

THE ROLE OF CONSECRATED PERSONS IN CATHOLIC EDUCATION

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The role of consecrated persons in Catholic education cannot be overemphasized. Catholic education is an important ministry for the Church. It assists young people to come to the fullness of their lives. Consecrated persons are called to accompany these young people in reaching full maturity in Christ and humanity.

It is ministry of forming young people to be responsibility and experience the dignity of their human person. As a result consecrated persons sees this as a special ministry and service to the Church and humanity.

Catholic school system is an integral part of the Church. Catholic schools are faith based i.e. they teach belief in God and the Christian way of life. Through Catholic education, families are supported in their effort to educate their children. In collaboration with families, the unique role of consecrated persons in Catholic education cannot be over- emphasized. As educators, they are called to nurture a hunger for God and to foster caring Christian community of peace, justice and love. They are called to promote good morals in students and in preparing them for the job market. This is an important ministry in the Church and in the life of consecrated persons.

Consecrated persons have something special to give to the education apostolate of the Church. For instance, through their formation, lifestyle as visible and living sign of God's love which they can give to the school community. Because of these gifts, they are called to be leaven in the school community. As vowed Religious, they can naturally link education with evangelization because the Catholic schools are known as powerful tools for evangelization. This idea is well emphasized by the 1965 Second Vatican Council document *Gravissimum Educationis*. The document explains that consecrated persons in the school system are the principal catalyst in furthering the religious maturity of students and introducing them to the Person of Christ, this we do naturally and intuitively. Furthermore, the Congregation for Catholic Education called this "Evangelical Completeness" and sees it as a fundamental contribution of consecrated persons to the educational mission of the schools (Traviss 2003).

The second gift consecrated persons bring to Catholic education is the formation of the school community, the formation of the students, spiritually, intellectually and physically. This is a

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

African Journal of Consecrated Life

A Publication of the Conferences of Major Superiors of Nigeria **Motto:** *Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service with Faith and Reason*

ISSN 1597 6610

ISSN 2659-0301online

call to foster the holiness of the students since holiness and happiness are synonymous in the light of faith.

The formational aspect of religious life has prepared consecrated persons in a special way to offer a personalized education by way of attentive listening and dialogue (Traviss 2003). Further, “they are in fact convinced that “education is a thing of the heart, and that consequently, an authentic formative process can only be initiated through personalized relationship (CCE, 2002, art 62). Thus, Catholic schools are a place where heart can be formed to be open to love, justice, peace and caring. It is a place where young people are formed in order to establish an authentic educational relationship and as well as nurture relationships with others and with God. Catholic school apostolate is a call of consecrated persons to share the gifts of their chosen lifestyle more effectively.

Third, consecrated persons presence in schools is a visible and living sign of God’s love and a way to discover life as a gift from God. The Congregation for Catholic Education used the concept of “culture of vocation” to describe this fundamental component of the new evangelization (CCE 2002 art 56). This is a call to share the educational charism and spirituality that animate the lives of consecrated men and women. It is also a call to bring to life the Evangelical Councils and bring the humanism of the beatitudes to the field of education and schools (CCE 2002, art 6).

Therefore, the mission of consecrated persons in education is to participate in the saving mission of the Church and to assist in the building of the body of Christ. It is a call to make integral the human formation enhanced by adequate preparation both in secular and religious knowledge and pedagogical skills. Consecrated persons are called to complement the formational efforts of Catholic families. As an apostolate their call is to nurture a hunger for God and to foster a caring, Christian community of peace, justice and love. Also, to promote good morals in the students and discipline for the job market. Consecrated men and women are to contribute to the order and excellence of the entire school system. They serve as mentors to the students and fellow teachers. They must believe in their call to Catholic education and live accordingly. They are called to be true witnesses to their faith to both students and teachers in the school, through their personal and professional behaviours. As consecrated persons involved in education, we are called to see Catholic education as our professional ministry. They reflect the best of us and set the standard of excellence by which all of us measure ourselves.

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

African Journal of Consecrated Life

A Publication of the Conferences of Major Superiors of Nigeria **Motto:** *Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service with Faith and Reason* ISSN 1597 6610 ISSN 2659-0301online

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FAMILY AFFECTIONS AS A CHALLENGE TO THE VOCATION TO CONSECRATED LIFE: A READING OF SAINT AUGUSTINE'S *EPISTULA* 243¹ TO LAETUS

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ABSTRACT

This article analyses the letter that Augustine wrote a letter to Laetus, a Catholic layman from Africa who had entered a monastery but left after his father's death because of his attachment to his mother and his family. While trying to console him for the struggle he was going through, Augustine pointed out to the young man that he needed to order his love in the right way so that human affections would not stop him from achieving his resolve to embrace the monastic life. However, despite his call for family renunciation, Augustine exhorted Laetus to observe a certain degree of family loyalty. He was called to give any property he intended to free himself of to his mother and siblings and thus liberate his neck from the burden of any family attachment. We contend that Laetus' predicament is still a reality today in religious life and that Augustine's answer is relevant to us even in our context.

The radicality of the discipleship has always posed a problem to those who are called to follow Christ. From the early times of Christian history, some believers have sought to follow the Lord

¹ This letter, like most of the Augustine's letters, has not been the object of so many studies. However, generally speaking, it is important to note that of recent, interesting studies are dedicated to Augustine's letters. See for example, V. H. Drecoll, *Zur Neuedition der Augustinbriefe im Corpus Christianorum*, in *Augustiniana* 1-2 (2017), 123-143; P. Nehring, R. Toczko, M. Stróżyński (eds.), *Scrinium Augustini: The World of Augustine's Letters*, Turnhout 2017 and eponymous database hosted by Nicolaus Copernicus University in Toruń (Poland) which is a research tool into the *Letters* Saint Augustine, fruit of a project carried out by several Polish scholars.

It is also worthwhile to specifically mention studies which focused on *ep.* 243 in recent years. Concerning the date of its writing, of great relevance is the study of A. Gabillon, *Pour une datation de la lettre 243 d'Augustin à Laetus*, in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 40 (1994), 127-142. By using evidence from internal and external sources, and especially by making connections with different works of Augustine, including the recently published Sermon Mainz 42, the author proves that the letter must have been written in exactly 397, either before May or after September. Other studies that partially focused on *ep.* 243 would include: L. Verheijen, *Nouvelle approche de la Règle de Saint Augustin*, Abbaye de Bellefontaine 1980, 1980. Verheijen also dates the *Letter* 243 to the year 397; A. Zumkeller, *Augustine's Ideal of the Religious Life*, transl. E. Colledge, New York 1986. Michael Fiedrowicz carried out a thorough study of the letter to prove that Augustinian monasticism aims at "*learning of the true life*" (*ep.* 243, 6). Cf. M. Fiedrowicz, *Castra ne deseras* (*ep.* 243,1): *riflessioni agostiniane sull'abbandono della vita monastica*, in *Il monachesimo occidentale. Dalle origini alla 'Regula Magistri': XXVI Incontro di studiosi dell'antichità cristiana*, Roma, 8-10 maggio 1997, Roma 1998, 333-339; M. R. Salzman, *Elite realities and mentalities: the making of a western Christian aristocracy*, in *Arethusa* 33/3 (2000), 347-362; R. Krawiec, *'From the Womb of the Church': Monastic Families*, in *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 11/3 (2003), 283-307; B. Bruning, *Ab utero matris meae, quae multum speravit in te. La maternité et la paternité d'Augustin*, in Id., *Unity and its limits in the thought of Augustine*, Leuven 2017, 195-211.

much closer through a special consecration. In the life of the Church, Religious life, as known today, is an expression of that followership which is a prefiguration of the realities of the Kingdom.

After his conversion and Baptism, Augustine left Italy to settle in his home country in Africa. There, he first set up a community of friends in Thagaste, his place of birth. With those friends, he planned to live a life of prayer, holy leisure, and study of the Word of God. That is his first experience of community life (or rather monastic life). Having been ordained a priest² and later on consecrated bishop,³ Augustine continued to promote monastic life in its coenobitic dimension. Under his guidance and leadership, many monasteries were founded throughout North-Africa and many young people were attracted to this life inspired to the life of the first Christian community of Jerusalem (*Acts* 4, 32-36).

It was in this context that a Catholic layman named Laetus discerned his desire to join the monastic life had entered a monastery. However, Laetus soon started experiencing some challenges linked to family affections. He actually left the monastery after his father's death because of his attachment to his mother and his family. Besides, his mother started making every possible effort to have him abandon his desire for the monastic ideal. Now shattered by such a situation, Laetus wrote a letter to the monastery in Hippo, to which Augustine replied with his *Letter* 243.

My purpose in this paper is not only to make known some aspects of Augustine's thoughts most often neglected,⁴ but also to show how, despite the 16 centuries that separate us from him, he still has something important to say to our time on a question like consecrated life in this letter that transcends the case of Laetus and could easily apply to our concrete situation today.

The article will be divided into three asymmetrical parts: The first part is going to be a brief presentation of the figure of Laetus. The second part will consist of an analytical reading of the *Letter* 243 and in the last part, I will draw some conclusions as to the relevance of Augustine's thought to the religious life today, especially in our African context.

1. WHO WAS LAETUS?

Very few influential people were known with the name Laetus⁵ in Augustine's North Africa. According to the best prosopographical instrument available to us, only two people bore that name

² Augustine was made a priest almost by surprise while visiting Hippo, where he intended to convince a friend to join monastic life. He was literally "hijacked" by the people of God and led to the Bishop Valerius of Hippo who ordained him there and then. This happened in January 391. Cf. Aug., *sermon* 355 (SPM 1 (1950) 124-131); Possidius, *Vita sancti Augustini* 4, 1-2 (PL 32, 36-37).

³ Bishop Valerius made Augustine the co-adjutor Bishop of Hippo in 395 and one year later, he fully assumed the office of the Bishop of the city.

⁴ Augustine was not an abstract theologian not concerned with the concrete issues bothering people around him. People now little or nothing about this works as a pastor of souls and often look at him as the polemist, the fighter of heretics, the *Doctor gratiae*, etc. In his pastoral works, we see him tackling so many of the topics that are intimately linked to us today and that regard the simple faithful who are not so much concerned with high-profile theology.

⁵ The Latin word "*laetus*" is an adjective deriving from the verb "*laetare*" which means "to rejoice, to be happy". From this etymology, *Laetus* could mean "*joyful, cheerful, glad, joyous, rejoicing, happy, pleased, delighted, full of joy*" being from the same root as "*Laetitia*" which means *happiness, joy*. For an exemplified use of the word by Latin

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

African Journal of Consecrated Life

A Publication of the Conferences of Major Superiors of Nigeria Motto: Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service with Faith and Reason ISSN 1597 6610 ISSN 2659-0301online

in the period under consideration. The first one is precisely the person we are concerned with in Augustine's *Letter 243*, and the second one is certain Laetus, a catholic Bishop of Aggarsel Nepte in Tunisia around the year 484, so some 50 years after the death of Augustine.⁶

The person to whom Augustine wrote probably had a link with the Augustinian communities in Hippo (either the *monasterium* of the laymen or the *episcopium* which is the monastery for the clerics) but it is not clear to which communities he belonged before leaving. What is certain is that Laetus has left the company of the brothers to settle family issues and was facing serious difficulties to return to his initial resolve. M. Fiedrowicz draws attention to the similarities and contrasts that exist between Augustine the author of this letter and Laetus its addressee. Such a biographical comparison is indeed important for us to understand the orientation of Augustine's line of thought. According to the analysis of Fiedrowicz, there is an antithetical parallelism⁷ between the Bishop of Hippo and the young man in search of some quiet in his soul. While in the case of Augustine, the tears of Monica his mother, the death of a friend in Thagaste, the attitude of his students while teaching in Rome⁸ caused him to abandon the world in order to consecrate his life to God in monastic life and then lead a consummated life of pastoral engagements, in the case of Laetus, these situations thrust him away from monastic life. The tears of his mother, the death of a servant, the flight of a slave all caused Laetus to leave the monastery. Augustine converted from a secular life to monastic life while Laetus, whom Augustine is urging to the harvest of the Lord, is getting involved in the worries of secular affairs. Most certainly, Augustine must have recalled his own spiritual odyssey while reading the letter the young man sent to him.⁹

Augustine struggled in the context of a life far from God in search of truth and eventually came to the light of divine revelation through conversion. Laetus, on the contrary, was born and raised in a Christian family as we shall see in the course of the analysis of the letter. Probably, abandoning his initial intention to embrace monastic life does not mean that he is renouncing his Christian faith. However, since the ideal of ascetic life was highly regarded¹⁰ in those days compared to the ordinary Christian life, and considering the possibility there was for Laetus to become minister of

authors, see F. Gaffiot, (ed.) *Dictionnaire Illustré Latin-Français*, Paris 1934, 883. It should also be noted that, the common name *laetus* was used in the agrarian legislation of the Late Antiquity, precisely in the *Codex Theodosianus*, to designate a foreigner (settler) who received a portion of land of the State to cultivate. Cf. *Cod. Th.* 7, 20, 10 (PL 13, 521).

⁶ A. Mandouze, *Prosopologie de l'Afrique chrétienne (305-533)*, Éditions du CNRS, Paris 1982, 623-624: « Laetus1 – Laetus 2 »

⁷ Cf. M. Fiedrowicz, *Castra ne deseras* (ep. 243,1): *Riflessioni agostiniane sull'abbandono della vita monastica*, 333-334.

⁸ All these are episodes in the tormented life of Augustine before his conversion, of which he made mention in his *Confessions*. For the account of those facts, see respectively *Conf.* 3, 11, 19 (CCL 27, 37; *Ibid.* 4, 4, 7 – 7, 12 (CCL 27, 43-46); *Ibid.* 6, 12, 22 (CCL 69)

⁹ Cf. M. Fiedrowicz, *Castra ne deseras*, 334.

¹⁰ On this topic see Carol Harrison, *The Silent Majority: The Family in Patristic Thought*, in *The Family in Theological Perspective*, ed. Stephen C. Barton, T & T Clark 1996, 100. Considering the fact that many would leave the family bonds to embrace the ascetic life with people other than those of the biological family, Harrison posits that: “*spiritual relations and the fruits of the spirit are infinitely preferable to physical relations and their fruits*”

the Word of God,¹¹ Augustine considered Laetus as a soldier who is deserting the battlefield. Let's now analytically study the content of the letter.

2. AN ANALYTIC READING OF AUGUSTINE'S LETTER 243

In other texts of Saint Augustine, we find his opinion on the question of people leaving monastic life for one reason for another. He tends to make reference to the exhortation of Christ to persevere and not to look back. For example, he says in his *sermon* 96 commenting on *Mk* 8: 34:

“Remember Lot's wife”, said the Lord (*Lk* 17:32). Lot's wife, by looking back, stayed where she was (*Gn.* 19:26). So, every one of us, wherever we have got to, should be afraid of looking back and should march on along the road, following Christ. Forgetting what lies behind, stretching out to what lies ahead, let us follow according to our inner intention toward the palm of God's calling in Christ Jesus (*Phil.* 3: 13-14).¹²

To situate this excerpt in its context, it is important to say that the preacher of Hippo was speaking of the necessity of faithfulness to the state of life which one has chosen. The married people should remain in the bond of holy matrimony without falling away into adultery, while those who have chosen the life of continence are exhorted to remain in that life. This idea finds a better expression in his commentary to *Ps.* 75:

Make your vows to the Lord your God and carry them out, for Lot's wife is a lesson to us all. Suppose a married woman has desired to commit adultery: she has looked back from the place she had reached. Or a widow who had vowed to remain in that state desired to marry; what she desired was something legitimate for a bride, but not for her, because she looked back from her own place. Or a virgin has become a nun and is already consecrated to God; let her make sure to have all the other adornments that truly belong to virginity, without which even virginity is a disgrace... If before taking her vow she had married she would not be condemned... If she turns her eyes towards marriage, she is not condemned because she wants to marry, but because she had already gone beyond that, and becomes a Lot's wife by looking back. You must not hesitate to do what is in your power, you whom God inspires to grasp at some more honorable station.¹³

Saint Augustine speaks here of women in various states of life who look back, in the particular context in which he was speaking, but that does not mean that his exhortation should not apply also to men. In fact, in the first part of the paragraph, he insisted that the prescriptions of the divine laws are for all (*Est enim quidam modus communis omnibus*). The example of the wife of Lot who is not

¹¹ Augustine alluded to *Luc* 10: 2 by saying that Laetus should have a well-ordered love so as prioritize the most important over the less important one, lest the abundant harvest of the Lord should fall prey of birds. Cf. *Ep.* 243, 12 (CSEL 57, 579): *si est in te caritas ordinata sciens praeponere maiora minoribus et misericordia moueri, ut pauperes euangelizentur, ut ne messis domini copiosa operariorum inopia in praedam uolucris iaceat...*

¹² Aug., *Sermon* 96, 10 (PL 38, 589)

¹³ Aug., *en. Ps.* 75, 16 (CCL 39, 1049).

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

African Journal of Consecrated Life

A Publication of the Conferences of Major Superiors of Nigeria Motto: Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service with Faith and Reason ISSN 1597 6610 ISSN 2659-0301online

to be imitated returned in *Sermon* 105, 7, while Saint Augustine was preaching on perseverance in hope:

So, there is nothing so inimical to hope as looking backward; which means placing one's hope in these things that are slipping by and passing away. Instead, it should be placed in things that have not yet been given but are to be given some time, and then will never pass away. But as long as the world is dripping with temptations, like the sulfurous rain of Sodom, we must be warned by the example of Lot's wife. She looked back, you see; and where she looked back, there she stuck. She was turned into salt, (*Gn.* 19:26) to season sensible people with her dreadful example.¹⁴

So, Augustine's point in the above-cited texts is the need to persevere and not to look back once one has chosen ascetic life. In the letter under consideration, he focuses on the exhortation of the Lord who calls his disciples to renounce what, in the world, could hinder them from following him. Essentially, the argument of the Bishop of Hippo in this letter is that the biological family does not have to exist as a stumbling block to ascetic practice.

He started his letter by expressing his sorrow over the difficulty the young Laetus was encountering in his first steps in following Christ and affirmed that his response and the consolation he is offering are nothing less than a duty of charity:

I read the letter that you sent to the brothers, and I want to console you because your first steps in religious life are troubled by many temptations. In that letter, you also indicated that you desired a letter from me. I felt sorrow with you, my brother, and I could not refrain from writing for fear that I would deny not only to your desire but also to mine what I saw that I owed to the duty of charity.¹⁵

Having shared those compassionate words with Laetus, Augustine extensively quoted the passage of *Lk.* 14: 26-33 in which the Lord speaks of the need for total renunciation of family ties for those who want to be his followers. The reason for this orientation of Augustine's argument lies in the fact it was Laetus' mother who was becoming an obstacle to his resolve to embrace the ascetic life. So, in tackling the matter, Augustine seems to make familial renunciation a central tenet of conversion to the ascetic life. In that line of thought, he reminded Laetus that that woman who is his mother is also his sister in Christ, and as such, she should not be so possessive as not to allow the child born from her to do the will of God.

In the passage of *Luke* Augustine was commenting include also the injunction of Lord to prefer him to one's own life. He deftly linked that idea to other passages of the Gospels in which the Lord said that one needs to lose his life in order to find it: *One who loves his own soul will lose it* (*Jn* 12:25; *Mt* 10:39, 16:25; *Mk* 8:35; *Lk* 17:33). Now Augustine quickly explained what to hate one's soul actually means:

¹⁴ Id. *Sermon* 105, 7 (PL 38, 612)

¹⁵ Aug., *ep.* 243, 1 (CSEL 57,568).

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

African Journal of Consecrated Life

A Publication of the Conferences of Major Superiors of Nigeria Motto: Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service with Faith and Reason ISSN 1597 6610 ISSN 2659-0301online

This commandment, however, by which we are commanded to lose our soul, does not mean that anyone should kill himself, which is an unforgivable crime, but what it does mean is that one should kill in oneself the soul's carnal love because of which the present life causes delight and presents an obstacle to the life to come. After all, this is what the words "*hates his own soul and will lose it*" mean. This is accomplished, however, by loving, since he most clearly mentions in the same commandment the benefit of gaining one's own soul when he says, *But one who loses it in this world will find it for eternal life.*¹⁶

Having clarified the true meaning of the commandment, he applied it to the relationship between the aspirant to the ascetic life and his family members. Just as to lose one's life does not equate with committing suicide, so also losing one's parents does mean to kill them. So how does he lose them? Augustine, using a highly imaged language says:

He does not kill them like a parricide, but by the spiritual sword of the word of God he piously and confidently strikes and slays the carnal love of theirs by which they try to bind themselves and their children in the entanglements of this world, and he causes that love to live in them by which they are brothers and sisters, by which along with their children in time they acknowledge God and the Church as their parents in eternity.¹⁷

This statement introduces us to the idea of the spiritual motherhood of the Church through which, Augustine will make it clear to Laetus, that the Church is the mother of his biological mother and of his. While the anonymous mother of Laetus could only generate him into this passing and mortal life, Mother Church generates all her children for everlasting life. This spiritual mother is in need of her children in the midst of the difficulties that encompass her. The whole of the § 8 of our *Letter* exposes these convictions of the Bishop of Hippo:

Mother Church is also the mother of your mother. She has conceived both of you from Christ; she has been in travail for you with the blood of martyrs; she has given birth to you into everlasting light; she has fed and feeds you with the milk of faith, and, though she prepares more solid foods, she sees with horror that you want to wail like small children without teeth. This mother, spread throughout the whole world, is troubled by such varied and multiple attacks from errors that her aborted offspring now do not hesitate to war against her with unrestrained arms. Because of the neglect and laziness of certain ones whom she holds on her lap, she grieves that her members become cold in many places and become less able to embrace the small children. From where but from other children, from other members, in whose number you are included, does she demand the help that is due her in justice? Are you going to neglect her needs and turn to the words that the flesh speaks? Does she not strike the ears with more serious complaints? Does she not have a womb that is more precious and breasts filled with heavenly food?¹⁸

¹⁶ *Id.*, ep. 243, 5 (CSEL 57,572).

¹⁷ *Ibid.* (CSEL 57, 573).

¹⁸ *Ibid.* (CSEL 57, 574-575).

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

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The love through which Laetus' mother was trying to keep him away from his ascetic aspiration is not true love. It is a private egoistic love that will definitely not be of any benefit for eternal life. Augustine abundantly reflects on the antithetical pair "private – common" in many of his work.¹⁹ And in the letter under analysis, he remains consistent with the major ideas he has developed elsewhere. On the opposition between the private and the common, Augustine expresses the same idea in his letter to Laetus as in the treatise *De vera religione*. He posits that he who indulges in private love might not have a share in that community of love that is proper to eternal life: "*What, then, is extraordinary if he who loves not that which is common, but that which is private, does not reach the kingdom of God?*"²⁰ In the next paragraph, he says: "*Let's hate the temporal bonds if we burn with the love of eternity.*"²¹ Likewise in his commentary on *Our Lord's Sermon on the Mount*, he wrote:

Let us love what can be led with us in that kingdom, because in it no one says: My Father, but all to the one God: Our Father; not: My Mother, but all to the Jerusalem of the kingdom: Our Mother; nor: My Brother, but all for all: Our Brother... It is, therefore, necessary that the disciple of Christ hates the good things that pass in people whom he desires with him to the good things that will remain forever and the more he hates those things in them the more he loves them.²²

And the same idea recurs in the letter we are studying. Augustine exhorted Laetus not to be tied down by the private love of his mother and generalized the right attitude to those who follow Christ: "*This is what everyone should think concerning his own soul, so that he may hate in it a private love, which is undoubtedly temporal. But he should love the community and society of which scripture said, 'They had one soul and one heart for God (Acts 4:32)'*"²³ Laetus' mother represents the sphere in which private love is predominant, that is, disordered love, limited to one's own interests, temporal and transient. The love that attaches one to one's siblings is private. Regarding the claim of a father, a mother, children and any other relation, Augustine says "*all*

¹⁹ Among other scholars who studied this topic in patristic thought and in Augustine's works in particular we can name M. J. Wilks, *The Problem of private ownership in patristic thought and an Augustinian Solution of the Fourteenth Century*, in *Studia Patristica* VI (1962), 533-542; G. Madec, *Le communisme spirituel*, in *Homo Spiritalis. Festgabe für Luc Verheijen O.S.A., zu seinem 70. Geburtstag*, ed. K. H. Chelius – C. P. Mayer, Würzburg 1987, 225-239. Madec's article is about Augustine's use of the philosophical antithesis "commune/proprium" with the variants: "universale, sociale, privatum". This theme, which Augustine finds in Acts 4:32, represents a fundamental element of his conception of religious life: spiritual good is common to all; pride, on the other hand, "amor excellentiae propriae", annihilates the meaning of the universal and relegates spiritual being to selfishness; it is opposed to the ideal of charity which is the basis of common life. He demonstrates that in this antithetical pair we find the theme of the two loves that founded two Cities.

²⁰ Aug., *vera rel.* 88 (CCL 32, 245): *quid ergo mirum, si ad regnum non peruenit, qui non communem, sed priuatam rem diligit?*

²¹ *Ibid.* 89 (CCL 32, 245)

²² *Id.*, *s. dom. m.* I, 15,41, (CCL 35, 46).

²³ *Id.*, *ep.* 243, 4 (CSEL 57, 571).

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A Publication of the Conferences of Major Superiors of Nigeria **Motto:** Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service with Faith and Reason ISSN 1597 6610 ISSN 2659-0301online

these are his personal goods, which generally tie one down and prevent one from obtaining not the personal goods that pass away in time but the common goods that last for eternity.”²⁴

While Laetus’ mother, who represents the private mentality, gives more importance to the fact of having generated him than to that of being generated like him by Mother Church, the young man, instead of calling her his mother, limiting himself to the purely biological and affective level, should consider her - according to the “eschatological-communitarian” mentality – his sister in Christ, thus anticipating the eternal relationships already here on earth. Augustine nicely put the idea as follows:

After all, by the very fact that a certain woman is your mother, she is of course not mine. Hence this is something temporal and passing, just as you see that it already belongs to the past that she conceived you, that she bore you in her womb, that she gave birth to you, and that she nursed you with milk. But insofar as she is a sister in Christ, she belongs to you and to me and to everyone who is promised the one heritage in heaven and God as Father and Christ as brother.²⁵

Fiedrowicz, in his above-cited study, highlighted the fact that Augustine himself adopted the attitude he was recommending to Laetus toward his own parents.²⁶ As can be read in the *Confessions*, he prayed God to inspire his future readers: “*Let them remember with loving devotion these two [Monica and Patricius] who were my parents in this transitory light, but also were my brethren under you, our Father, within our mother the Catholic Church, and my fellow-citizens in the eternal Jerusalem, for which your people sigh with longing throughout its pilgrimage, from its setting out to its return*”.²⁷

Further in his argument, Augustine posits that Laetus’ mother’s love is not genuine maternal love. It’s a carnal love that comes from original sin. He, therefore, exhorts Laetus to beware of Eve²⁸ whom his mother took as a model:

Watch out that she does not twist and overturn you for the worse. What difference does it make whether it is in a wife or in a mother, provided that we nonetheless avoid Eve in any woman? For this shadow of a son’s love for his mother comes from the leaves of that tree with which our parents first clothed themselves in that damnable nakedness. And whatever she offers you in those words and in that suggestion supposedly as a duty of love, in order to turn you aside from the most genuine and pure love of the Gospel, comes from the cunning of the serpent.²⁹

²⁴ *Ibid.* 243, 3 (CSEL 57, 570).

²⁵ *Ibid.*

²⁶ Cf. M. Fiedrowicz, *Castra ne deseras*, 334.

²⁷ *Id.*, *Conf.* 9, 13, 37 (CCL 27, 157).

²⁸ Cf. G-H Baudry, *La responsabilité d’Ève dans la chute: analyse d’une tradition*, in *Mélanges de science religieuse* 53/3 (1996), 293-320; G. Bonner, *The Figure of Eve in Augustine’s Theology*, in *Studia Patristica* XXXIII (1997), 22-39.

²⁹ *Id.*, *ep.* 243, 10 (CSEL 57,577).

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

African Journal of Consecrated Life

A Publication of the Conferences of Major Superiors of Nigeria Motto: Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service with Faith and Reason ISSN 1597 6610 ISSN 2659-0301online

Augustine links the situation of Laetus to the original sin in which Man fell away from the design of God.³⁰ Abandoning his resolve to embrace ascetic life is somehow like falling away from a divine project which would benefit not only Laetus and the monastery to which he belonged, but the Church to whom Augustine assigns the role of a spiritual mother.

Augustine put his fine-grained psychology skills to play to address Laetus in such a way that the young man could see what loss it would be for him to yield to the desire of his mother instead of clinging to the ideal of ascetic life to which the Bishop believed he was truly called. He wrote: “*See, the desire for the truth and for knowing and finding the will of God in the Holy Scriptures attracts you; the duty of preaching the gospel attracts you. The Lord gives the signal that we should keep watch in the camp, that we should build the tower from which we may be able to look down on and drive off the enemy of eternal life*”.³¹ Augustine seems convinced of the call of Laetus to the ministry of preaching. He makes reference to the very camp and tower he spoke of at the beginning of his letter. The young man who enters the monastery is a new recruit of Christ, the camp is the monastery (community of brothers leaving in oneness of mind and heart) where the tower, which could be understood as the spiritual awareness and vigilant dedication to spiritual matter, is built. All these reflections are intended to convince Laetus to return to his original resolve.

Laetus’ mother may not want to follow the ascetic way. She is free not to, but she should not hinder the longing of his son: “*She does not want to follow? Then let her not hinder you. She does not want to change for the better? Then be on your guard that she does not corrupt you...*”³² Recalling the history of salvation and pagan myth, Augustine makes reference to the mother of the seven Maccabees³³ and the mothers of Sparta who demonstrated bravery in allowing their children to show courage and determination in facing death. With insistence, Augustine wrote about Laetus’ mother:

She is clearly not a mother of the sort that the Maccabees had, nor one like the mothers of Sparta, of whom it was recorded that they roused their sons for the conflicts of war much more persistently and much more passionately than the sounding of trumpets in order that they might shed their blood for their earthly fatherland.³⁴ For your mother, who does not allow you to

³⁰ There is a deep theological development of this doctrine’s theology. T. Nisula offers a well-argued study on Augustine’s view of sin whose deep root lies in pride (superbia) and of which theological core is the separation of human will from God’s will. Cf. T. Nisula, *Inobedientia retributa - Psychological and Theological Arguments in Augustine’s View of Sin*, in *Studies in Luther and Lutheranism*, U. Nissen, A. Vind, B. Holm & O.-P. Vainio (eds.), Helsinki 2004, 132-150.

³¹ Aug., *ep.* 243, 6 (CSEL 57, 573).

³² Id., *ep.* 243, 10 (CSEL 57, 577).

³³ On Augustine’s mention of the figure of the mother of the seven Maccabees, see C. B. Tkacz, *The Seven Maccabees, the Three Hebrews and a Newly Discovered Sermon of St. Augustine (Mayence 50)*, in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes* 41/1 (1995), 59-78, esp. p. 62 n. 14.

³⁴ The Spartan mothers are presented mostly as exemplary good mothers in the context of their and their sons’ political and social ἀρεταί. On this topic as presented in the work of Plutarch, see M. Myszkowska-Kaszuba, *The Roman mother like the Spartan mother: remark on a cross cultural notion of the mother(hood) in Plutarch*, in *Hermes: Zeitschrift für Klassische Philologie* 45/4 (2017), 480-487.

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

African Journal of Consecrated Life

A Publication of the Conferences of Major Superiors of Nigeria **Motto: Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service with Faith and Reason** ISSN 1597 6610 ISSN 2659-0301online

withdraw from worldly concerns in order to learn of the true life, shows well enough how she would not allow you to repudiate this world in order to face death if that were necessary.³⁵

Further, Augustine used the relationship of Jesus with Mary to enlighten Laetus as to how he should relate with his mother. He notes that Jesus also had a mother, but then he went ahead and cited the passage where Jesus defined familial relationships based on whoever does “*my father’s will.*” Thus, says Augustine, “*In that way, the best and divine teacher rejected the term “mother,” which they had reported to him as something private and personal to him, because it was earthly, in comparison with the close relationship of heaven. And, in mentioning the same close relationship of heaven among his disciples, he showed the kind of society in which that virgin was again united with him along with the other saints.*”³⁶ It is clear that Augustine does not suggest that Jesus rejected the motherhood of Mary but the term “your mother” signifying a private mother-son relationship from a purely biological angle. The relationship between Jesus and Mary did not depend on her womb, her ten months of pregnancy, her labor, her breastfeeding – those things Augustine linked to Laetus’ mother – but rather on the fact that Mary did God’s will. Augustine nicely expressed this idea in his treatise *On the holy virginity*:

Therefore, Mary is more blessed in receiving the faith of Christ, than in conceiving the flesh of Christ. For to a certain one who said, “Blessed is the womb, which bore You,” He Himself made answer, “Rather, blessed are they who hear the Word of God, and keep it.” [...] Thus also her nearness as a Mother would have been of no profit to Mary, had she not borne Christ in her heart after a more blessed manner than in her flesh.³⁷

In a nutshell, the mother-son relationship, and apparently any others that followed the spiritual model, could still be maintained rather than renounced.

Augustine, as a spiritual father, had keenly observed Laetus’ attitude right from the time he was still living in the monastery. He remained the young in the letter the basic weak point he had noticed in him: “*When you were here, I noticed that you were held back from the love of God by family concerns, and I perceived that you were carried and dragged by your cross instead of carrying and dragging it.*”³⁸ The metaphoric use of language here is obvious while speaking of the cross. What Augustine meant by the cross, as he would further clarify, is precisely the weight of our mortal flesh. Of course, he is not saying that the flesh is evil as the Manicheans suggested,³⁹ but that one should not live according to the impulse of the mortal flesh. He continued his

³⁵ Aug., *ep.* 243, 6 (CSEL 57, 573-574).

³⁶ Aug., *ep.* 243, 9 (CSEL 57, 576).

³⁷ Id., *virg.* 3, 3 (CSEL 41, 237).

On this argument and mariological reflexions see G. Madec, *Marie, vierge et mère, selon saint Ambroise et saint Augustin*, in *La virginité de Marie*, ed. J. Longère, Paris 1998, 73-83. See esp. 79-83 for Augustine; C. Charamsa, *Maria e la nuova / vera famiglia di Gesù (a proposito di Marco 3,31-35)*, *Alpha Omega* 11 (2008), 37-54.

³⁸ Id., *ep.* 243, 11 (CSEL 57, 578).

³⁹ For a presentation of Augustine consideration on the flesh as not created by the powers of darkness, see T. J. van Bavel, ‘*No one ever hated his own flesh*’ *Eph. 5:29 in Augustine*, in *Augustiniana* 45/1-2 (1995), 45-93.

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

African Journal of Consecrated Life

A Publication of the Conferences of Major Superiors of Nigeria **Motto:** *Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service with Faith and Reason* ISSN 1597 6610 ISSN 2659-0301online

argument shed light on the image of the cross that drags the one who is supposed to carry it at the command of the Lord: “*After all, he said, what else does our cross, which the Lord commands us to carry in order that we may follow him with the least impediment, signify but the mortality of this flesh? For it is what torments us until death is swallowed up in victory.*”⁴⁰ Now, Augustine suggests that the cross (that is the flesh) must be crucified by the nails of the fear of God.⁴¹

Finally, he counsels Laetus on the disposition of his inheritance and urges him to greater alacrity in following the Lord. In the last paragraph of the *Letter* under study, we can see how Augustine did not reject family but rather redefined it.⁴² It is interesting to note that in spite of his appeals for Laetus to forgo his earthly family lest he be deserting his true mother, Augustine ends his letter by making clear that the young man still had a duty to provide financially for his household (his biological family and his dependents). He wrote:

Of course, if your share of the family property, in whose management it is neither necessary nor proper that you be involved, includes some cash, it really should be given to your mother and to the others in your family. Their needs should certainly hold first place in your eyes if, in order to be perfect, you have decided to distribute such money to the poor. *For, if anyone, the apostle says, does not provide for his own and especially for the members of his family, he has denied the faith and is worse than a non-believer* (1 Tm 5:8).⁴³

From the foregoing, it is evident that according to Augustine, even for the ascetic who is called to the choice of familial renunciation, a degree of family loyalty can still be required. However, this loyalty should serve as a means of freedom and not as a reinforcement of bonds that would not allow the candidate to ascetic life to freely answer God’s call. Therefore, nothing, not even the tears of his mother and other family issues, should hold him back once he has settled the questions that led him away from the monastery. Augustine affirmed this saying to Laetus:

If you have left us in order to deal with these matters and in order to remove your neck from these chains and to put on wisdom, how will your mother’s tears flowing for her flesh and blood harm you? How will they tear you away? Or what about the flight of a slave, the death of female servants, or the ill health of brothers? If you have a well-ordered love, you should know how to prefer more important to less important things and to be touched by mercy in order that the gospel may be preached to the poor.⁴⁴

In essence, the Bishop of Hippo is exhorting the young Laetus to remove his neck from the burden of family worries in order to free serve the Lord as a preacher of the Good News. Probably

⁴⁰ Aug., *ep.* 243, 11 (CSEL 57, 578).

⁴¹ *Ibid.* Wisdom for Laetus would consist in returning to his initial resolve to live ascetic life. The beginning of such wisdom as the Bible says in the fear of God. Augustine has a wide spectrum of commentaries on topic of “Fear of God” as the beginning of wisdom. On this topic in patristic literature, see G. Folliet, *De la citation scripturaire Initium / Principium sapientiae timor domini à l’adage La crainte et le commencement de la sagesse*, in *Revue des Études Augustiniennes et Patristiques* 36 (2011), 1-88, esp. 28-35 for Augustine.

⁴² Cf. R. Krawiec, ‘*From the Womb of the Church*’, 290-291.

⁴³ Aug., *ep.* 243, 12 (CSEL 57, 578-579).

⁴⁴ *Ibid.* (CSEL 57, 579).

Augustine was thinking of his own itinerary in his monastic experience as he went from his vocation to a quiet studious monastic life to a full immersion into the pastoral care of the diocese he was called to lead, and to which he generously consumed his life.⁴⁵ From the foregoing, how does Augustine speak to us today?

3. THE RELEVANCE OF AUGUSTINE’S THOUGHT TO RELIGIOUS LIFE TODAY

Religious life today continues to face some of the challenges of old but also new dimensions arise that constitute serious vocational problems. In effect, even today, it is not uncommon for families to question a member’s vocation to consecrated life.

Sometimes they are afraid they will never again see that son or daughter, brother or sister especially if the latter joins a missionary congregation that could send him or her to a far place of apostolate.

Other times, families think one need not become a consecrated person before doing some of the “works” religious used to be identified with. We know that for centuries consecrated life was at the forefront in all areas of mercy and solidarity in the face of human needs: from hospitals to schools, orphanages, homes for the elderly and others, there was no area where religious had not shined by their considerate presence and tireless apostolic dedication. But with time, especially in Western economically advanced Countries, the State has withdrawn slowly and definitively many of these areas, driving out, sometimes by force and violence, the Christian presence, i.e. men and women who devoted themselves to this specific apostolate. As Fr. Alessandro Perrone, *rej*⁴⁶ indicates in a conference, all these apostolates corresponded to the specific mission of the institute, its charismatic mission. But all that led, probably unconsciously or rather unnoticed, to a certain

⁴⁵ Augustine did really spend his existence at the service of the Gospel and the people of God, by been a very good pastor of his flock. On the topic of Augustine as a pastor of souls, there exists an abundant bibliography of which we can indicate the most recent: R. B. Eno, *New Light on Augustine the Pastor*, in *Studies in Catholic History of J.T. Ellis*, eds. N.H. Minnich, R.B. Eno, R.F. Trisco, Wilmington, Delaware 1985, 500-519; A. Trapè, *Saint Augustine : man, pastor, mystic*, New-York 1986; M. Neusch, *Augustin, moine et Pasteur*, in *Connaissance des Pères de l’Église* 55 (1994), 4-7; T. Jañez Barrio, *San Agustín obispo-pastor: Predicador representativo de la Unidad Católica*, in *Pensamiento agustiniano XI. San Agustín pastor de la Iglesia. Jornadas Internacionales de Agustinología, Universidad católica Andres Bello, Caracas 1996*, 8-27 F. Bellentani, “Episcopus ... est nomen suscepti officii”: *Il vocabolario del servizio episcopale in alcuni testi agostiniani*, in *Vescovi e pastori in epoca teodosiana. XXV Incontro di studiosi dell’antichità cristiana, Roma, 8-11 maggio 1996* 1-2, Roma 1997, 667-681; M. Fiedrowicz, “Propter infirmiores et simpliciores dominicas oves” (ep. 191,2). *Agostino vescovo: Diffensore della fede dei semplici*, in *Vescovi e pastori in epoca teodosiana. XXV Incontro di studiosi dell’antichità cristiana, Roma, 8-11 maggio 1996*, 2 vol., Roma 1997, 695-702; S. Ferdi, *Saint Augustin en visite pastorale dans les campagnes d’Hippone*, in *Saint Augustin. La Numidie et la société de son temps. Actes du Colloque SEMPAM-AUSONIUS, Bordeaux, 10-11 octobre 2003* (ed. par S. Lancel/S. Guédon/L. Maurin = Scripta Antiqua 14), Bordeaux 2005, 109-113; R. Dodaro, *Pastor*, in *Augustinus-Lexikon* 4 (2012sqq.) 506-510; H. R. Drobner, *Augustine the Preacher: Classical Orator and Pastor of Souls*, in *Library of Religious Studies, Guangzhou 2012*, 74-89; K. Chabi, *Saint Augustine as a Reforming Voice for the Catholic Church in Roman Africa: The Testimony of his Letter 29 to Alypius*, in *Augustinianum* 58/2 (2018), 469-491.

⁴⁶ Fr. Alessandro Perrone, RCJ, *The prospects to cope with the challenges of Religious in Europe*, published on <http://ucesm.net/cms/wp-content/uploads/Report-Fr-Alessandro.pdf>, consulted and retrieved on October 10, 2019.

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

African Journal of Consecrated Life

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confusion in the light of the mission of the Institute and its works, its specific apostolate, since even within the ecclesial community the functionalist vision of religious life was promoted, so that the charismatic and prophetic vision of this religious life quietly ended almost in the shadow. Once this vision is absent, religious life is seen as any corporation of “workers” with the specific dimension of celibacy added to it. And of course, one does not necessarily need to be a celibate to do some of those “works” the consecrated persons do.

Still at other times the problem come from the fear of not having anything to gain in terms of material benefits from the member who decides to join a religious congregation instead of looking for job, set up a family, think about the posterity of the large family, take care of his parents at their old age, etc. In this case, a vocation to religious life is considered as a waste of one’s life.

Finally, we need to acknowledge that it is also true that most families simply want happiness for their members. If one finds happiness in the consecrated life, their family members often find peace themselves.

In the first three specific cases (fear of separation, the perception of social irrelevance, and preoccupations about material benefits) family worries continue to burden consecrated persons in many quarters. The details we have about Laetus’ mother in Augustine’s *Letter* 243 relate to her maternal love which tended to keep the son for herself as a private property, so her case falls within the first problem we raised. We do not know whether there are other dynamics that underlie her efforts to retain him and keep him away from his resolve to become a consecrated person.

In other cases, parents do allow their children to join consecrated life but eventually, make so many demands of them. In our African setup, for example, many Christians do not know there is a difference between a religious priest and a diocesan priest. But they do perceive that, in normal time, for the fact that one consecrates one’s life to serve God, a sober and simple way of life should characterize each priest and also a woman religious. Unfortunately, the contrary is sometimes the case. And considering the lavish and extravagant lifestyle of some diocesan priests,⁴⁷ think of priests who are into business or ministries that yield them a lot of wealth, some parents expect their family member who is a religious priest to also make a display of wealth. In the case of women religious, the family could also become a serious burden as most Reverend sisters, especially those in the position of power, are expected to take care of innumerable family issues. And of course, this constitutes a major problem to their personal life and also to the life of their communities. At times, it is the religious herself who is so worried about the family by giving full attention to every little problem of her biological family, as in the case of Laetus who Augustine said was “*held back from the love of God by family concerns*”. Both the unnecessary worries and the extravagant way of life whether by religious (men/women) or by diocesan priests stand in contradiction with the basic inspiration of religious life, which is prophetic and oriented toward a true witness to the life and message of Christ. Pope Francis expressed the idea of the right attitude of the consecrated person very well:

I am counting on you “to wake up the world” since the distinctive sign of consecrated life is prophecy. As I told the Superiors General: “Radical evangelical living is not only for religious:

⁴⁷ It should also be said that the contrary is obtainable. There are diocesan priests who are very frugal and who lead a very simple and humble lifestyle while religious make a display of riches.

The CATHOLIC VOYAGE

African Journal of Consecrated Life

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it is demanded of everyone. But religious follow the Lord in a special way, in a prophetic way.” This is the priority that is needed right now: “to be prophets who witness to how Jesus lived on this earth... a religious must never abandon prophecy”⁴⁸

To imitate “*how Jesus lived on this earth*” is precisely what the consecrated persons are called to do and any choice of a religious that is opposed to this witness is surely a serious shortcoming that needs to be amended, in order for them “*to wake up the world*”. Both on the part of the consecrated person and of his or her Christian family, there is a need to look at things from the right perspective.⁴⁹ To that effect, Augustine’s insight might shed some light on the right course of action even today. As we endeavour to be loyal to our biological family, it is important to bear in mind that our call has its own demands that openly contrast with the expectations that the family could place on the consecrated person. It is a generally acknowledged fact that the families we grew up with so profoundly influence the person we are, that to separate ourselves from them would be to split ourselves. This is not desirable. It is, however, important to act in accordance with a choice of life that also has its rules.

CONCLUSION

We have studied the correspondence of Augustine with Laetus in the above pages and have noticed how the Bishop of Hippo tried to convince the young man to have a well-ordered love. It is not wrong to love one’s parents even though the Lord commands that we “hate” them. To “hate” in other words means to prefer Him to them and to any other thing, including our own life. As we have seen in the study of *Letter 143*, Augustine is clear that it would be inappropriate for Laetus to continue to be involved in the management of his family; however, he also clearly states that Laetus has an obligation to give whatever wealth he has to support his mother and dependents, and not impoverish them by giving away his goods to the poor.

By and large, Augustine is not teaching a blind family renunciation. For that reason, his doctrine on this point is still relevant to us even though 16 centuries distance makes things very different from what was obtainable in his time. Indeed, society, culture, language, mentality, everything has changed. The distance between us and him is great, yet it is far from being unbridgeable. That is why it is interesting to observe that many things that challenged consecrated

⁴⁸ Pope Francis, *Apostolic Letter of his Holiness Pope Francis to all consecrated people on the occasion of the year of consecrated life*, II, 2. The Pope added as follows: «*Prophets receive from God the ability to scrutinize the times in which they live and to interpret events: they are like sentinels who keep watch in the night and sense the coming of the dawn (cf. Is 21:11-12). Prophets know God and they know the men and women who are their brothers and sisters. They are able to discern and denounce the evil of sin and injustice. Because they are free, they are beholden to no one but God, and they have no interest other than God. Prophets tend to be on the side of the poor and the powerless, for they know that God himself is on their side.*»

⁴⁹ I mentioned the Christian family of the religious here because there are people who join religious life being from families that are not Christian or not Christian from another denomination. In certain cases, there could be acceptance from their family of origin, sometimes even more that what could be obtainable from a Christian family. But there could also be serious rejection and efforts to make the religious abandon his or her resolve.

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ISSN 1597 6610

ISSN 2659-0301online

life in those early times of Christian faith continue to exist today and need to be addressed in the particular context of our society. And the voice of a Church Father like Augustine still has some relevance for us.