munus.html.

engaging with economic structures that either foster or undermine human dignity.³⁷

- ii. The Priority of Human Dignity: In the face of poverty and conflict, *Africae Munus* repeatedly emphasizes the inviolable dignity of the human person. This provides a Christocentric foundation for Consecrated Life's work, ensuring that its response to economic conditions is never merely technical or sociological but is always rooted in the gospel vision of the human person.
- iii. Concrete Areas of Apostolate: The document specifically highlights the "world of education" and the "world of health care" as critical areas of the Church's mission. In contexts of economic hardship, these ministries run by consecrated persons become essential lifelines for integral human development, directly operationalizing the principles of *Populorum Progressio* and standing as a counter-witness to an economy of exclusion seen in Nigeria.³⁸

10. Synthesis: A Prophetic Witness in the Economic Sphere

This synthesis calls Consecrated Life to a twofold mission: first, to a prophetic witness that courageously denounces unjust economic structures and the "throwaway culture" that disproportionately affects the African-Nigeria poor; and second, to a practical, transformative presence through its ministries, community living, and advocacy, modelling an economy of solidarity, sustainability, and integral development. In doing so, Consecrated Life in Africa

³⁷ *Africae Munus*, 22.

³⁸ *Africae Munus*, 98-103.

does not merely react to economic conditions but becomes a sign of contradiction and a beacon of hope, embodying an alternative way of living in the midst of economic challenge.

11. Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that economic conditions are not a peripheral concern but a defining reality for Consecrated Life in Africa. The challenges of poverty, financial insecurity, and economic pressure directly impact vocational growth, community witness, and apostolic effectiveness. Ignoring these realities risks compromising the prophetic voice and vitality of consecrated life in Nigeria and on the continent at large.

However, consecrated life institutions are capable of remarkable adaptation. The way forward, therefore, is not despair but purposeful action. By embracing a threefold path of economic empowerment, structural reform, and theological inculturation, consecrated persons in Africa can transform these challenges into opportunities for renewal. This requires courage, creativity, and a deep faith that trusts in Providence while actively employing human ingenuity and collaboration.

The future of a vibrant, authentic, and sustainable Consecrated Life in Africa depends on the ability of the institutes to manage their socio-economic context with wisdom and prophetic hope. By doing so, they will not only secure their own future but also offer a powerful witness to the Gospel that truly responds to the cries of the African-Nigeria people.

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