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**TOWARDS THE PRACTICE OF SYNODALITY
AND THE LESSONS FROM THE JUBILEE YEAR
IN CONSECRATED LIFE**

**Community Life, Formation, Mission
and Authenticity**

A Publication of the Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria

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Motto: *Witness to Truth and Mercy through Love and Service
with Faith and Reason*

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Editorial

Journeying in the Path of Synodality as Pilgrims of Hope

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“They [Consecrated men and women] are called to interrogate Church and society with their prophetic voice.” (Synod of Bishops, *Final Document* (2024), n.65)

“Religious life ought to promote growth in the church by way of attraction. The church must be attractive. Wake up the world! Be witnesses of a different way of doing things, of acting, of living! . . . It is this witness that I expect of you. Religious should be men and women who are able to wake the world up.” —Pope Francis, Meeting with the Union of Superiors General, Nov. 29, 2013

The vocations, mission, and contributions of the consecrated life to the Church and the world are invaluable and irreplaceable. Throughout the centuries, the Church has guided many forms of Consecrated Life and been enriched by them. The recent Synod of Bishops on Synodality¹ and the Jubilee Year (2025) have celebrated and commended them, but they also offered encouragement,

¹ POPE FRANCIS, XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops, *For a Synodal Church: Communion, Participation, Mission. Final Document* (2024). (www.synod.va/content/dam/synod/news/2024-10-26_final-document/ENG--- Documento-finale.pdf).

exhortations, and expectations or hope to consecrated women and men. Three important interventions during the celebration of both events deserve attention, as they offer clear orientations about the beauty, role, and challenges of Consecrated Life today. These are the *Final Document* of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of The Synod of Bishops on Synodality (October 2024)², along with two homilies delivered by Pope Francis and Pope Leo XIV during the 28th World Day for Consecrated Life³ and the Jubilee of Consecrated Life⁴.

The edition of *The Catholic Voyage* that you have at hand is a discussion on important aspects of the Synod on Synodality and the Jubilee Year and their implications for consecrated life. The present reflection, first, briefly highlights some relevant issues concerning

² In the *Final Document*, Consecrated life is mainly discussed in the second part, specifically within the section on "Charisms, Vocations and Ministries for Mission," especially Paragraphs 60 and 65; see also paragraphs 50-56 on the need for new relationships that flourish in various contexts. Other related topics such as lay participation, ordained ministry, and the formation of the people of God are also covered in the surrounding paragraphs.

³ POPE FRANCIS, *Homily during First Vespers of the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord on the World Day for Consecrated Life* (1 February 2025, Vatican City).

www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250201-omelia-presentazione-del-signore.html.

⁴ Pope LEO XIV, *Homily at Holy Mass during Jubilee of Consecrated Life*, 9 October 2025, Vatican City. www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20251009-giubileo-vita-consacrata.html

Consecrated Life based on the above-mentioned documents, and, second, presents the articles in this volume.

Called to interrogate the Church and society and to new Relationships

First, the *Final Document* of the Synod on Synodality recognises that the forms of Consecrated Life - Orders and congregations, societies of apostolic life, secular institutes, as well as associations, movements and new communities - all have special contributions to make to the growth of synodality in the Church. Consecrated persons are called to interrogate the Church and society with their prophetic voice. Many communities of consecrated life today are like laboratories for inter-cultural living in a way that is prophetic for both the Church and the world. Synodality calls on pastors of local Churches and leaders of institutes of Consecrated life and societies of Apostolic Life to strengthen relationships to facilitate an exchange of gifts in the service of the common mission.⁵

Listening and *dialogue* are of great importance in a synodal journey. The members of the Church, including consecrated persons, listen to and freely accept the invitation of their respective leaders (the Pope, Bishops, Abbot, Major Superior, Rectors, Pastors, Coordinator, etc); they set out with their leaders and follow their lead. They all, as participants, pray, reflect, struggle, and dialogue and discern together in an atmosphere of authentic communion. Essentially, as experience teaches, it is *relationships*, authentic communion, that

⁵ SYNOD OF BISHOPS, Final Document, n.65.

sustain the Church's vitality and breathe life into its structures. The dynamics of relationships are inscribed in our very nature as creatures. Hence, a missionary synodal Church, the religious community in particular, must renew both listening and dialogue as well as relationships with God and with one another. In this journey, the Consecrated Life in the Church plays a significant role⁶.

One of the significant roles the Consecrated Life plays in the Church is in its vocation to nurture and strengthen relationships⁷. This includes new and authentic relationships with the Lord, among members of one's religious community, between men and women, in the family, in the local community, among social groups and

⁶ Cfr. SYNOD OF BISHOPS, *Final Document*, n.49

⁷ POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata* (1995) emphasizes relationships with God (the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit) and within community (fraternity, Church, world), with specific paragraphs highlighting this: Numbers 12-13, (on Foundation of Relationship), focus on the fundamental Trinitarian relationship and communal life; Paragraph 20 is a key passage calling consecrated persons to nurture fraternal communion as a sign of God's love and a path to deeper union with Christ, emphasizing the "trinity of relationships": with the Lord, the community, and the mission. This idea builds throughout the document, highlighting that consecrated life isn't just individual devotion but lived in community, a "sign of fraternity". Numbers 23-24 (on Deepening the Encounter) discuss deepening the personal encounter with Christ; Numbers 47-51 (on Relationship with the Church) explore relationships with the Church (apostolicity, mission); and Numbers 82-85 (*Relationship with the World*) call for prophetic witness in the world, fostering dialogue and communion. The core message is that consecrated life is relational, a "call to communion" that deepens love for God and neighbour.

people of different religions, in the educational environment, and, indeed, with all of creation. The evangelical quality of relationships within a community is essential, since it is decisive for the witness that the Family of God needs to give. They witness to this ecclesial communion by reaching out to everyone, especially to the poor, those at the margins and mostly the needy. For Christians, attending to relationships is not merely a strategy or a tool for greater organisational effectiveness, but fundamentally at the core of its very nature.

Concerning relationships between men and women, there is a serious need for conversion. The differences between men and women form the foundation of human relationships. This difference is a gift from God and a source of life. Both men and women have been created in the image and likeness of God (Genesis 1:27), and they complement each other. We are all equal in Christ (Gal 3:27-28), so there should be no discrimination. As Christians, consecrated persons are called to welcome and respect everyone, in all places and situations. We bear witness to the Gospel when we seek to live in relationships that respect the equal dignity and reciprocity of men and women.

The Synod reminds us that the call to renewed relationships in Jesus flourishes in a plurality of contexts, in the different contexts in which Christians live and carry out the Church's mission. Consequently, the plurality of cultures requires that the uniqueness of each cultural context be taken into account. Consecrated persons do not live and serve in a vacuum, but in a cultural and social context. However, all cultures are also marked by distorted relationships that are not in

keeping with the Gospel. We see, for instance, the evils of wars and armed conflicts, and the illusion that just peace can be achieved by force. This reality creates barriers that divide. This results in inequalities such as those between men and women, racial prejudices, caste divisions, discrimination against people with disabilities, violation of the rights of minorities, and the reluctance to accept migrants. The most radical and dramatic rejection is that of human life itself: this leads to the discarding of the unborn and the elderly. The consecrated persons, with other members of the Family of God, need to face these contexts in order to embark on the road to the conversion of relationships in the light of the Gospel.

As the Synod recognises, many of the evils that afflict our world are also present in the Church. For example, there is an abuse crisis in its various and tragic manifestations. There are people and groups who suffer exclusion and marginalisation, some of whom live in existential peripheries. In particular, there are voices of victims and survivors of sexual, spiritual, economic, power and conscience abuse by members of the clergy or persons with Church appointments. The Church needs to listen with special attention and sensitivity to these voices; listening to those in the peripheries is necessary as the path to healing, repentance, justice and reconciliation. However, opening oneself up to the world reveals that the Holy Spirit has spread the seeds of the Gospel in every region of the world, in every culture and every human group⁸. These seeds bear fruit in the ability to live

⁸ VATICAN II, Church's Missionary Activity, *Ad Gentes*, n. 15 and Dogmatic Constitution on the Church, *Lumen Gentium*, n.42 (and n.5), refer to the seed of

healthy relationships, cultivate mutual trust and forgiveness, overcome the fear of diversity, and somehow enrich the communal life. The seeds of the Word also give life to welcoming communities, promote an economy respectful of people and the planet and bring about reconciliation after conflict.⁹ Like all Christians, consecrated women and men are called to bear fruit by sharing the gifts they have been given and to be witnesses to the Gospel, in other words, by bringing light to the world. One of these gifts is that of the evangelical counsels. “The evangelical counsels, in fact, are a ‘divine gift which the Church has received from her Lord and which she ever preserves with the help of his grace’”¹⁰

The Light of the Evangelical Counsels

During the celebration of the World Day for Consecrated Life in the Jubilee Year, Pope Francis highlighted the illuminating power of the evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience as a means of evangelisation, and he encouraged consecrated persons to live them fully. He explained how, through the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience that consecrated persons have professed, they can

the word (*Semina Verbi*). This concept emphasises that God has already planted elements of truth and grace within various cultures and the hearts of all people, which the Church's mission helps to nourish and bring to fruition in Christ.

⁹ *Final Document*, n. 53-56.

¹⁰ ST. POPE JOHN PAUL II, *Allocution to the Plenary Assembly of the Sacred Congregation for Religious and the Secular Institutes*, (6 May 1983), n.1; LG, 43.

bring the light of those vows to the women and men of our time.¹¹ First, by the *light of poverty*, consecrated persons “manifest the goodness of those things in the order of love, rejecting everything that can obscure their beauty – selfishness, greed, dependence, violent use and misuse for the purpose of death and destruction – and embracing instead all that can highlight that beauty: simplicity, generosity, sharing and solidarity.”¹²

Secondly, by the *light of chastity*, consecrated persons, renouncing conjugal love and following the path of continence, reaffirm the absolute primacy of God’s love. This love is to be received with an undivided and spousal heart (cf. *1 Cor 7:32-36*), and is recognised as the source and model of every other love. Consecrated chastity shows the men and women of contemporary time a way to heal the malady of isolation through the exercise of a free and liberating way of loving. Chastity is a way of loving that accepts and respects everyone, without coercing or rejecting anyone. To achieve this goal, however, communities of Institutes of Consecrated Life and societies of Apostolic Life must provide for the spiritual and affective growth of their members during both initial and ongoing

¹¹ POPE FRANCIS, *Homily* during First Vespers of the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord on the World Day for Consecrated Life (1 February 2025):

www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2025/documents/20250201-omelia-presentazione-del-signore.html .

¹² POPE FRANCIS, *Homily* during First Vespers of the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord on the World Day for Consecrated Life.

formation. In this way, chastity can reveal the beauty of a self-giving love and avoid harmful phenomena such as questionable choices that are a symptom of unhappiness, dissatisfaction, or even living “double lives”.

Thirdly, *by the light of the vow of obedience*, “consecrated obedience can act as an antidote to this isolated individualism, for it promotes an alternative model of relationship marked by active listening, where ‘speaking’ and ‘listening’ are followed by the concreteness of ‘acting’, even at the cost of setting aside our own tastes, plans and preferences. Only in this way, in fact, can one fully experience the joy of a gift, overcoming loneliness and discovering the meaning of his existence in God’s greater plan.”¹³

In addition to the three vows, Pope Francis draws attention to the dynamic and profound significance of “*returning to the origins*”, an expression frequently talked about in Consecrated Life¹⁴. It does not

¹³ POPE FRANCIS, *Homily* during First Vespers of the Feast of the Presentation of the Lord on the World Day for Consecrated Life.

¹⁴ The phrase "return to the origins" (or similar expressions like "return to the original spirit" or "return to the original divine inspiration") has been used in several recent Catholic Church documents and addresses concerning consecrated life, most notably originating from the Second Vatican Council's decree *Perfectae Caritatis* and frequently reiterated by recent in their addresses a dynamic, spiritual re-engagement with the original charism and a return to the person of Christ.

. The "return to the origins" is a central theme in the modern renewal of consecrated life, rooted in Vatican II's call for adaptation and continually

mean a return to origins, as if it were a return to a museum or a mere nostalgic look at the past at an archaeological tour or site but a living, historical return to the founding inspiration. The word of God reminds us that the first and most important “return to the origins” in every consecration and for every one of us, is the return to the person of Christ and to his “yes” to the Father. Indeed, every authentic renewal takes place in front of the tabernacle, in prayer and adoration, even before meetings and “round tables” discussions, which must also be held and are useful¹⁵.

emphasized by recent Popes as a dynamic, spiritual re-engagement with the original charism and a return to the person of Christ.

¹⁵ In this regard, Pope Francis warns against two of the obstacles that make Consecrated persons lose the ability to wait for God: the neglect of the interior life and adopting a worldly lifestyle. He emphasised the value of “waiting for God” in our lives: *“waiting for God is also important for us, for our faith journey. (...) He himself exhorts us to stay awake, to be vigilant, to persevere in waiting. Indeed, the worst thing that can happen to us is to let “our spirit doze off”, to let the heart fall sleep, to anesthetize the soul, to lock hope away in the dark corners of disappointment and resignation. (...) I think of us Christians today: are we still capable of waiting? Are we not at times too caught up in ourselves, in things and in the intense rhythm of daily life to the point of forgetting God who always comes? Are we not too enraptured by our good works, which runs the risk of turning even religious and Christian life into having “many things to do” and neglecting the daily search for the Lord? Don’t we sometimes risk planning personal and community life by calculating the odds of success, instead of cultivating the small seed entrusted to us with joy and humility, with the patience of those who sow without expecting anything and those who know how to wait for God’s time and let him surprise us? We must*

“To ask,” “to seek,” and “to knock” in Consecrated Life

On his part, at the celebration of the Jubilee of Consecrated Life, Pope Leo XVI emphasised three important attitudes that Jesus taught us and which consecrated persons are called to live: “To ask,” “to seek” and “to knock” (Lk 11:9); these are, in the first place, expressions of prayer. The Pope highlighted these attitudes in relation to the evangelical counsels and a few other values of the Consecrated Life. According to Vatican II, vows are a useful means of “deriving more abundant fruit from baptismal grace” (*Lumen Gentium*, 44).

“To ask” is to recognise, through poverty, that everything is a gift from the Lord and to give thanks for it. “To seek” is to open oneself, through obedience, to discovering each day the path we must take on the journey towards holiness, following God’s plans. “To knock” is to ask for and to offer the gifts we have received to our brothers and sisters with a chaste heart, striving to love everyone with respect and generosity.

“To ask,” “to seek,” and “to knock” also mean reflecting on our own lives, bringing to mind and heart what the Lord has achieved over the years by multiplying talents, strengthening and purifying faith,

recognize at times that we have lost the ability to wait.” Homily of Pope Francis at the Eucharistic Concelebration with the Members of the Institutes of Consecrated Life and The Societies of Apostolic Life, on 2 February 2024. www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/homilies/2024/documents/20240202_omelia-vita-consacrata.html.

and fostering generosity and freedom in charity. Whether this has been achieved in joyful circumstances, or in ways that are more difficult to understand, or perhaps even through the agony of suffering, in any case we find ourselves in the embrace of goodness that characterises what God does in us and through us, for the good of the Church and of the world (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 43).

Moreover, our “asking,” “seeking,” and “knocking,” both in prayer and in life, remind everyone that God is the fullness and meaning of our lives. For believers, God is everything – and everything in different ways: as Creator and the source of existence, as love that calls and challenges, as the strength that impels and inspires us to give. Without him, nothing exists, nothing makes sense, nothing is worthwhile. Therefore, the Church entrusts consecrated men and women with the task of being living witnesses to *God’s primacy* in their lives. By stripping themselves of everything, consecrated persons help the brothers and sisters they meet cultivate this friendship.

Today, too, some say, “It is vain to serve God” (*Mal* 3:14), but, as the Pope notes, this way of thinking leads to a genuine paralysis of the soul. “We end up settling for a life made up of fleeting moments, superficial and intermittent relationships, and passing fads — things that leave a void in our hearts.” This cannot make one truly happy. “Instead, we need consistent, lasting and healthy experiences of love.” Through the lived example of “asking,” “seeking,” and “knocking” in consecrated life, consecrated persons can be likened

to the flourishing trees (cf. *Ps* 1:3) that spread the “fresh air” of authentic love throughout the world.

As “The sun of righteousness shall rise with healing in its wings,” (*Mal* 4:2), the Church invites consecrated persons to prolong the “asking,” “seeking,” and “knocking” of their lives through prayer to the eternal horizon that transcends the realities of this world. In other words, consecrated persons are called in a special way to bear witness to “future goods” (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 44).

In a word, Pope Leo XIV, referencing St. Pope Paul VI, urges consecrated persons, “to treasure and cultivate what they have received. In particular, they should: keep the simplicity of the ‘least ones’ of the Gospel; practice humility; be truly poor, meek, eager for holiness, merciful and pure of heart; and be peacemakers, bringing to the world the peace of God, and offering hope that does not disappoint.

Synodality: Community Life, Formation, Mission and Authenticity

This volume of *The Catholic Voyage* presents articles that address some important aspects of the Synod on Synodality and the Jubilee Year 2025 regarding Consecrated Life. It opens with biblical reflections, takes the reader through the implementation of Synodality and the lessons learnt from the Jubilee year, and invites us to a rethink religious life for mission today in a synodal style.

The Biblical Jubilee Year is relevant to Christians in the contemporary world, as Sr. Agnes Acha’s reflection reminds

readers. While acknowledging that individuals, married couples, dioceses, parishes, religious congregations, institutions, etc., celebrate different forms of jubilees (e.g., silver, golden, diamond, bronze, and centenary Jubilees), she also recognises that most of these jubilee celebrations are characterised by exuberant festivities. Frequently, their celebrants are distracted by the festivities such that they pay little or no attention to the quintessence of jubilee, partly due to a lack of understanding. Her article, therefore, aims to explain the stipulations of the biblical jubilee year presented in Leviticus 25:8-55. She claims that these stipulations are relevant to contemporary Christians and that appropriate knowledge and understanding of the requisites of the biblical jubilee year can motivate them to positive, transformative actions of hope. The author believes that, although the jubilee regulations were originally intended for God's chosen people, Israel, these ethical principles cut across all religious and ideological boundaries. Although they are religiously based, they have implications for the welfare of society and the entire humanity. They point to human predicaments today from which our contemporary world yearns for liberation. The article suggests the appropriate lessons for all Christians celebrating Jubilee in contemporary society.

In the Jubilee Year 2025, the role of the Virgin Mary is central as the "Mother of Hope." Many Marian shrines and churches worldwide, especially those designated as pilgrimage sites for indulgences, invited pilgrims to seek comfort and spiritual renewal under her patronage through special Masses, relics, and events, fostering hope.

This is because the Christian faithful believe in her motherly and intercessory role and invoke her. “May Mary Most Holy, our hope, intercede for us and continue to lead us to Jesus, the crucified Lord,”¹⁶ the saviour of the world. In this context, the article by Michael Pilani and Ikechukwu Kanu, titled “They Have No Wine” (John 2:3), undertake the study of the Biblical witness to Mary’s intercessory role in Salvation history. They argue that Mary played a significant role in the inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry (John 2:1-11), highlighting her central role in salvation history. The paper explores Mary’s intercessory actions, addresses contemporary interpretations of her role and argues that she exemplifies a paradigmatic model of Christian faith, obedience and devotion. Mary’s exemplarity, the authors opine, corroborates her enduring relevance in ecclesial life and spiritual formation and offers insights into the broader dynamics of divine-human interaction in salvation history. The authors hope that their findings contribute to contemporary Mariological discourse and provide frameworks for understanding intercessory prayer within Christian spirituality.

In a world where many regions are increasingly experiencing agony caused by the ideology of racial supremacy and discrimination, Ikechukwu Kanu and Michael Pilani propose, in their second article, a timely study on this topic and explore the theological and socio-historical implications of Romans 10:12 as a critique of racial

¹⁶ POPE LEO XIV, *Homily*, Holy Mass for Jubilee of Marian Spirituality (12 October 2025), <https://www.vatican.va/content/leo-xiv/en/homilies/2025/documents/20251012-giubileo-spiritualita-mariana.html>.

supremacy ideologies. These authors investigate the Apostle Paul's message of equality between Jews and Gentiles, emphasising its radical challenge to the prevailing ethnic hierarchies of the first-century Roman Empire. Situating Paul's teachings within their historical context, the research traces the enduring impact of such interpretations in relation to colonialism, slavery, and racial discrimination. It seeks to demonstrate how Paul's message calls for dismantling racial hierarchies in both ancient and contemporary contexts. It also argues that Romans 10:12 provides a biblical framework for challenging modern racial supremacy ideologies and promoting a more inclusive Christian theology that transcends ethnic and racial divisions. Such theology ought to foster liberation, peaceful coexistence, and development.

Daniel Onyeyana's article, "*The Implementation of Synodality in the Religious Community Life and Governance in Formation Houses in an African Perspective*," draws readers' attention to religious formation, one of the recurrent themes of the recent Synod of Synodality (2021-2024). "Synodality is not a chapter in an ecclesiology textbook, much less a fad or a slogan to be bandied in our meetings. Synodality is an expression of the Church's nature, her form, style and mission¹⁷. Synodality enhances effective leadership, and reaffirms the early tradition of the Church. The Synod's Final Document returns to the sources of the Church's tradition and

¹⁷ FRANCIS, *We are Church Together*. Address to the faithful of the Diocese of Rome, September 18, 2021, in Dicastery for communication, walking together: the way of synodality, Maryknoll, NY: Orbis, 2023, 151-163, at 152.

renewal. Onyeayana's study focuses on *how* synodality is a dynamic dimension of ecclesial communion that promotes participation, communion and the sharing of values among all members of the religious community. From an African perspective, he explores *ways* in which the Synod's proposals concerning community life and governance could be implemented in religious formation houses.

The insightful reflection on "Consecrated Persons and the Jubilee Year of Hope" by Jude Ossai, OSA, challenges us to appreciate the deeper meaning of the Jubilee Year and to look forward to and prolong the rich experience it offers. In Biblical times, a jubilee was a time when the land was to lie fallow, mortgage debts were remitted, and slaves were freed; the theological meaning of the Jubilee was that all life and land belong to God.¹⁸ The Catholic Church has, in more recent centuries, observed a Jubilee Year (or Holy Year) as a special time of grace, forgiveness, reconciliation, and spiritual renewal, of receiving favour and blessing from God. It is traditionally held every 25 years, marked by pilgrimage, repentance, and the granting of indulgences. It involves specific rituals, like opening the Holy Doors in Rome, and encourages the faithful to encounter God, seek mercy, and promote justice and hope. When Pope Francis published the Bull of Indiction *Spes Non Confundit* ("Hope does not disappoint", Rom.5:5), for the Jubilee Year in 2025, he intended the jubilee year to be a year of rekindling our trust and hope in God amid all the difficulties and sufferings that the world

¹⁸ Richard MCBRIEN (General Editor) *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995, p. 720.

has experienced in recent years, and still experiences today. Different groups, associations and segments of the Church were given special moments to celebrate their jubilee year. Consecrated men and women were given their due place in the list of persons and groups expected to celebrate the jubilee in a special way. They had the opportunity to celebrate in their respective countries and then at the international level in Rome (October 8-9, 2025). The Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life expanded the general theme of the jubilee to include the theme of peace, thus: “Pilgrims of Hope on the Way to Peace”, and organised additional programs or initiatives for Consecrated Persons gathered in the Eternal City. Ossai’s reflection examines the history of the jubilee year in general and the 2025 jubilee year in particular, and asks: "After the Jubilee Year 2025, What Next?" The author proposes possible areas in which the Jubilee 2025 should leave its mark on consecrated persons, even after the Holy Doors close. The Jubilee Year should result in clear signs of renewal and transformation. Of particular note is the author’s discussion of what the Jubilee Year signifies for consecrated persons, and how we can continue to feel and experience its inspirations and lessons as individual consecrated persons, as religious communities, and as religious institutes.

In this present volume, the reader will also find Nihal Abeyasingha’s essay on “Rethinking Religious Life Today”, where he proposes a synodal approach to mission and calls for authenticity. Two distinct phenomena about vocations to Consecrated Life are noticeable in

various regions of the world today. On the one hand, in some regions, especially in the West, vocations to the religious life are declining, and while religious institutes remain institutionally strong and financially secure, they face a growing shortage of personnel. On the other hand, there is a phenomenon of vocational boom, especially in Africa, thus posing the challenge of sustaining and administering the growing number of vocations. Abeyasingha's essay, in the face of these challenges, suggests that instead of retreating inwards, religious communities must look outward, to places where authentic lives are being lived in pursuit of justice, dignity, and service. He calls on religious institutes to foster such authenticity within their own charisms; they are to embrace "creative fidelity"—faithfulness to the founding spirit while responding to contemporary needs. The essay calls for a transformation of religious life into a prophetic witness that engages the world meaningfully. The author recognises that religious life is a "gift within the Church," part of the divine-human exchange initiated in the Incarnation. The question asked, then, is what "drop of water" can consecrated life today contribute to this ongoing exchange? The author proposes what he believes could prepare the ground for consecrated persons to make a valuable contribution in responding to this question.

Finally, speaking of transformation, Esther Adama draws attention to the Lenten Season and its spiritual benefits. Lent is a period of reflection that leads to spiritual transformation in the lives of all members of the Family of God, the Church. It is a fruitful period of forty days of spiritual exercises. Traditional Lenten practices or

spiritual exercises of prayer, fasting, and almsgiving offer a possibility for our daily living and for becoming open to the needs of the poor around us. God transforms our hearts to accompany Him in several works of mercy, such as helping us overcome temptation, repent of sin, and reconcile with God through the constant and proper use of the sacraments. This holy period of spiritual pilgrimage and encounter with Jesus can aid spiritual growth when we rely on God during times of temptation, challenge, and trial. Moreover, the Church's synodal form suggests that Lent is also a time of communitarian decisions, of decision-making in a manner that is counter-current. The Lenten season calls us to exercise a communitarian decision-making process in which everyone contributes to improving society, feels a sense of belonging, and harnesses his/her positive energies and potentials to transform both themselves and our world. Lenten Season is a time to slow down, pause and reflection on the God of our journey who invites us daily to love and serve Him. God wants us to follow in His footsteps in faith, hope and love by cultivating a forgiving spirit, stop the killings, corruptions, trafficking in humans and work in sincerity of heart in the spirit of the beatitudes.

Happy reading.

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Focus

Consecrated Persons and the Jubilee Year of Hope¹

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Introduction

According to the Jewish Law, as recorded in Leviticus (chapter 25), every fifty years is a jubilee, in which the land was to lie fallow, mortgage debts remitted, and slaves freed, and the theological meaning of the Jubilee was that all life and land belong to God.² The Church has been inspired by this Jewish practice and has observed jubilee or Holy Year for more than seven centuries now. After a long, winding history, the Catholic Church “*has more recently observed years of jubilee (or ‘holy years’) every twenty-five years, as times of*

¹ This is a revised and updated version of the original paper presented at the Joint Annual Meeting of the *Conference of Major Superiors of Nigeria* (CMSN-Men) and the *Nigeria Conference of Women Religious* (NCWR), held in Lagos, Nigeria, January 2024

² Richard McBrien (General Editor) *The HarperCollins Encyclopedia of Catholicism*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1995, p. 720.

*effecting reconciliation with God and of receiving favour and blessing from Him”.*³

From 1300, the celebration of jubilee years has become a constant in the spiritual journey of the Catholic Church. From that time till date, jubilee years have assumed different forms, with the introduction of various spiritual activities. The interval between the years they are celebrated have also varied from Pope to Pope. From the initial declaration of it being celebrated every hundred years, Jubilees have been celebrated every fifty year, thirty-three years and, since 1470, every twenty-five years. In other words, the current practice of celebrating Ordinary Jubilee Year every 25 years started 555 years ago.

On 11th February 2022, Pope Francis announced that there would be a jubilee year in 2025, to last from 24th December 2024 to 6th January, 2026, with the theme, “*Pilgrims of Hope*”. On 9th May 2024, the Pope published the Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee Year 2025 with the title, *Spes Non Confundit* which means “Hope does not disappoint”, take from Romans 5:5. The Pope intended the jubilee year to be a year of rekindling our trust and hope in God amid all the difficulties and sufferings that the world has experienced in recent years, and still experiences today.

As part of the celebration of the jubilee year, different groups, associations and segments of the Church are given special moments

³ Peter M.J. Stravinskias. *Our Sunday Visitor's Catholic Encyclopaedia*, Indiana: Our Sunday Visitor Publishing Division, 1991, p.542.

to celebrate “their jubilee year”. For example, jubilees for youth, teenagers, parents, bishops, communicators, policemen, Catechists, and so on. Consecrated persons are also given special place in the list of persons and groups expected to celebrate the jubilee in a special way. As a matter of fact, consecrated persons are given the opportunity to celebrate in their respective countries and on international level, in Rome. The dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life took the jubilee seriously and prepared for it in a special way. In adopting a theme for the Jubilee of Consecrated Persons, the dicastery expanded the general theme of the jubilee by adding the theme of peace: “*Pilgrims of Hope on the Way to Peace*”.

This article is focused on the jubilee of Consecrated Persons. We intend to take a look at the history of jubilee in general and on this jubilee year, 2025. At the end we will discuss what the jubilee signifies for consecrated persons, and suggest possible “take-aways” from the jubilee, and concrete ways we can continue to feel and experience the inspirations and lessons from the jubilee year as individual consecrated persons and as religious institutes.

Jubilee Year - History and Significance

Jubilee Year or Holy Year has a history that extends to the Old Testament times, as we noted in the introduction, despite the fact that it has been adapted and given a more Christian and Christological flavour. Vestiges and traces of the Jubilee year can be found in the

Book of Leviticus where the people of Israel were required to observe every 50 years as a jubilee year. We read in Leviticus:

You will declare this fiftieth year to be sacred and proclaim the liberation of all the country's inhabitants. You will keep this as a jubilee: each of you will return to his ancestral property, each to his own clan. This fiftieth year will be jubilee year for you; in it you will not sow, you will not harvest the grain that has come up on its own or in it gather grapes from your untrimmed vine. The jubilee will be a holy thing for you; during it you will eat whatever fields produce. In this year of jubilee, each of you will return to his ancestral property (*Leviticus 25:10-13*)

The people of Israel, God's chosen people, were instructed to give "sabbath rest" to the land; they were to farm for six years and give rest to the land on the seventh year (*Leviticus 25:3-5*). Then on each 50th year, there is to be a jubilee for everyone. This 50th year - the jubilee year, is to be calculated as the year after seven weeks of years - seven times seven years (*Leviticus 25:8*). The proclamation of the Jubilee year was done by sounding the trumpet throughout the land. The trumpet with which this year was announced was a goat's horn called *Yobel* in Hebrew, and it is the origin of the word, Jubilee. The celebration of the jubilee year also included the restitution of lands to the original owners, the remission of debts, the liberation of slaves, and the letting the lie fallow - to rest. Jubilee was therefore a time to respect the dignity of the human person and of creation.

The jubilee is called Holy Year, not only because it is marked with solemn holy acts, but also because its aim and purpose are to encourage holiness of life. Jubilees are convoked in the Church to strengthen faith and encourage works of charity and works of mercy.

A jubilee can be “ordinary” or “extraordinary”. Extraordinary Jubilee years are the jubilees that are called and celebrated outside the regular year circle for jubilees. They are usually called to highlight and celebrate a particular event or theme. Like the Ordinary jubilees, extraordinary jubilees are also announced with a Bull. The most recent extraordinary jubilee was the Jubilee Year of Mercy which was celebrated from December 8, 2015 to November 20, 2016, with the theme, “Merciful Like the Father”. Pope Francis declared the extraordinary Jubilee year in order to highlight the love and mercy of God. Another example of an extraordinary Jubilee year was the 1983 jubilee year called by Pope John Paul II, which commemorated the passion and resurrection of Christ.

History of Jubilee Years

The first ordinary jubilee was proclaimed by Pope Boniface VIII in 1300 with a bull, “*Antiquorum Habet Fida Relatio*”. At the time of the announcement of this jubilee, there was great suffering, caused by wars and diseases in the entire Europe. Consequently, there was great desire among the people to return to God through a more holy way of living. With sentiments of faith and devotion, numerous Christians decided to travel to Rome (on foot) “*to pray at the tombs of the Apostles Peter and Paul, and to receive the Pope’s blessing,*

in order to obtain the grace and the strength to carry on".⁴ It was recorded that these Christians came in their thousands at Christmas 1299. When the Pope inquired and learned of their reason for making such a pilgrimage, he was full of admiration for their faith and so proclaimed "a year of forgiveness of all sins" for the year 1300. The success of this jubilee year led the Church to establish that a similar year would be held every hundred years.

During the Avignon Papacy (1305-1377), Christians requested that the second jubilee should be held earlier, in 1350, instead of 1400. Pope Clement VI gave his consent and then set a period of fifty years between jubilees instead of the hundred years established earlier by Pope Boniface VIII. Beside visiting the Basilicas built over the tombs of Peter and Paul, pilgrims were also required to visit St. John Lateran Basilica, the central basilica of Rome.⁵

Later, Pope Urban VI decided to reduce the period between jubilees to thirty-three years, in memory of the thirty-three years our Lord Jesus Christ spent on earth. When Pope Urban VI died, the new Pope, Boniface IX, opened the Holy Door on Christmas Eve 1390, but since the number of pilgrims were so great, he called a second Jubilee ten years later, at Christmas 1400.⁶ Pope Martin V called a Jubilee in 1425, instead of maintaining the thirty-three years that was formerly established. Pope Nicholas V followed the twenty-five-

⁴ https://www.vatican.va/jubilee_2000/docs/documents/ju_documents_17-feb-1997_history_en.html

⁵ Ibid

⁶ Ibid

year interval and called for Jubilee in 1450. In 1470, Pope Paul II issued a Bull, *Ineffabilis Providentia*, with which he fixed the jubilee for every twenty-five years, beginning with the next Jubilee Year (1475). The next jubilee year 1475 was proclaimed by Pope Sixtus IV. From this time on, ordinary jubilee years have been celebrated every twenty-five years.

The difficult situation in which the Church found herself during the rule of Napoleon, and the wars in Europe prevented Pope Pius VII from proclaiming the jubilee of 1800. When the Jubilee year resumed in 1825, very many pilgrims visited Rome that year. Like in 1800, the jubilee could not hold again in 1850 due to the unsettled political situation in the Roman republic and the temporary exile of Pope Pius IX. However, Pope Pius IX did proclaim the jubilee year 1875, even though the ceremony of opening the Holy Door could not hold due to the fact that Rome was under the occupation of King Vittorio Emmanuele.⁷

Pope Leo XIII called the 22nd Christian Jubilee which opened the 20th Century of the Christian era in 1900. During this jubilee, six beatifications and two canonizations were held - the canonization of St. Jean Baptist de La Salle and St. Rita of Cascia. From this year, Jubilee years continued to be observed every twenty-five years in 1925 (Pope Pius XI), 1950 (Pope Pius XII), 1975 (Pope Paul VI), 2000 (Pope John Paul II). It is worthy of note that it was during the Jubilee year of 1950 that Pope Pius XII defined the Dogma of the

⁷ Ibid

Assumption of the Blessed Virgin Mary. This year's jubilee – 2025 jubilee year of hope - is occurring exactly twenty-five years after the Jubilee Year of 2000 which ushered in the third millennium.⁸

Jubilee years are always characterized by the opening of the Holy Doors, pilgrimages, receiving of indulgences and several other Spiritual exercises that are aimed at renewal, reconciliation and growth in holiness. The 2025 jubilee year is not different as the activities lined up and celebrated can testify.

Significance of Jubilee Year

In Roman catholic tradition, a Holy Year or Jubilee year is a major religious event. It is a year of forgiveness of sins and also the punishment due to sin. It is a year of reconciliation between adversaries, of conversion and of receiving the sacrament of reconciliation. It is, therefore, a year of solidarity, hope, justice, commitment to serve God with joy, and a time to make peace with one's neighbour.

Jubilee years are basically moments of grace for all Christians who approach it and participate in it with a deep sense of faith and resignation to the impulse and guidance of the Holy Spirit. Jubilee

⁸ Professor Anthony Ikechukwu Kanu, OSA, gives a detailed history of Jubilee Years with meticulous presentation of the dates, the bulls of indiction and the peculiarities and variants of their celebrations. See Ikechukwu Anthony Kanu, "Consecrated Persons and the Jubilee: Embracing Hope, Conversion and Reconciliation" in *The Catholic Voyage 22, No. 1* (2025), pp. 98-129.

or Holy Year is always a special moment in the sense that it offers opportunity for renewal, reconciliation and grace. Jubilee years emphasize mercy and forgiveness, renewal and rebirth, unity and solidarity. In summary, a Jubilee is a *Kairos*, an opportune moment for divine encounter and self-transformation according to each one's calling / vocation. For Consecrated Persons, therefore, Jubilee years like this one, offer opportunity for self-transformation, for the renewal of our calling, for spiritual growth, and for greater appreciation of our spirituality and charism.

Jubilee Year 2025

The Jubilee year 2025 was inaugurated with the opening of the Holy Doors of the four major basilicas in Rome, as it is customary. The Holy Doors were opened in this sequence:

- The Holy Door of the Basilica of St.s Peter, Rome, was opened on 24th December, 2024.
- On 29th December, 2024, the Holy Door of the Basilica of St. John Lateran was opened.
- On 1st January, 2025, the Holy door of the Basilica of Mary Majors was opened.
- On 5th January, 2025, the Holy Door of the Basilica of St. Paul's outside the Walls was opened.

These holy doors were opened in line with the ancient tradition of the Church and the ceremony symbolizes Jesus Christ who is the door of our salvation. In the Gospel of John, Jesus refers to himself

as the door (gate), and those who pass through it receive life: “*So Jesus spoke to them again: in all truth I tell you, I am the gate of the sheepfold. ... I am the gate. Anyone who enters through me will be safe: such a one will go in and out and will find pasture*” (John 10:7, 9). In every jubilee year, passing through the Holy Door is a very symbolic and significant spiritual activity engaged in by pilgrims. Passing through the Holy Door is a symbolic way of connecting with Christ by passing through him in order to have life and be saved.

After series of events that are planned to take place in local Churches and on the international levels, the Jubilee year shall conclude definitively in January 2026: The Jubilee year will be concluded in the particular churches (in dioceses) on Sunday, 28th December, 2025. It will then conclude finally with the closing of the Holy Door in the Basilica of St. Peter on 6th January, 2026.

Beginning of the Journey towards the Jubilee Year 2025

The first major step towards the celebration of this Jubilee Year was the letter Pope Francis addressed to Monsignor Rino Fisichella, the President of the Pontifical Council for the Promotion of the New Evangelization. On 11th February 2022, the Memorial of the Blessed Virgin Mary of Lourdes, the Pope wrote a letter to Monsignor Fisichella, officially notifying him of the Ordinary Jubilee year 2025. By the letter, the Pope entrusted the “responsibility for finding

suitable ways for the Holy Year to be planned and celebrated with deep faith, lively hope and active charity”.⁹

The Pope noted in the letter that he had chosen as the motto of the Jubilee Year, *Pilgrims of Hope*. His choice of this theme is motivated by the recent difficulties and sufferings faced by humanity, particularly on account of the covid-19 pandemic. By this theme the Pope is inviting everyone in the world that is fraught with fear and anxiety to rekindle their hope and confident trust in God as we navigate through the uncertainties of this life with its myriads of challenges and difficulties.

The jubilee year is meant to inspire and encourage hope in humanity. He states, therefore, that “*we must fan the flame of hope that has been given us, and help everyone to gain new strength and certainty by looking to the future with an open spirit, a trusting heart and far-sighted vision*”.¹⁰ The Pope hoped that the Jubilee could contribute greatly to the restoration of a climate of hope and trust as prelude to the rebirth we urgently desire.

The Pope stated in the letter that a Bull of Indiction would be issued and it would contain the necessary guidelines for the celebration of the Jubilee Year. He also stated that the year 2024 would be devoted to prayer as a way of preparing for the Ordinary Jubilee Year 2025.

⁹ Letter of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, to Msgr. Rino Fisichella, par 6.

¹⁰ Letter of the Holy Father, Pope Francis, to Msgr. Rino Fisichella, par 4.

The Bull of Indiction - *Spes Non Confundit*

Pope Francis published the Bull of Indiction for the Jubilee Year 2025, on 9th May, 2024, with the title, *Spes Non Confundit* which means “Hope does not disappoint”, taken from Romans 5:5. This title is in line with the theme of the Jubilee year which is “*Pilgrims of Hope*”. Apart from giving general guidelines on the celebration of the Jubilee Year, the pope emphasized the Christian Virtue of Hope and encourages believers in Christ to find strength and renewal through their faith in God’s promises, even in the face of the difficult circumstances and challenges we face in the world today. The central message of the Bull can be summed up in three main themes:

1. *Focus on the Jubilee:* The publication of *Spes Non Confundit* signifies the beginning of the 2025 Jubilee Year, and its preparation entered an intense state. The Pope expressed his desire that the Jubilee Year be a moment of personal encounter with the Lord; the Jubilee Year is a special time for Catholics to reflect on their faith, seek forgiveness and rekindle their hope. The Pope seizes the opportunity to reflect on the virtue of Hope in the scriptures and in the life of Christians. Christians are, and should always be *Pilgrims of Hope*, as they march towards our eternal homeland.
2. *Global Concerns:* in the Bull, Pope Francis highlights the need for addressing global issues like poverty, inequality and environmental concerns through the lens of hope and action.

3. *Call to Action*: The Bull is also a call to action, to address these global issues with a hopeful perspective. The Pope encourages individuals and communities to actively live out their faith by embodying hope in their daily lives and engaging in acts of charity and reconciliation. Through conscientious and intentional actions of world and Christian leaders, hope will be rekindled in the lives of the many persons who suffer from these global concerns.

Highlights of the Pope’s Teaching on Hope in *Spes Non Confundit*

In the Bull of Indiction, Pope Francis takes time to teach the virtue of hope in different perspectives. Let us take cursory look at some of these perspectives.

- a. Patience sustains our hope and strengthens it as a virtue and way of life. Patience is both the daughter of hope and at the same time, the firm foundation of hope.¹¹ There is a beautiful dynamism between faith, hope and patience. Since faith is “*assurance of things hoped for and certainty of things not seen*” (Hebrew 11:1), it means that there can be no true faith without hope. Faith is expressed in hope and as a matter of fact, faith gives birth to hope. On its part, hope gives birth to patience because if one hopes for what he believes in, but yet unseen, he has to wait for it to be realized. This explains why

¹¹ Pope Francis. *Spes Non Confundit*, no. 4.

the Pope emphasizes the fact that Patience sustains and strengthens hope. As pilgrims of hope, it is very important that we cultivate the virtue of patience.

- b. Hope is the constant companion that guides our steps towards the goal of our encounter with the Lord Jesus.¹² The goal and ultimate purpose of Christian life is the attainment of eternal life in Christ Jesus. We are on a pilgrimage, a spiritual journey to the eternal kingdom, the kingdom that is “already but not yet”. It is hope that keeps pointing us towards our destination and goal. The one who has placed his/her hope in Christ Jesus cannot be disappointed because Christ is trustworthy, and because “*the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit which has been given to us*” (Romans 5:5).
- c. An essential foundation and reason for our hope is faith in life everlasting because “*hope is that theological virtue by which we desire life as our happiness*”.¹³ Our hope is founded on our belief that there is life after this life. That life keeps pulling us and granting us perseverance in our life’s struggles. The most convincing testimony to hope in everlasting life is provided by the Martyrs who held on to hope as they set their eyes on life eternal.

¹² Pope Francis. *Spes Non Confundit*, no. 5.

¹³ Catechism of the Catholic Church, no. 1817; *Spes Non Confundit*, nos. 19, 20.

- d. In addition to finding hope in God's grace we are also called to discover hope in the signs of the times that the Lord gives us.¹⁴ We need to recognize the immense goodness that is present in our world, despite the evils that we see and experience. In this way hope kills pessimism and engenders optimism. Being aware of, and recognizing that God is still at work in us and around us, the negativity and sad realities around us, notwithstanding, increases hope and gives us strength to look forward with conviction and joy.
- e. Living out hope and looking to the future with hope entails having enthusiasm for life and readiness to share this enthusiasm with others.¹⁵ This attitude of enthusiasm disposes us to transmit life, and would not condone any form of the culture of death. The Pope points out, as an example, that this attitude can encourage the people of our time to reverse the trend of decline in birthrate in some countries.
- f. The Pope desires that the Holy Year - Jubilee year 2025, should be a time for us to be tangible signs of hope for our brothers and sisters who are experiencing hardships of any kind. Typical example of people in this category are prisoners and the sick.¹⁶ We are invited and encouraged to carry out

¹⁴ Pope Francis. *Spes Non Confundit*, no. 7.

¹⁵ Pope Francis. *Spes Non Confundit*, no. 9.

¹⁶ Pope Francis. *Spes Non Confundit*, no. 10.

some concrete actions that can contribute to the restoration of hope to them and assure them of the love of Christ.

- g. The Pope notes that there is so much hopelessness today that giving hope to people is an important act of charity. The Jubilee should inspire the Church, Consecrated Persons inclusive, to reach out to the youths in particular who are, unfortunately, confronted with hopelessness as they seek to realize their dreams in vain.¹⁷ In the spirit of the Jubilee, it is important that we have concrete and well planned projects towards the development and improvement of the lives of young people who, without doubt, often fall victims of hopelessness, especially in our country, Nigeria, where the government cares little about their well-being.

The Jubilee of Consecrated Persons

The Jubilee Year of hope is planned in such a way that various groups, institutions and organizations are given opportunities to celebrate individual jubilees. For example, there are “jubilees” for Children, for teenagers, for parents, for youths, for musicians, for health-workers, for policemen, for deacons, for bishops, for priests; there are “jubilees” for Marian spirituality, for consecrated life, and so on. This is the reason the Dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic Life also planned a specific jubilee

¹⁷ Pope Francis. *Spes Non Confundit*, no. 12.

for all men and women religious during the jubilee year of hope - 2025.

Consecrated Persons

Consecrated persons are men and women who freely commit themselves to living out the evangelical counsels. The Second Vatican Council states that by virtue of the pronouncement of the public vows of chastity, poverty and obedience, religious men and women “are consecrated” to God,¹⁸ and that is why they are called Consecrated Persons. Consecrated persons are part of the Church and they occupy a unique state in the Church; they are not merely an intermediary state between the clergy and the laity. John Paul II buttresses this point in *Vita Consecrata* when he states:

According to the traditional doctrine of the Church, the consecrated life by its nature is neither lay nor clerical. For this reason, ‘lay consecration’ of both men and women constitutes a state which in its profession of the evangelical counsels, *is complete in itself*. Consequently, both for the individual and for the Church, it is a value in itself, apart from the sacred ministry.¹⁹

This uniqueness makes Consecrated Life a very important part of the Church, for without it the Church cannot be complete - as the Church

¹⁸ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

¹⁹ Cf. Pope John Paul II. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World, *Vita Consecrata*, 25 March, 1996. No. 60. Cf. Code of Canon Law, 588.

is made up of the Laity, the Clergy and the Religious. As consecrated life is unique in the Church, so also each religious Institute is unique in the sense that each Institute is defined by a specific character or charism. The members of every given religious institute share in this collective charism of their institute and are shaped by it.

The Second Vatican Council's decree on the renewal of religious life, *Perfectae Caritatis*, recognizes that there is a variety of charisms and refers to the charism of the religious institute as "special character"²⁰ The charism of a religious institute is a special character in the sense that it defines its peculiar and unique identity among other institutes and religious communities. The quiddity and *raison d'être* of any institute of consecrated life depends on its charism; each Religious Institute is individuated and identified by its charism.

In *Lumen Gentium*, the Second Vatican Council Fathers teach that the distinct character of each religious institute should be preserved and fostered by the Church.²¹ When each unique charism is preserved and lived out, a beautiful mosaic tapestry is created and the gospel of Christ which is the foundation of the charism and spirituality of each religious Institute is better lived out in the Church.

There are different forms of Consecrated Life and this specific jubilee, the Jubilee of Consecrated Life, is inclusive of the different

²⁰ Cf. Second Vatican Council, Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life, *Perfectae Caritatis*. (28 October, 1965), 1.

²¹ *Lumen Gentium*, 44.

forms of consecrated life and societies of apostolic life. To briefly throw more light, we wish to note the following:

1. Under Institutes of Consecrated Life belong all men religious (priests and brothers), and all women religious (Sisters and Nuns), all of whom live in community.
2. Also forming part of consecrated Persons is the *Ordo Virginum* (Order of Virgins), that is, consecrated women living individually in the world.
3. Under Societies of Apostolic Life are Secular Institutes who, like the religious, also take the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. They are consecrated men and women living in the world.

For the celebration of the jubilee of Consecrated Life, the Dicastery for Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life adopted the general jubilee theme of hope and elaborated it to include the theme of peace which is of great importance and urgency today. And so, the theme of the Jubilee of Consecrated Life is “*Pilgrims of Hope on the Path of Peace*”. This is in response to Pope Francis’ call to create an environment of hope and trust. As people who are consecrated to God, these qualities of hope, peace, reconciliation and trust are very vital, hence the need to highlight them in the celebration of Jubilee, which is an opportune moment of grace and renewal.

Preparation for the Jubilee of Consecrated Life

The journey of the Jubilee of Religious Life began in Rome in July 2023, and culminated in Rome, in October 2025. The jubilee of consecrated persons is three-fold in its focus:

- a. Listening to the cry of the poor: a commitment to the least,
- b. The custody of creation: protection of the environment,
- c. In solidarity with all brothers and sisters: a universal fraternity.

Walking towards this journey, representatives from the different forms of religious life formed a work-team and it included a male religious, a female religious, a member of the Secular Institute and a consecrated woman belonging to the Order of Virgins. The preparation for the jubilee included discussions and reflection, with the idea that the religious are part of the wider Church and so should walk together with all the members of the Church.

The jubilee journey for Consecrated persons was in four phases:

1. Preparatory phase in one's country: July - December 2023, with the theme, "*Thirsting for Reconciliation*".
2. Meeting in Rome: from 1st - 4th February, 2024, with the theme: "*To be a sign of Reconciliation among the People*".
3. The Celebration of Jubilee for Religious Life on 2nd February, 2025, the World-day of Consecrated Life, in one's own country.
4. The celebration of the Jubilee of Consecrated Life in October, 2025 in Rome.

In phase 1, *Fratelli Tutti* and *Laudato Si* were studied through online meeting, on the theme of reconciliation.

In phase 2, meetings were held in Rome from 1st to 4th February, 2024 by close to 300 religious from different forms of consecrated Life, from about 60 countries. In these meetings, there was mutual encounter and sharing of experiences of mission and life. The theme, “*Pilgrims of Hope on the Way to Peace*” was further developed, focusing on dialogue, sharing and prayer, growing in charity, openness to read the signs of the times and more. As part of these meetings, the participants engaged in pilgrimages to holy sites in Rome, including basilicas. There were Eucharistic celebrations and prayer sessions as well. At the end, participants were called to be ambassadors of hope on the path of peace, in their respective countries.

Phase 3 is the celebration of Jubilee of Consecrated Life in one’s own country. In this celebration we are called to celebrate our unique state in the Church and our togetherness as consecrated persons.

Phase 4, is focused on the celebration of the universal character of Religious Life with representatives of all forms of religious life gathering in Rome together with the representatives of the universal Church, to celebrate the Jubilee of Hope.

What is the Significance of the Jubilee Year for us as Consecrated Persons?

The Jubilee Year is an opportunity for consecrated persons to reflect on hope as an important component of their faith journey. As it were, Consecrated Persons, like all Christians, are on a pilgrimage, advancing toward the heavenly homeland. As we make this pilgrimage in our uniqueness as consecrated persons, we often face obstacles, discouragements, difficulties, anxieties and uncertainties. At times, our respective religious institutes face different forms of turbulence and even, crisis. Hope is, therefore, very essential for us.

It also happens that those Consecrated Persons who serve as major superiors face difficulties in the discharge of their duties, as servants, coordinators and moderators of their brothers and sisters in consecrated life. This ordinary Jubilee year is presented to such leaders as a special moment - *kairos*²² - to rekindle hope in the impregnable and dependable love of God. Pope Francis invites us to hold on to our faith and hope in God because “*Hope does not Disappoint*”. Consecrated Persons are also particularly called to walk the path of peace by promoting reconciliation, charity, justice and other actions that make peace possible. If we are to be sincere, we will admit that many religious institutes (and communities) are

²² *Kairos* signifies the moment when time and circumstance come together to create a unique opportunity for action, decision, or transformation. *Kairos* is an opportune moment; it presents a unique chance for growth transformation and achievement.

experiencing different kinds of disunity, lack of charity and even injustice.

Above all else, the Jubilee Year is a time of holiness and renewal, a time of personal *metanoia* and self-transformation. It is, therefore, an opportunity for consecrated persons to grow in holiness and renew their commitment to God as people totally given and dedicated to God. For the Consecrated Persons, the jubilee year is a time of introspection and re-evaluation of their “consecratedness”. A profound and sincere reflection will lead to a rediscovery and renewed consciousness of our unique identity as Consecrated Persons. This renewed consciousness should lead to a transformation of our approach to our mission, ministry and relationship with people, within and outside our religious institutes.

After the Jubilee Year, What Next?

The Ordinary Jubilee Year of Hope will be concluded on 6th January, 2026 with the closing of the Holy Door in St. Peter’s Basilica, Rome. What should be our “takeaways” from the Jubilee Year? What positive impact and mark should the Jubilee Year leave on individual Consecrated Persons and on our Religious Institutes? This question is very important so that the Jubilee does not mere become “a great event” without spiritual benefit and positive impact.

We wish to suggest the following as possible areas that the Jubilee should leave its mark on Consecrated Persons, even after the Holy Doors are closed. We can put it in another way by saying that the

Jubilee Year should lead to the following among other marks of renewal and transformation:

1. *Return to, and re-emphasize the need to live according to one's charism and spirituality:* This is important because Jubilee Year calls for introspection and re-evaluation of our lives (as consecrated persons). This is very significant because as we stated earlier, charism and spirituality are fundamental and foundational to every religious institute. The Jubilee Year is an opportunity to individually and collectively engage in *resourcement* - a return to our foundational source, because we may have derailed one way or another. It is when we have engaged in *resourcement* that we can appropriately carry out an *aggiornamento* - adaptation to our current life situation, and the signs of the times. There are situations where there is no balance between these two recommended approaches to the essence of our Religious Institutes, and the fruits of the Jubilee should help us achieve that balance.
2. *Promote Justice and Peace in our Religious Institutes:* There can be no true peace without justice because as long as some members get badly and unjustly treated, there is bound to be expression of dissatisfaction, and peace will be destroyed. For example, when we engage in the practice of nepotism, favoritism and double standard, either in our local communities or in the Religious Institute as a whole, there is bound to be anger, bitterness and bad relationship in that community or religious institute, as the case may be. Consecrated Persons,

especially superiors, need to take advantage of the jubilee year to destroy any possible unjust structures that might be existing in our religious institutes. As it were, unjust structures create structural sins. Every consecrated person should be just in their dealing with one another, and they should also be active promoters of justice through our action.

3. *Practice and Promote Ongoing Conversion:* Conversion and repentance are very important in our journey towards perfection which, incidentally, is the goal of consecrated life: *perfectae caritatis*. The awareness of the need of ongoing conversion is a humble admission of one's imperfection and the need to constantly repent from one's sinful actions and dispositions. The Jubilee year is an invitation to, and an opportunity for Consecrated Persons to evaluate their lives personally and collectively, with the sincere intention of returning to God and to the right track. For ongoing conversion to be possible, we need to be in touch with our true selves, and be comfortable to tell ourselves the truth about ourselves. The greatest threats to ongoing conversion are *pride* and *absence of self-awareness*. Some consecrated persons are distant from themselves and as such, end up being distant from God. In the same way, a religious institute may drift away from its essence and identity. In such situations, collective ongoing conversions is required.
4. *Improve our commitment to Community Life.* One of the focuses in the preparation for the jubilee of consecrated persons was fraternity. Community life is a very central characteristic of

religious life. Community life occurs when the persons that make up the community are prepared to sacrifice their own personal interests for the benefit of the common good. Community starts when one “*passes from the enjoyment of being together to wanting to be together, laying aside other activities in which he is interested, in order to spend more time with other members of the community*”²³. Community should help to build her members and not destroy them. Conversely, individual members of the community should not destroy the community.

5. Very often, religious men and women do not make enough sacrifice in order to live genuine and authentic religious community life. It would seem that so many religious have not succeeded in graduating from the “I” and “me” to the “we” and “us”. This causes tension and breaks down relationships in religious communities. One of the fruits of the Jubilee year should be renewed commitment to contribute to the building up and strengthening of the spirit of communion in our different respective local communities and religious institutes. The jubilee year should inspire us to jettison selfishness and individualism.

²³ Varied Authors, “Communion of Life” in *Our Journey Back to God: Reflections on Augustinian spirituality*. Rome: Pubblicazioni Agostiniane, 2006, p. 317.

6. *Chapters of Renewal and Practical Acts of reconciliation within our Institutes:* There is hardly any religious institute that can boast of not having issues that are bothering on either division, tribalism, ethnicism or sectionalism, or power tussle, or different forms of litigation. The Jubilee year of Hope should inspire us to develop concrete actions and initiatives that can restore peace, reconciliation and unity. Possible actions and initiatives are chapters of renewal that serve as occasions for reconciliation and healing of wounds within the local communities or on the level of the religious institute. Chapters of renewal are like truth and reconciliation ceremonies, where wounds are presented before the Lord and brothers or sisters reconcile with one another in a spirit of humility and *metanoia*.
7. *We need to be become planters and promoters of peace:* On individual levels, the Jubilee Year should succeed in planting the seed of peace in us; it should lead us to seek ways of becoming more of instruments of peace, hope and reconciliation in and through our actions. We need to be more reconciliatory and resist the temptation to treat our fellow sisters or brothers uncharitably and unjustly. Even in situations where fellow sisters or brothers treat us badly, we need to resist the temptations of paying them back with their own coin. In other words, we need to grow beyond retaliation and vindictiveness that make us treat people based on their uncharitable and disrespectful approach towards us. Strange as it may sound, there are religious institutes where some members have civil

legal cases against their brother/sister of the same religious order or congregation. In the spirit of the Jubilee, as *Pilgrims of Hope on the Path of Peace*, such cases (and all grievances) should be withdrawn and reconciliation be sought, after all, a jubilee year is a time to “set prisoners free” and to forgive enemies.

8. *We should Grow in Synodality*: One of the fruits of the Jubilee should be improvement in our ability to include others, walk with others and listen to others. As consecrated persons, every member or facet or segment of our community or religious institute should matter to us and we should practice inclusiveness. This is particularly important for leaders and superior. In his address to the consecrated persons who participated at the Jubilee of Consecrated Life, Pope Leo XIV said that going forward, consecrated men and women should be experts on synodality, by living such values as mutual listening, participation, sharing of opinions and abilities and the common search for paths according to the voice of the Spirit.²⁴ In order to rekindle hope, grow in peace and reconciliation, we need to learn to “walk together”.
9. *Be Communicators of Hope*: In his message for the 59th World Day of Social Communications, on 24th January, 2025, Pope Francis invited Journalists and communicators to be

²⁴ <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/pope-leo-xiv-to-consecrated-men-and-women-the-church-needs-you>

“communicators of hope”. The Pope observed in his address to them: *“Too often today, communication generates not hope, but fear and despair, prejudice and resentment, fanaticism and even hatred. All too often it simplifies reality in order to provoke instinctive reactions; it uses words like razor; it even uses false or artfully distorted information to send messages designed to agitate, provoke or hurt”*.²⁵ We can apply this message to ourselves as Consecrated Persons because we are constantly communicating in different ways.

Hope is very powerful and it possesses the capacity to heal both the soul and the psyche of the human person. This is why it is important that we become heralds and communicators of hope, not of fear or pessimism. As consecrated Persons and as superiors, in particular, it is important that we take advantage of the message and lessons of the Jubilee Year of Hope to improve in our ability to give hope, not only to our fellow brothers and sisters in our religious institute, but to everyone we meet and the people to whom we minister. Most importantly, we should not be instigators of despair, resentment or prejudice.

10. *Actions to Preserve the Environment*: As part of the preparation for the Jubilee year, representatives of the different forms of Consecrated Life studied Pope Francis’ encyclical on the

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<https://press.vatican.va/content/salastampa/en/bollettino/pubblico/2025/01/24/25014a.html>

preservation of the environment, *Laudato Si*. As a take away from the Jubilee year, Consecrated Persons should make concrete efforts aimed at preserving and safeguarding the environment. This would raise the consciousness of members of our Institutes on this subject matter. Moreover, the original, biblical roots of Jubilee Year are connected with “giving sabbath rest to the land”. When commitment to the care and preservation of the environment is shown in our places of apostolate, those who collaborate with us in our apostolates and ministries will be encouraged and inspired to also promote and safeguard the environment.

In sum, the jubilee year is an invitation to consecrated persons to become closer to God and to one another and to nature. Becoming closer to God and to one another is one way of saying that the Jubilee year should lead us to a return to our true identity and vocation. During an audience with the consecrated persons who gathered in Rome for the Jubilee of Consecrated Life, Pope Leo XIV stressed the need for Consecrated Persons to “return to the heart”, to “discover the spark” of the beginnings of their vocation. Citing *Dilexit Nos* of pope Francis, Pope Leo XIV said, “*it is in fact in the heart that the paradoxical connection between self-esteem and openness to others, between the most personal encounter with oneself and the gift of oneself to others is produced*”.²⁶ By this, Pope

²⁶ <https://www.ncregister.com/cna/pope-leo-xiv-to-consecrated-men-and-women-the-church-needs-you>

Leo is challenging consecrated persons to cultivate the interior life: It is in the interior of our being that we discover truth, and when we cultivate the attitude of the interior life, genuine renewal and transformation takes place.

Conclusion

We are actually fortunate to be part of this great opportunity to celebrate this ordinary Jubilee year – the Year of Hope – a special time of favour, a time of renewal and of strengthening our trust and hope in God. The organization and celebration of this ordinary jubilee year is very beautiful especially because it is ecclesiastically very inclusive. Different facets, sub-divisions and groupings of the Church were celebrated and given a sense of belonging. One can say that this jubilee has been very “synodal” in the sense that its celebration involved everyone in the Church and there is a sense of “walking together” and feeling part of the universal Church.

Consecrated Persons had the opportunity to celebrate the jubilee locally and internationally, and this made it possible for every single religious to have a feel of the jubilee. As the jubilee gradually draws to a close, the question we need to ask and endeavour to answer should be: “What should I do as a Consecrated Person to feel and experience the positive effects of the Jubilee year of Hope in a long time to come?” It is important that we do not allow this jubilee year pass us by and disappear, without profiting from its special grace and blessings. The jubilee would truly be *Kairos* for us if we allow the inspirations, encounters and special events of the Jubilee year affect

us positively and conduce to a sort of renewal in us and in our religious institutes and communities. We need to be intentional about making the fruits of the Jubilee Year of Hope visible and noticeable in our communities and in our individual lives.

Studies & Perspectives

**The Biblical Jubilee Year and Its Relevance for
Christians in the Contemporary World**

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Abstract

Individuals, married couples, dioceses, parishes, religious congregations, institutions etc. celebrate different forms of jubilees. These include silver, golden, diamond, bronze and centenary. Most of these jubilee celebrations are characterized by exuberant festivities. Celebrants of jubilees are often distracted by the festivities that they pay little or no attention to the quintessence of jubilee. This attitude is probably as a result of lack of proper

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understanding of the meaning and origin of jubilee. Therefore, this paper aims at explaining the stipulations of the biblical jubilee year as presented in Leviticus 25:8-55. The paper opines that these stipulations in Leviticus 25:8-55 are very relevant to contemporary Christians (priests, consecrated Persons and layfaithful) as they celebrate different forms of jubilees. It posits that an appropriate knowledge and understanding of the requisites of the biblical jubilee year can motivate contemporary Christians to positive transformative actions of hope.

It is true that the jubilee regulations were originally meant for God's chosen people Israel, however, these ethics cut across all religious and ideological boundaries. Although they are religiously based, they have implications for the welfare of the society and the entire humanity. They point towards what are commonly seen as human predicaments today from which our contemporary world yearns for liberation. This paper indicates the rightful approach of Christians celebrating jubilee in contemporary society.

Introduction

Our lives are marked with jubilees, anniversaries of births, weddings, priestly or episcopal ordination, and consecrated life. Dioceses, parishes, religious congregations, societies, associations, institutions, both church and state, religious or secular institutions like schools, business establishments, organizations etc. also celebrate Jubilees or anniversaries of their foundation. It ranges from silver, golden, bronze, diamond to centenary jubilees.

Usually, when we talk of jubilee, what readily come to mind are the social issues, enjoyment, jubilation, fine clothes and shoes to put on, the type of food that will be eaten, gifts, souvenirs etc. While these are also important, the spiritual aspect should not be undermined. In this regard, the two words, jubilee and jubilation should be noted. Both of them stem from the Latin root *Jubilare*. Jubilation focuses on what one has achieved both good and bad. Sometimes even “sinful joy” is celebrated. Some Christians are no longer ashamed to celebrate even property or wealth acquired through vile means. They support themselves with the erroneous saying that the end justifies the means. Today, the tendency is to celebrate academic degrees, big cars, houses and structures etc.

In Leviticus 25:8-55, which is part of the “Holiness Code” (Leviticus 17-26), God gave the guidelines for the Jubilee year, which was to be observed every fifty years. This special year was marked by a series of social, economic, and spiritual principles that were meant to maintain balance, justice, and freedom in the community of God’s people. This paper proposes that contemporary Christians have a lot of lessons to learn from the stipulations of the biblical Jubilee year. It aims at exploring the biblical Jubilee year and the lessons that it offers to Christians: priest consecrated persons and lay faithful today. The work has three main sections. The first section offers the etymology of the word Jubilee. In the second section, the characteristic features of the biblical Jubilee are presented. Implications of the biblical Jubilee year for contemporary Christians are examined in the third section.

Etymology of the Word

The word jubilee is derived from the Hebrew word, *yobēl* which means “ram” or “ram’s horn”. This is because it was a horn that the Israelites blew as a trumpet to announce the beginning of the Jubilee year. This special trumpet was blown only by priests and only on special occasions. The word *yobēl* is also said to mean “remission” since it is implied in the content of the jubilee year.² It passed into English through Greek and Latin. In the Greek bible, *yobēl* is rendered as *iobelaios*, and is given in Latin as *jubilaeum*. Gradually the attention shifted from the instrument of announcement to the content of announcement. The passage that precedes it (Lev 25:1-7) deals with sabbatical year because it is implied in the content of the jubilee (see also Exod 23:10-11). The passage that precedes Leviticus 25:8-55 (i.e. Lev 25:1-7) deals with sabbatical year because it is implied in the content of the jubilee (see also Exod 23:10-11). The passage of Exodus is repeated in Leviticus and clarified with some modifications.

While the sabbatical year is every seven years, the jubilee year is every 50 years. The seventh sabbatical year is also a jubilee year, a special year of remission.³ This means that every 50 years and every 49 years there would be two consecutive years for the Israelites to refrain from cultivation and give rest to the land and the animals that worked in the fields. The jubilee year is usually announced by the

² P. M.J. Stravinskias, ed., *Catholic Encyclopedia*, vol 1, 1991, p. 542.

³ R. North, *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee*, Rome 1954, 109-134.

blowing of the *yôbēl* on *Yôm Kîppur* (the Day of Atonement, ie the tenth day of the month of Tishri).⁴

The idea of jubilee is intimately connected with that of the sabbatical year which is also closely associated with the idea of the Sabbath. The Sabbath is the last day of the week in which Yahweh rested after creating the world. Consequently, the people gathered for worship, ritual observances, and complete rest from work (cf. Exod 20:8-11). The Sabbath came to be represented as sign of God's sanctification of the people (Exod 31:13-16; Ezek 20:12). The observance of the sabbatical year is attested to even after the exile (cf. Neh 10:32 and 1 Macc 6:49-53). The seventh sabbatical year is also a jubilee year, a special year of remission.⁵ The Sabbatical year was the last year in a series of seven years.

This means that every 50 years and every 49 years there would be two consecutive years for the Israelites to refrain from cultivation and give rest to the land and the animals that worked in the fields. This great Day of Atonement was a big national day of penance and reconciliation with God. The jubilee year is called *senat hayyôbēl* (Lev 25:13), that is, "the year of the horn of the ram in literal translation.

⁴ For more about the Day of Atonement see Leviticus 16; J.J. Castelot – A. Cody, "Religious Institutions of Israel", in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, New Jersey 1968, 1281-1282; See also S. Kizhakkeyil, *The Pentateuch: An Exegetical Commentary*, Mumbai 2009, 334.

⁵ R. North, *Sociology of the Biblical Jubilee*, Rome 1954, 109-134.

Whatever is the respective origin of the Sabbath, Sabbatical year and jubilee year, there is evidence in the bible that they were strictly religious dictates that were marked with religious observances, and that there was one common theme that ran through their observance, namely: cessation from any action that meant exploitation of and burden to human beings, animals and nature. Hence the Sabbatical year is referred to as *senat deror*, i.e. year of liberation/release (Deut 15:9; Ezek 46:17). Similarly, the same term is used to describe the jubilee year (Lev 25:10). The central idea behind them is freedom from burdens of different kinds – from the burden of slavery and debt for human beings, and from the burden of cultivation of the land.

Characteristic Features of the Biblical Jubilee Year

It was a Sacred Year (Lev 25:10)

Lev 25:10 offers the notion that the jubilee year was to be declared a holy or sacred year. According to the Old Testament, sacredness or holiness (*qodes*) is an attribute reserved for God alone, in the first place, and only in the second instance that it is shared by creation. God is holy and sacred because of being utterly other, set apart from creation. Created things are sacred only as much as they stand in special relationship with God by which they serve to reveal God's holiness.⁶ Hence to say that the jubilee year was sacred meant that it stood in a special relationship with God.

⁶ De Vaux, "Holy", in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed., L. Dufor, London, p. 236.

It was a Year of Liberation (Lev 25:10)

The jubilee year was to be a year of liberation. The text refers to liberation from social and economic conditions that hold human beings in bondage. The fact that the jubilee year was inaugurated on the great Day of Atonement (*yom kipur*) is significant. The ritual of the Day of Atonement was meant to effect God's forgiveness of Israel's sins, the cleansing of the people, the land and the temple. The strong link between liberating fellow humans from the social and economic conditions that enslave them and being liberated by God from sin is very significant. This therefore renders a holistic idea of liberation. Hence, the jubilee year was a year of God's special forgiveness of the sins of the people. The divine forgiveness becomes imperative for human beings forgiving their fellow humans and reconciling with them. Consequently, in the jubilee year everyone lives a full human life in freedom, fulfilling God's purpose.

The Land was to Lie Fallow for the Year (Lev 25:11; Exod 23:10-13)

The jubilee year is *a year of no cultivation* (cf. Lev 25:18-24). In this regard, the year of jubilee shares common feature with the sabbatical year (cf. Lev 25:1-7; Exod 23:10-11; Deut 15:1-2). The Hebrew verb *sabat* means to cease, desist, terminate, be at end. It is only secondarily that it connotes "rest" (Exod 21:19; Lev 26:34-34). The main purpose of this regulation was to protect the land and its resources; to allow the land to lie fallow is to allow the land to rest.

It also entails not overusing or despoiling the land. In this way the land is allowed to regain its vitality lost in agricultural activities over the past years. This indicates God's care and concern for creation. As the Creator, God demands from humans a rest for the land that supports life on earth. Another important reason for leaving the land to lie fallow every seven years is that "it was an occasion for them to acknowledge that all land belonged to God and that they were merely God's tenants on his land. The reassurance of Yahweh's providence during this year (vv.18-22) is strictly connected with "assurance of abundance in return for fidelity"⁷ (vv.18-19).

Another important purpose of this regulation was to express concern for the poor and needy in the society. During this year of jubilee, the farmland with its entire yield was left at the disposal of everybody irrespective of social class, race or gender. People did not gather into barns and so there was no hoarding. The crucial lesson is that the land and its produce belong to God and must be shared equitably at least once in seven years. This phenomenon indicates what should have been a permanent feature of Israelite society as it manifests God's concern for the poor of the land and for equitable distribution of wealth.

Properties were to revert to Original Owners (Lev 25:10.13)

In the jubilee year, all ancestral belongings were to revert to their original owners (Lev 25:10). The Israelites maintained a strong

⁷ Faley, "Leviticus", p. 77.

attachment to the land as a patrimony. Ancestral land ought not to be alienated in perpetuity. A typical example is the case of Naboth who refused to give out his ancestral land to King Ahab (cf. 1 Kings 21:1-16). The king seemed to have forgotten this tradition because on his spirit of dictatorship. Yahweh himself allotted the land to the different tribes (Josh 13-19). Hence if for any reason one is forced to sell his land, the land was to revert to the original owner during the jubilee year. No clan is supposed to lose its land which is its main means of sustenance. This is also the case with houses outside the walled cities (Lev 25:31), houses owned by Levites even in walled cities (Lev 25:31), and lands “sanctified to Yahweh” (Lev 25:25-27.29.48; 27:19; Jer 32:8). The reason was to establish the original arrangement in which God shared the land among the people with the intention that every clan might have a means of livelihood. Hence it was not permitted to sell the land in perpetuity. Moreover, land was allotted to clans and not to individuals. In this way, provision is made even for generations yet to be born in the clan. The jubilee year was a year of restoration of the land. It was a period of “emancipation in which, in addition to the usual sabbatical observance (vv. 11-12), all alienated properties were returned to their original owners (v.10).⁸

Concerning *redemption of a house in a walled city* (Lev 25:29-34), a house sold in a walled city has a period of one year for its redemption. The original owner gets back his property after paying

⁸ R.J., Faley, “Leviticus”, in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, New Jersey 1968, 77; See also Levoratti, “Leviticus”, p.472.

the new owner. If he fails to pay within one year, the house then belongs to the new owner perpetually. Houses in the fields outside the walled cities could be redeemed. The Levites were given the concession to redeem their houses sold any time even in walled cities.

Justice in Economic Transactions (Lev 25:13-16)

The fact that property was to be returned to the original owners was to be taken into consideration in fixing the price of property. The jubilee year determines the price. The more distant the jubilee year, the more expensive a property would be (Lev 25:16). It was not necessarily the land or the property that was sold. Instead, it was the number of the productive years of the land or the use of the property. The land belonged to the clan and ultimately to God who gave it to Israel. Therefore, nobody had the right to “sell” the land. The land was not to be taken as an item of commerce or a means of personal gain or financial speculation.⁹ In economic dealings, justice is demanded among the people. The justice of the jubilee implies not just giving each person his/her due but is also guided by ethics. Prices are not set arbitrarily, but should be fixed with humane considerations. There is an explicit sanction on cheating, “if you buy or sell with your neighbor, let no one wrong his brother” (Lev 25:14).

⁹ C.R. Padilla, “The Relevance of the Jubilee Year in Today’s World”, in *Mission Studies*, 25/26, 1996, p.18.

Hebrew Slaves Were to be Released (Lev 25:40; Deut 15:12-18)

Slavery was a common phenomenon in the ancient world. Israel was not an exception (cf. Exod 21:21-22). There are different categories of slaves. Some were foreigners who were hostages of war, some were bought from merchants. Some others were either sold or sold themselves into slavery. Hebrew slaves were mainly household servants. Moreover, the Levitical legislation forbade masters from treating fellow Israelites as slaves. They were rather to be treated as hired servants (Lev 25:39-40). In this way, permanent servitude was forbidden in Israel. The slave had options. According to the law, a maximum of six years of servitude is required (Exod 21:2). He could leave his master in the seventh year without any recompense being paid. He could choose to denounce his freedom and live with his master. The slave could also be redeemed by paying compensation. The compensation was fixed on the function of the next jubilee year. A female slave was treated as part of the family and could not leave (Exod 21:5-11).¹⁰

Apart from the regulations of the normal period of servitude, in the jubilee year, all Israelite slaves were to be released (Lev 25:39). Thus this year guaranteed the personal liberty of the Israelites. Three issues stand behind this regulation: Israel is totally God's people, God's servants and thus cannot be slaves to human beings (Lev 25:42,55). Again, the whole nation of Israel had served as slaves in Egypt, and so have tasted the bitterness of slavery. Therefore, none

¹⁰ C. Augrain, "Slave", in *Dictionary of Biblical Theology*, ed. X. Leon Dufour, London 1973, pp. 557-558.

of them should subject his fellow Israelite to the same conditions (Deut 25:15). Moreover, God had delivered Israel from slavery in Egypt (Lev 25: 38.42.55) and as such to make them slaves once again was to frustrate God's purpose for his people. The liberation from Egypt was to guarantee their total freedom.

Cancellation of Debts (Deut 15:1-11)

The Deuteronomic code stipulates that remission of debts was required during the sabbatical year. This injunction would also apply to the jubilee year which was the Great Sabbatical Year. Creditors were to remit all debts owed by fellow Israelites. The law also prescribed generosity to those in need. To neglect them was considered sinful (Lev 25:7-11). Moreover, interest was not to be charged on loans (Lev 5:36-37). Scholars seem to agree that this regulation could not apply to loans taken for commercial purpose.¹¹ Although the text is not explicit on this, it seems plausible to conclude that only a needy person would go for a loan and so it would be unacceptable to capitalize on his poverty and exploit him.

Helping a Poor Brother (Lev 25:35-46) and Redeeming a Brother from Slavery (Lev 25:47-55).

The Israelites were required during this year to help their poor brethren. Money should be lent to them without interest. They can take slaves from other people but not from among their own

¹¹ J.E. Hartley, *Leviticus*, Dallas 1992, p. 441.

brethren. Human beings just like the land belonged to Yahweh. Therefore no Israelite should enslave a fellow Israelite. A poor Israelite, being freed can become an economic dependent or could become a wage earner. This law modifies other laws that permitted Israelites to be slaves of their own people at least for a specific period (cf. Exod 21:2-11; Deut 15:12-18). The law permitted them to take slaves from among foreign residents in Israel or outside. If for any reason Israelites sold themselves to rich aliens dwelling among them, the relatives of the Israelite slaves should strive to redeem them by paying to the rich foreigner. If not redeemed by relatives, they would be released during the jubilee year.

Relevance of the Biblical Jubilee for Christians in the Contemporary World

Implications for Priests and Consecrated Persons Celebrating Jubilee

Preamble

From its biblical foundation, jubilee focuses on the great things that God has done for us. In celebrating Jubilee, the concentration is not on self. It is rather a celebration of grace. It implies blowing the trumpet of what God has done for us. In celebrating Jubilee, one acknowledges the greatness of God and one's own littleness. One experiences a profound joy of peace and liberation. In this regard, prior to the celebration of the jubilee, there is need for religious congregations, institutions, dioceses, parishes, to organize seminars, workshops and retreats for the jubilarians in order to emphasize the

spiritual aspects. These programmes are geared towards enhancing effective Christian and religious transition into the new *era* involving repentance, conversion and appropriate Christian, priestly, and religious renewal.

Return to the Source

In fact, the main principles of the jubilee are contained already in the rules and regulations for priests and in the Constitutions of most religious congregations. The jubilee year is a call for *reditio ad fontes* (to go back to the source). Firstly, there is need to read and internalize Leviticus 25, Constitutions and other important books of one's religious institute. Some religious do not even remember to open these books from year to year. Knowing and internalizing the "sacred books"¹² will go a long way in enhancing authentic, committed and convinced religious and priestly living. The jubilee year celebration is a time to reflect seriously on how one has lived his/her life from the time one joined his/her congregation or diocese. We should ask ourselves some questions like: what contributions have I made towards the growth of the church or the congregation both spiritually and materially? Have I contributed positively or negatively? The jubilee year challenges each one to play her part positively. Mother Theresa of Calcuta said that the whole world will be clean if everybody sweeps in front of his/her house.

¹² By this I mean the sacred scriptures, our Constitutions and directory, Chapter Acts, Book of Customs and other spiritual books.

Implications for Leadership and Followership

Priests and consecrated people are leaders in the church at different degrees. To be a priest or religious is to be wedded to Christ and to his church. Abuse of power has permeated various facets of the church today. It is important for leaders in the church to understand that the purpose of leadership is not to reign over others but to serve, motivate, encourage and enable them to be faithful to their vocation and thus actualize their potentials. The challenge before us is the challenge of using our votes to elect the best and the most suitable for office. We should be deluding ourselves and embarking on the path of institutional suicide by using our votes to elect those who would pander to our feelings.¹³ Leaders in the church should understand that, authority must be judged at the foot of the cross. And the criterion of the cross is death to the self. Both the leader and the led must die to self so that the former does not become a tyrant and the latter a slave. This calls for a leadership that listens in a community that prays. A leader in a religious community, in any community of Christians, for that matter, is not to lead with the mindset of a monarch who neither asks nor is asked questions, but to lead as the one who serves. Whatever the case may be, to accept to lead or to accept to be led is to accept to die to self.¹⁴

¹³ A. Akinwale, "The Challenges of Religious Life Today", *The Catholic Voyage*, Iperu Remo 2012, p. 10.

¹⁴ A. Akinwale, "The Challenges of Religious Life Today", p.10.

A Time of Sharing

There is no doubt that Jubilee entails happiness and rejoicing. (cf. Isaiah 61; Nehemiah 8,9-10). What type of joy does Nehemiah advocate for? It is particularly rejoicing in God. During jubilee celebrations, you acknowledge that God has been gracious to you and you should be ready to share this God's graciousness with others. It is not a time to do fundraising for self-aggrandizement, or send out advertisement for brochure. If you must raise fund, it should be used to help the poor and the less privileged around you. It is a time to open your bank account, your wardrobe and extend the joy to the needy. The jubilee is not because of any special achievement, degrees, doctorate, height, intelligence etc. We rejoice for the many graces and gifts of God.

As a priest, consecrated person, lay faithful, can God say that he is pleased with the way you have lived and served him so far? Christians are to love. Since God has loved them first, they too must show this love to their fellow humans.

A Time of Retrospection and Renewal

Jubilee is a time of stock-taking and assessment. It is a time of refilling, refueling and re-pumping "inflated tyres", to begin anew on a fresh page. It is a time to forget the errors and mistakes of the past with the resolution to correct such mistakes and live better. It is a time to realize how much you are valued and loved by God. Your sins/debts are forgiven you and you are free. Catholic priests participate in the priesthood of Melchizedek – *King of righteousness* whose power lies in his righteousness (cf. Romans 14:17). Jubilee

does not just mean food and drink but a call for righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit (Rom 14:17). The priest should heal through his words and actions.

Rest and Trust in God

The concept of rest and trust in God are particularly relevant in today's fast-paced and consumer-driven society. The Jubilee year reminds us to take a step back and trust in God's providence, rather than being consumed by our own efforts and material possessions. As Walter Brueggemann writes, “the Sabbath practice of Israel was not an invitation to laziness, but rather an invitation to joy and faith in the abundance of God's gifts”.¹⁵ Therefore, the Jubilee year calls Christians to prioritize their trust in God and His provision, rather than their own achievements and possessions. Applied to our day-to-day lives, when one celebrates Jubilee, one of the profound lessons to be learnt is the importance of rest. Rest in this sense does not imply cessation from active work, but also a time of retrospection – looking back and acknowledging the divine providence, who has gratuitously sustained you from the beginning of life's journey up until the time of the celebration. It entails not holding onto your personal prowess or capacity in all your achievements thus far. All we are and have are gifts from the creator and in him our future is secured.

¹⁵ Walter Brueggemann, *Sabbath as Resistance: Saying No to the Culture of Now* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 2014) 10.

Lessons for All Christians Celebrating Jubilee

Implications for Ecology

The rest associated with the Jubilee year can also extend to environment. As Leviticus speaks of the land's rest, contemporary Christians are called to reflect on sustainable practices and stewardship of God's creation. According to Norman Wirzba, the Jubilee signifies a "rhythm of life that requires the earth to be treated with respect and care."¹⁶ In our world today, it has been observed that humans misunderstood God's injunction to "...fill the earth and subdue it" (cf. Gen. 1:28-29) and as a result it has led to various levels of exploitation of nature's gift to the detriment of the entire creation. The jubilee year beckons on us to be eco-conscious, to be conscious about our environment, protecting it in a manner that will give glory to the creator. Going a bit further, we are called to be care-takers; not only of our immediate surroundings but of whatever is entrusted to us. The land is God's, and in his benevolence, He gave it to humans who have the responsibility to tend it with care and at last be accountable to the creator for it. It emphasizes reset for lands (Lev. 25:4-5), rejuvenation of natural resources and responsibility towards creation, promoting natural resources and encouraging waste reduction practices and conservation.

¹⁶ Norman Wirzba, *Food and Faith: A Theology of Eating* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 115.

Economic Justice and Equity

The Jubilee year also highlights the importance of economic justice and equity. Today, the gap between the rich and the poor continues to widen, creating a divided and unjust society. The principles of the Jubilee year challenge this reality by promoting the redistribution of wealth and the release of debts. In his book “the Jubilee Manifesto”, Michael L. Budde writes, “the point of the Jubilee is not to punish those who prosper, but to provide for those who lack”.¹⁷ Thus, the Jubilee year calls Christians to actively work towards economic justice and to use their resources for the improvement of society. This resonates deeply with the Nigerian economic situation, wherein the rich get richer and the poor get poorer. The message of the jubilee is a clarion call to all and sundry to be good neighbors, especially, in promoting policies geared towards poverty alleviation and wholesome living. It calls us to be sources of strength and support to those who are struggling through life, the marginalized, the less-privileged, those at the margins of the society etc., for this is one of the means we can give back to God whatever He has blessed us with. We cannot afford to be oblivious or insensitive to the plights of those around us. If we indeed want to make the world a better place, we must ensure the well-being of the members of our immediate society, with this, the goodness we bring can extend to the world at large. In sum, the jubilee “...calls Christians to view

¹⁷ Michael L. Budde, *The Jubilee Manifesto: A Framework, Agenda, and Strategy for Christian Economic Life* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 2012), 57.

their neighbors' wellbeing as intertwined with their own."¹⁸ We unite our voice with that of the Supreme Pontiff to make a passionate appeal to affluent nations requesting that they acknowledge the gravity of so many of their past decisions and determine to *forgive the debts* of countries that will never be able to repay them.¹⁹

The Jubilee is a reminder that *the goods of the earth* are not destined for a privileged few, but for everyone. The rich must be generous and not avert their eyes from the faces of their brothers and sisters in need. Together with the Holy Father we should "think especially of those who lack water and food". For him, hunger is a scandal, an open wound on the body of our humanity, and it summons all of us to a serious examination of conscience. We agree with the Pope "that with the money spent on weapons and other military expenditures we can establish a global fund that can finally put an end to hunger and favour development in the most impoverished countries, so that their citizens will not resort to violent or illusory situations, or have to leave their countries in order to seek a more dignified life".²⁰

We agree with the Pope "If we really wish to prepare a path to peace in our world, let us commit ourselves to remedying the remote

¹⁸ Soong-Chan Rah, "God's Justice: The Practice of Faith in the Public Square" (Wipf and Stock, 2014), 102.

¹⁹ *Spes non Confundit*, no.16.

²⁰ *Spes non Confundit*, no. 16.

causes of injustice, settling unjust and unpayable debts, and feeding the hungry”.²¹

Forgiveness and Reconciliation

Moreover, the Jubilee year emphasizes the importance of forgiveness and reconciliation. In a world where grudges and animosity are rampant, the Jubilee year calls Christians to extend forgiveness and work towards reconciliation. “To forgive is to refuse to let the past define the present”.²² The Jubilee year reminds Christians that forgiveness is not a one-time act, but a continuous process that requires effort and intentionality. It also challenges Christians to seek reconciliation with those they have wronged and those who wronged them, just as God has reconciled with us through Christ. It is an invitation to let go grudges and resentment. “The practice of forgiveness lies at the heart of the Christian faith, inviting individuals into reconciliation and renewed relationship.”²³ He should heal the physically and spiritually sick people through confessional absolution.

Empowerment of Women and the Girl Child

The jubilee year ought to be a year of women empowerment. Many societies today particularly in Africa still have no regard for women. The boy child is considered superior and more important than the

²¹ *Spes non Confundit*, no. 16.

²² Miroslav Volf, *Free of Charge: Giving and Forgiving in a Culture Stripped of Grace* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2006), 32.

²³ N.T. Wright, “Simply Jesus: A New Vision of Who He Was, What He Did, and Why He Matters” (HarperOne, 2011), 66.

girl child. Hence from the on-start preference is given to the male child. Even in the matter of education and other aspects of formation. There is need for a change of attitude in this regard. All under privileged people groan for liberation and empowerment. These are positive actions to be taken during the jubilee year. More so, the jubilee year must be a year of *metanoia*. To be truly liberated as Children of God, it is necessary to be converted to God.

Implications for Liberation

Even though slavery was officially abolished in the 18th century AD, slavery still exists today in various forms in our contemporary world. The hard economic situation often forces people to take up menial jobs that attract unfriendly relations with their masters. The year of jubilee guards against such situation and calls for a change of attitude in that regard. Christians ought to be sensitive to such situations. Many young Africans fall victim of this both in Africa and abroad. Slavery is also inherent in military dictatorship which Africa has experienced extensively. The dictator would not normally be interested in the welfare of the people; whole populations are usually turned into slaves for the dictator. There is also a form of slavery in the relationships between rich and poor countries. The rich countries control global economic power and dictate to poor countries what course of action to take. Often the destiny of the poor country is thus determined. This causes a great deal of difficulties for the citizens of the poor countries. During the Holy Year, we are called to be tangible signs of hope for those of our brothers and sisters who experience hardships of any kind such as prisoners, the

youth, the sick, migrants, refugees and displaced persons, exiles, the elderly, the grandparents, the poor and the needy.²⁴

Conclusion

The Scriptural passages of Leviticus 25:8-55; Isaiah 61:1-4 and Luke 4:18-19 clearly highlight the important message of the biblical jubilee for contemporary Christians especially as we prepare for the celebration of the Jubilee year in 2025. These celebrations serve as moments of indebted thanksgiving to God, the source of everything that is good. They are seen as crucial moments of re-examining one's existence, especially as it concerns one's approach to life as well as one's relationship with God and fellow human beings. Hence, at the end of such events what often results, for serious minded people is a reflected resolve for the better, in the remaining years of one's life. Jubilee emphasis spiritual renewal and reconciliation, promotes economic and social equality. The liberation from bondage reflects Christ's liberating power and offers hope for a better future, rooted in God's promises. It teaches that God's mercy and love know no bounds and so are invited to extend the mercy and love to others, live a life of renewal and reconciliation and prioritize social justice, equality and community. These principles are not just limited to the Jubilee year but are meant to shape our everyday lives as followers of Christ. We agree with Martin Luther King Jr. that "the establishment of a genuine

²⁴ Cf. *Spes non Confundit*, nos. 9-14.

community of love and justice will be the great justification for the existence of Christianity.”²⁵ If our world is to be better evangelized, and justice is to thrive, we need nothing less than ethical revolution based on the religious principles of the type we have in the regulations governing the jubilee year celebration in the bible.²⁶

The essence of the jubilee is not necessarily to tell the story of what we have achieved or what we have failed to achieve. It is rather a *celebration of God’s faithfulness in spite of humanly seeming failures*. It is a time of stock-taking; a time of improvement, time to adjust our desires to match with the will of God. It is a time to forget the past and forge ahead in hope. It is a time to shun our vices and pursue the corresponding virtues. There is no need to be afraid of the future because the same God who has guided us so far will certainly continue to direct and help us to move ahead.

The jubilee message is a call on all, to renounce personal and collective sins, to embrace uprightness and truthfulness of life and to rededicate ourselves to the duty of building up the body of Christ.

²⁵ Martin Luther King Jr., "An Experiment in Love," in *A Testament of Hope: The Essential Writings and Speeches*, ed. James M. Washington (San Francisco, CA: HarperSanFrancisco, 1991) 382-383.

²⁶ J.S. Ukpong, "The Jubilee Year in Biblical Perspective", in *West African Journal of Ecclesial Studies*, vol 5, Ibadan 2000, p.2.

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Studies & Perspectives

**The Implementation of Synodality in the Religious
Community Life and Governance in Formation Houses
from an African Perspective**

Fr. Daniel Onyeayana, CMF¹

Abstract

Following the successful conclusion of the Synod of Synodality (2021-2024), and the publication of the Final Document Pope Francis says, “Synodality is not a chapter in an ecclesiology textbook, much less a fad or a slogan to be bandied in our meetings. Synodality is an expression of the Church’s nature, her form, style and mission”². As a concept many supposed it undervalued or

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² FRANCIS, *We are Church Together*. Address to the faithful of the Diocese of Rome, September 18, 2021, in Dicastery for communication, walking together: the way of synodality, Maryknow, NY: Orbis, 2023, 151-163, at 152.

*belittled the hierarchical structure of the Church, this is a misunderstanding of the Synod of Synodality, it rather enhances effective leadership. It is not opposed to the tradition of the Church, rather reaffirmed the early tradition of the Church that had been the agenda of Vatican II. The Final Document returns the sources of the Church's tradition, and *aggiornamento*³. This write up will focus on how synodality is a dynamic dimension of ecclesial communion that promotes participation, communion and the sharing of values among all members of the religious community. We are going to explore how the proposals of the Final Document could be implemented in religious community life and governance in formation houses from African perspective. The key concepts are: synodality, religious community, art of formation, and consecrated life.*

³ *Aggiornamento* is an Italian word meaning “updating” or “bringing up to date” and refers to the renewal and adaptation of the Catholic Church to modern times, as called for by Pope John XXIII at the Second Vatican Council. It does not mean breaking with tradition but rather renewing it to be more vital and relevant to the modern world, which includes both internal spiritual renewal and external adaptation of laws and institutions. Pope Benedict XVI emphasized that *aggiornamento* means renewing tradition, not breaking with it. *Aggiornamento* seeks to maintain the Church's continuity and stability while adapting to the world, a process that involves carefully discerning what is enduring and what needs to be adapted.

1.0 Introduction

Synodality has been part of the structure of Church in her style of administration and evangelization. It became a clarion call made by Pope Francis to revitalize this concept through; honest and purposeful listening to everyone, from bottom to top. This call was not only accepted by the universal Church but also embraced with all sense of enthusiasm. For the first time in so many decade synodality was in the mouth of every Catholic all over the world from the catechumens preparing for first holy communion to the young boys and girls who made up the large number the Church's population. The lay adults were not left out; the consecrated persons and clergies were all involved in this strong request from Pope Francis. The response to this call gave a sense of belonging to every baptized Catholic, excited that their opinions regarding the progress and growth of the Church in all its ramifications will be heard.

In this paper I will attempt to elaborate how the concept of 'synodality' could be implemented in the community life of the institutes of consecrated life and in her act of governance in formation houses, with peculiar focus on Africa. I intend to start with clarification of terms that will be reflected in this paper such as: synodality, community life and art of formation and succinct explanation on African perspective of consecrated life. Africa is a large continent blessed with multicultural tribes and cultures with over 3,000 languages, and 1.4 billion people and most of the communities of the Consecrated Persons are multicultural and intergenerational. Thus, "diversity is one of Africa's greatest riches,

but it has also become one of its sharpest blades, cutting through nations and communities, breeding distrust, exclusion, and political instability”⁴. Nevertheless, my paper will be limited to the implementation of the *Final Document*. In this write-up we will see that the Synod on Synodality awakens in us the essences of the Church as a pilgrim Church, that incorporates dialogue and discernment in her journey. It is important to note that synodality and conciliarity are attributes of the Church before they are exercises of any particular ministry.

2.0 Definition of Terms

In order to invade ambiguity in the usage of words and terminology above all to contextualize the concepts I will be exploring in this article we will concisely give an in-depth explanation of the concepts and how they are applied in the Church.

2.1 Meaning of the word ‘Synod.’

Etymologically, the word synod is derived from the Greek word “*synodos* (συνὸδος) which is a compound of two words, *syn* (συν), meaning together and *hodos* (ὁδός), meaning way or journey. Therefore, it signifies walking or journeying together”⁵. It is based on this meaning of synod that Pope Francis convoked the

⁴ E. UVIASE, *Tribes and firewalls: reprogramming African unity in a digital age*, 2025, 4.

⁵ M.R. AMBROSE, *Synod on Synodality*, in *The new leader*, vol. 134 no.20, 2021, 15.

‘Synod on Synodality’ (2021-2023), intending to reach out to the grassroots, and every baptized Catholic participating, it is known as from bottom to top. Historically, “The terms ‘synodality’ and ‘synodal’ derive from the ancient and constant ecclesial practice of meeting in synods. According to the traditions of the Eastern and Western Churches, the word ‘synod’ refers to institutions and events that assumed different forms over time, involving a plurality of agents and participants. This variety notwithstanding, what unites them is gathering together to dialogue, discern and decide”⁶. Pope Paul VI, with his *Motu Proprio Apsotokca Sollicitudo*, established the synod as “a special permanent council of bishops for the universal Church in September 15, 1965”⁷.

As an Ecclesia concept synod is codified in 1983 *Codex Iuris Canonici* (CIC) as “a group of Bishops selected from different parts of the world, who meet together at specified times to promote the close relationship between the Roman Pontiff and the Bishops”⁸. It is thus clear that when this term is used it refers to some selected hierarchy of the Church meeting with the Pope, the singular purpose is to reaffirm their allegiance to him and to deliberate on pressing issues concerning the Church and the world. In a designated manner,

⁶ FRANCIS, *XVI Ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops: For a Synodal Church; communion, participation, mission, Final Document* Rome 2024, 28.

⁷ J.C. OKOYE, *Understanding the synod on synodality a community of mutual empowerment*, Wipf and stock publishers Eugene 2024, 16.

⁸ *CIC*, 342.

the Synod of Bishops is the image of an ecumenical council and reflects its spirit and method; it has proven to be a privileged instrument for the implementation of Vatican II⁹.

Emphasizing on the uniqueness of the Synod of Synodality, Pope Francis in his *Episcopalis communio*, states “Although, structurally it is essentially configured as an episcopal body, this does not mean that the synod exists separately from the rest of the faithful. On the contrary, it is a suitable instrument to give voice to the entire People of God, ... demonstrating, from one Assembly to another, that is an eloquent expression of synodality as a constitutive element of the Church”¹⁰. As such this was a more inclusive Assembly without the Church losing her hierarchically structure, consequently, ‘Synodality’ became the central theme of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly of the Synod of Bishops.

In the words of Mario Grech, the secretary general of the Synod of Bishops to Vatican media, this theme was carefully chosen because “the time was ripe for a wilder participation of the people of God in a decision-making process that affects the whole Church and everyone in the Church. By presenting this theme to the people of God, we hope that we can help them to engage in this discernment process in a prayerful attitude, because after all, this is not an exchange of opinions, I say mine and you say yours, but together as a community, we try to do this personal discernment and this

⁹ J.C. OKOYE, *Ibid.*, 17.

¹⁰ FRANCIS, *Episcopalis communio*, Rome 2018, 6§2.

ecclesial discernment that is listening to the Holy Spirit together”¹¹. This in effect means that the gap between the leaders and the subordinates (those being lead) must be bridged. It is worldwide consensus that there is much resistance to overcome the image of a Church rigidly divided between leaders and subordinates, between the *ecclesia docens*¹² and the *ecclesia discens*¹³.

Explaining the pragmatic meaning of a synodal Church, Merlin Ambrose writes, “The synodal Church is a Church which listens, which realizes that listening is more than simply hearing. It is a mutual listening for everyone has something to learn: the faithful, the episcopal college, the Pope. This would mean all listening to each other, and all listening to the Holy Spirit the Spirit of truth”¹⁴. The Holy Spirit therefore is the protagonist of the Synod on Synodality, which focuses on ‘*communion, participation and mission*’. Stressing the Trinitarian dimension of Synodality, John Okoye affirms,

¹¹ CARLO & P. GIORGIO, *National Catholic Register*, (<https://www.ncregister.com/cardinal-grech-synod-on-synodality>, access on Monday 20th November 2025 at 20:12hrs).

¹² *Ecclesia Docens*, is the teaching Church. A term applied to the hierarchy, that is, the Pope and the bishops in union with him, speaking in their divinely authorized capacity of teaching the faithful in matters pertaining to salvation and sanctification.

¹³ *Ecclesia Discen*, is the learning Church. A term applied to all the faithful insofar as they are being taught by the successors of the Apostles. The basis for the expression is Christ's commission to the eleven before the Ascension, "Go, therefore, make disciple of all nations" (Matthew 28:19).

¹⁴ M. R. AMBROSE, *Ibid.*, 6.

“Synodality translates the Trinitarian dynamism with which God comes to meet humanity into spiritual attitudes and ecclesial processes”¹⁵.

2.2 Religious community life in the Institutes of Consecrated Life

Community life in the institutes of consecrated life is one of the basic and fundamental elements of their life especially among the Religious Orders and Societies of Apostolic Life. “The basic inspiration is obviously the first Christian community, the fruit of the Pasch of the Lord”¹⁶. Defining the nature of the religious community the dicastery for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life affirms, “before being a human construction, religious community is a gift of the Spirit. It is the love of God, poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit, from which religious community takes its origin and is built as a true family gathered together in the Lord's name”¹⁷. It can only therefore be understood as divine gift that is enshrined in the Holy Trinity. To this effect community of the Consecrated Persons belongs to the mystery of the Church, it exists to serve the Church.

¹⁵ J.C. OKOYE, *Ibid.*, 18

¹⁶ CONGREGATION FOR INSTITUTES OF CONSECRATED LIFE AND SOCIETIES OF APOSTOLIC LIFE, *Directives on formation in religious institutes*, Rome 1990, 26§2.

¹⁷ _____, *Fraternal life in community*, Rome, 1994, 8.

Religious community life as an institutionalized structure designates her members to live common life under a constituted superior according to the norms of the Church and the proper norms of the institute. Members through their professions are incorporated into a constituted community of Religious order and enjoy all the right, and involve in all the duties of the community. That is part taking in the life of the community. This view is well presented in the *CIC* thus, “A religious is to live in a lawfully constituted house, under the authority of a superior designated according to the norms of law”¹⁸. Along this same frame of thought, *CICLSAL* succinctly affirms “the community is established and endures, not because its members find that they are happy together due to an affinity in thought, character, or options, but because the Lord has brought them together and unites them by a common consecration and for a common mission within the Church. All adhere to the particular mediation exercised by the superior in an obedience of faith”¹⁹. Consequently, it is required for those bound to live in community to “live in their own religious house, observing a common life”²⁰. Underscoring the place of importance of religious community Pope John Paul II opines “the Church understood as the Family of God, consecrated life has the particular function not only of indicating to all the call to holiness

¹⁸ *CIC*. 608.

¹⁹ *CICLSAL*, 26.

²⁰ SACRED CONGREGATION FOR RELIGIOUS AND FOR SECULAR INSTITUTES, *Essential elements in the Church's teaching on religious life as applied to institutes dedicated to works of the apostolate*, Rome 1983, 1§12.

but also of witnessing to fraternal life in community”²¹. So, living in community for the Consecrated Persons is a prophetic testimony that “community life shows us that it is possible to live as brothers and sisters, and to be united even when coming from different ethnic or racial backgrounds”²².

Presenting the theological dimension of religious community Mary Bride Njoku avers, “Religious community is a Church *communio* with all its theological contents. It is essentially a place where those called to a shared charism seek together the will of God”²³. The uniqueness of religious community is her sense of belonging that every member imbibed, living a fraternal life in common that is expected from all, open to collaboration in the mission of the universal Church and the life of co-responsibility. The religious community is a “place and subject of mission specific choices which a religious community is called to carry out in various situations, and criteria for discernment”²⁴. To live fraternal life in community is an art in which everyone accepted, understood and integrated into the community not minding tribe, culture or statues. This basically makes the community life of the Consecrated Persons prophetic. Accordingly, formation to community life installs in them the aspiration that to live in community “is to live the will of God

²¹ JOHN PAUL II, *Ecclesia in Africa*, Rome 1995, 94.

²² BENEDICT XVI, *Africae munus*, Benin 2011, 117,

²³ M.B. NJOKU, *Consecrated Life: towards deepening its understanding*, Memoiyke Publishing Enugu 2021, 119.

²⁴ *Ibid.*, 7c.

together, in accordance with the orientation of the charismatic gift received by the founder from God and transmitted to his or her disciples and followers”²⁵. Fraternal life in community is one of the greatest testimonies that Consecrated Persons offer to the world.

2.3 Consecrated Life from an African Perspective

Africa being a religious continent and from whose soil Consecrated Life as a form of life began through the radical response some Egyptian Monks such as of St. Anthony of desert (251-361), he was attributed to have been as founder of Christian “anchoritic, that is eremitical reclusive life style”²⁶. This is one of the forms of religious life recognized by the Church. Another African monk is St. Paul Thebes (227-341) whom “the great Christian writer and Bible translator Jerome called the first Hermit in his book *Pauli primi eremitae*”²⁷. Another prominent Africa monk who became the human yardstick for consecrated life was St. Pachomius the Great (290-348). He is attributed to be the founder of cenobitism (communal life). Institutes of consecrated life trace their beginnings to these African Egyptian Monks. Thus, as a stable form of life African who have consecrated themselves and incorporated into consecrated life embrace life in common in its totality. Nonetheless, being a continent with diverse cultures and heritages, Africans have been exploring the means that the culture of Consecrated Life should embrace the African culture without loosing the central teaching of

²⁵ Ibid., 45.

²⁶ G. PETER, *The Story of monasticism*, Baker Academic Michigan 2015, 38.

²⁷ P.H. GÖRG, *The desert fathers*, Ignatius press, San Francisco 2011, 77.

the magisterium on Consecrated Life. Pope Benedict XVI in the his Apostolic Exhortation on *Africae Munus* postulated “The Holy Spirit enables the Gospel to permeate all cultures, without becoming subservient to any”²⁸ In recognition and appreciation of how Africans embrace Consecrated Life, Benedict XVI attested;

Africa is the cradle of the Christian contemplative life. Present from earliest times in North Africa, especially in Egypt and Ethiopia, it took root in sub-Saharan Africa during the last century. May the Lord bless the men and women who have decided to follow him unconditionally! Their hidden life is like leaven in the dough. Their constant prayer will sustain the apostolic efforts of the bishops, priests, other consecrated persons, catechists and of the entire Church²⁹.

African sense of Religious Life is embedded in her “wealth of cultural values and priceless human qualities which it can offer to the Church and to humanity as a whole”³⁰. Among the cultures of African that has been of great values is her acute sense of solidarity and community life. “In Africa it is unthinkable to celebrate a feast without the participation of the whole village. Indeed, community life in African societies expresses the extended family”³¹. This sense of togetherness and working together is what Africans are known for. This synodal approach is not alien to the Africans especially in

²⁸ BENEDICT XVI, *Africae munus*, Rome 2011, 37.

²⁹ Ibid 119.

³⁰ JOHN PAUL II, Ibid, 42.

³¹ Ibid., 43

the Nigeria context. The Nobel Prize winner a Nigerian and African novelist writes “A man who calls his kinsmen to a feast does not do so to save them from starving. They all have food in their own homes. When we gather together in the moonlit village ground, it is not because of the moon. Every man sees it in his own compound. We come together because it is good for kinsmen to do so”³². This is the spirit of journeying together that the Synod of Synodality presents to the Church.

Thus “Africans profound religious sense, a sense of the sacred, of the existence of God the Creator and of a spiritual world”³³, made them to embrace the life consecrated through the evangelical counsels. Africa has become the hub and fecund soil for vocations to Consecrated Life. Commenting on the growth of vocation to the priesthood and consecrated life in Africa John Paul II affirms, “It is necessary to discern them wisely, to provide competent directors and to oversee the quality of the formation offered. The fulfilment of the hope for a flowering of African missionary vocations depends on the attention given to the solution of this problem, a flowering that is required if the Gospel is to be proclaimed in every part of the Continent and beyond”³⁴. The implementation of the proposals in the *Final Document*, of Synod of Synodality on formation of candidates

³² C. ACHEBE, *Things fall apart*, New York 2017, 127. Kindle.

³³ JOHN PAUL II, *Ibid.*, 42§2

³⁴ *Ibid.*, 50§2

to the priesthood and consecrated life will solve the worries of Pope John Paul II regarding religious formation in Africa.

2.4 Panoramic explanation of the religious formation as an 'Art'

Formation from its etymological perspective, is derived from the Latin verb *formare*, which means to 'mould'. From Church's phraseology the formation of candidates (seminarians or formees) to the priesthood or consecrated life a process that are in stages and has dimensions. Formation for the Church is a continuum; therefore, the Church split the processes into to initial formation and on-going formation "the two constituting a single reality"³⁵. The main purpose of formation is to integrate all into configuration with Christ. Through these processes, formation then, is present in every moment in the life of priests and consecrated persons, clearly seen in their routines. Pope Francis on priestly and religious formation emphatically asserts, "formation never ends, it lasts a lifetime, and if it stops, we do not remain where we were, but we regress"³⁶. The term formation is known phraseology in the Church especially among Consecrated Persons. In Part V, of the *Final Document* the synod acknowledges, "The holy people of God require proper formation so that they can witness to the joy of the Gospel and grow

³⁵ FRANCIS, Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants in the course for seminary rectors and formators of Latin America, Rome 2022, 2.

³⁶ Cf. <https://www.vaticannews.va/pope-to-italian-seminarians-the-church-is-a-work-in-progress> (access on Sunday, 30 November 2025 at 12:46)

in the practice of synodality”³⁷. Nonetheless, “becoming missionary disciples of the Lord is not something achieved once and for all. It demands continuous conversion, growing in love to the measure of the full structure of Christ”³⁸. This assertion will continue to make all Consecrated Persons to imbibe the three cornerstones of synodality which are; communion, mission and participation.

In this paper we are going to concentrate on the implementation of synodality in formation houses of the Institutes of Consecrated Life. CICLSAL, stated in a synodal manner that “The formation of candidates, which has as its immediate end that of introducing them to religious life and making them aware of its specific character within the Church, will primarily aim at assisting men and women religious realize their unity of life in Christ through the Spirit, by means of the harmonious fusion of its spiritual, apostolic, doctrinal, and practical elements”³⁹. In this regard it is the top priority in a process of faith and, above all, in consecrated life.

The quality of life of an institute depends on the formation of its members. It is noted that, “the proper renewal of religious institutes depends chiefly on the formation of their members”⁴⁰. However, it is necessary to know what formation for religious life consists of, so as not to fall into the temptation of seeking that which may contribute

³⁷ *Ibid.*, 141.

³⁸ *Ibid.*, 142.

³⁹ CICLSAL, *Directives on formation in Religious Institutes*, Rome 1990, 1.

⁴⁰ *Ibid*

to technical and professional preparation, but which has nothing to do with authentic formation for this lifestyle. Along this line of thought SCRIS elucidates on the nature of formation in institutes of consecrated life thus,

Formation is not achieved all at once. The journey from the first to the final response falls broadly into five phases: the pre-novitiate, in which the genuineness of the call is identified as far as possible; the novitiate, which is initiation into a new form of life; first profession and the period of maturing prior to perpetual profession; perpetual profession and the on-going formation of the mature years; and finally the time of diminishment, in whatever way this comes, which is a preparation for the definitive meeting with the Lord⁴¹.

The dicastery explains that each of this stage has its own aim, content and methodology designed for the gradual maturity of the candidates to the priesthood, perpetual vows and beyond. It expresses thus; “Religious formation fosters growth in the life of consecration to the Lord from the earliest stages, when a person first becomes seriously interested in undertaking it, to its final consummation, when the religious meets the Lord definitively in death”⁴².

In order to understand better the panoramic concept of formation we will briefly implore the natures of formation from the Church’s point

⁴¹ SCRIS, Essential Elements in the Church’s teaching ..., 28.

⁴² Ibid., 43

of view and how they can facilitate the implementation of the proposals of the *Final Document*.

2.4.1 Formation as an Ecclesial ministry

Through this nature of formation, the magisterium sees it as an art, ‘the art of all arts’, that is seen as an ecclesial ministry of service. This service is seen in all the stages of formation to the ministerial priesthood and to the consecrated life. Hence formation as an Ecclesial ministry is seen as a service to the Church and the entire human race. “The service of formation, an authentic ecclesial ministry is an art, the art of arts. Formators must come to know the world of the young and should develop pedagogical ability to accompany and guide those being formed”⁴³. In the frame of thought Pope Francis unequivocally expresses that “formation is an art and must involve formators’ engaging candidates up close in dialogue and confrontation, lest we produce self-centered clerical monsters”⁴⁴.

Affirming that formation is an ecclesial ministry underlines the fact that it is a concept a process that it is at the heart of activities in the life of the Church and is taken seriously. As a ministry the Church embraced formation as a program or process as the responsibility of the Church. Emphasizing on its importance it was mentioned 73

⁴³ CICLSAL, *Inter-institute collaboration for formation*, Rome 1998, 23.

⁴⁴ R. J. LANDRY, Pope Francis on *Priestly Vocations, Formation of Seminarians, Priestly Virtues and the Priestly Ministry*, Huntington New York 2013, 2

times in the 1983 *Code of Canon Law*, which covers the entire ministry of the Church namely; Christian faithful, catechists, clerics, candidates and members of institutes of consecrated life, and candidates for reception of the sacrament. Our interest is on formation in institutes of consecrated life.

The qualities of a formative process as an ecclesia ministry, as reflected in the ‘holistic dimensions of formation’⁴⁵ and codified in the *CIC* on formation of the Religious, formation is: ‘appropriate to one’s role,’ ‘necessary or useful for the exercise of ministry,’ ‘systematic,’ ‘catechetical,’ ‘religious,’ ‘spiritual,’ ‘doctrinal,’ ‘theological,’ ‘specifically pastoral,’ ‘philosophical,’ ‘human and scientific,’ and ‘adapted to the times,’ while ‘paying regard to the whole person.’⁴⁶. The Code states “formation of Religious is to be systematic, adapted to the capacity of the members, spiritual and apostolic, both doctrinal and practical”⁴⁷. To this regard, it behoves the governance in the different institutes of consecrated life to have their ‘*Ratio Fundamentalis*’⁴⁸, in concordance to the teachings of the

⁴⁵ Dimensions of formation are; human, spiritual, intellectual, pastoral, and communal dimensions.

⁴⁶ <https://www.chausa.org/formation-in-the-code-of-canon-law> (access on Saturday 22nd November 2025 at 13:33hrs).

⁴⁷ Can. 660§1.

⁴⁸ *Ratio Fundamentalis*, is a comprehensive document that contains the formation plans of seminarians or candidates to priestly or consecrated life from initial stages through first professions, perpetual professions, ordinations, and ongoing formation.

Church. This clearly postulates that for the ministry of formation to achieve its goals in the Church it must be entrusted to capable hands.

For the consecrated persons formation as ecclesial ministry of service is the process of becoming more and more a disciple of Christ, growing in union with and in configuration to Him. “It is a matter of taking on increasingly the mind of Christ, of sharing more deeply His gift to Himself to the Father and his brotherly service of the human family, and of doing this according the founding gift which mediates the Gospel to the members of a given consecrated institute”⁴⁹.

2.4.2 Formation ministry of presence

The art of formation as ‘the art of all arts’ cannot be achieved in proxies or in absence. The formator who has been trained and prepared for this ministry must be on ground to carry out this vital responsibility of the Church. This is the only way the art of formation could be seen. In accepting to be engaged in the ministry of formation is accepting to be *available, accessible, approachable and accountable* in the ministry of formation. This means that the formator must be generous with his or her presence to those he or she is forming. The Congregation for Clergy, in the *Gift of the Priestly Vocation* affirms; “Moreover, those who are marked out to become formators need a specific preparation and generous dedication to this important task. Formators are needed who can ensure their fulltime presence and who, above all else, are witnesses

⁴⁹ SCRIS, *Essential Elements ...*, 45.

of how to love and serve the people of God, giving themselves without reserve for the Church”⁵⁰. The ministry of presence will bring out one of the most essential nature of formation that is accompaniment. Those formed need to be accompanied at all time in a personal way throughout the various stages and process of formation.

The purpose of personal accompaniment is to carry out vocational discernment and to form the missionary disciple. The art of formation here as ‘the art of all arts’ is to help those formed to know themselves and purpose of their vocational journey. Through personal accompaniment those formed will open up to formation. Co-responsibility and interpersonal relationship will be established between, formator and formee and between formee and fellow formee. This is further explained thus, “Formation comes about every day through interpersonal relationships, moments of exchange and discussion which result in the development of that ‘fertile soil’, in which a vocation matures concretely”⁵¹.

2.4.3 Formation Dynamism

Although formation among Consecrated Persons has its obligations and set down rules the art of formation itself is dynamic. The dynamism in religious formation is seen in affective formation, and in the formation of members to embrace other cultures without

⁵⁰ Congregation for Clergy, *Gift of the Priestly Vocation Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis*, L’Osservatore Romano Vatican City 2016, 49.

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, 50.

losing the essence of Consecrated Life. Pope Francis had called for affective formation. In which seminarians and candidates for consecrated life should embrace their formation journey with heart of love, which will make them internalize their formation and build their love for the Church and Congregation. “Unless we train ministers capable of warming people’s hearts, of walking with them in the night, of dialoguing with their hopes and disappointments, of mending their brokenness, what hope can we have for our present and future journey”⁵²? Thus, the dynamics of affective formation will lead to love of God, love of the Church, love of the congregation and the people of God.

Consequently, the dynamics of affective formation will enable the members of institutes of consecrated life to grow in maturity, appreciate themselves as ‘sexual being’, and practice perfect charity to all especially the poor and vulnerable. The affective formation helps the members to embrace the evangelical counsels with a heart of love and sacrifice not seeing the vows as burden. John Paul II expresses “If the subject of formation is the individual at every stage of life, the object of formation is the whole person, called to seek and love God ‘with all one’s heart, and with all one’s soul, and with all one’s might’ and one’s neighbour as oneself Love of God and of the brethren is a powerful force which can ceaselessly inspire the process of growth and fidelity”⁵³.

⁵² R. J. LANDRY, *Ibid.*, 4

⁵³ JOHN PAUL II, VC.71§1

Above all formation should help both the formator to embrace other cultures and the formee to see relevance in other people culture. In-depth study of different African culture is highly recommended as part of the dynamics of formation. This could be understood as “understanding the signs of the time”. A formator who don’t understand the manner of life of the present generation should be sent for training. In the art of formation, formators must come to know the world of the young and should develop pedagogical ability to accompany and guide those being formed. By this the formator must be flexible and dynamic through which discernment of vocation and individuals will be possible. In his *Africae Munus*, Pope Benedict XVI reflecting on the values of African culture and integrating it into evangelization affirms “in this process of inculturation, it is important not to forget the equally essential task of evangelizing the world of contemporary African culture”⁵⁴.

3.0 Implementation of synodality in religious community governance

The Congregation for Clergy reflecting on the community as a proper tool for formation instructs, “A healthy pedagogy of formation will not neglect to pay attention to the experience and dynamic of the group of which the seminarian forms a part. Community life during the years of initial formation must make an impact on each individual, purifying his intentions and transforming

⁵⁴ BENEDICT XVI, *Ibid.*, 37.

the conduct of his life as he gradually conforms himself to Christ”⁵⁵. A community environment of this kind will, by no doubt, help for the implementation of the proposals of Synod of Synodality.

Community life, as one of the hallmarks of the institutes of consecrated life especially in Religious Orders and Societies of Apostolic Life respectively it is structured to be synodal. It gathers all the members together in Christ with the designation to become a source of mutual aid to all, while helping to fulfil the religious vocation of each through journeying together. It intrinsically offers an example of honest dialogue, profound discernment, fraternal correction, fostering reconciliation, providing service to all, and engagement in mission. These characterize the fraternal life of the Consecrated Person as ‘one mind one soul’. We will explore how the proposals *Final Document* will be implemented in religious community.

3.1 Participation in common mission

Community life of the Consecrated Persons is designated for mission in the manner in which Jesus Christ commissioned His disciples and sent them out in pairs (cf. Matt, 28:16-20). Participation in common mission is seen as journeying together as proposed in the *Final Document*. This working together goes beyond physical appearances but it is inspired by the Holy Spirit, and rooted in the teachings of Christ. Pope Francis with the mind of synodality states “every baptized person is called to be a protagonist of mission since we are

⁵⁵ CONGREGATION FOR CLERGY, *Ibid.*, 50.

all missionary disciples”⁵⁶. The idea of mission among Consecrated Persons is rooted in their formation of community living where members are formed and prepared to journey together, to carry out their shared mission of proclaiming the Gospel. It is encapsulated in collaboration and co-responsibility. It promotes collaboration and a shared sense of responsibility for the community's life and mission, moving away from autocratic structures. Affirming the role of the communal dimension of formation among consecrated persons, John Paul II in his post-synodal apostolic exhortation *Vita Consecrata* made it clear that “the community is the chief place of formation in Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life... Through the fraternal life each one learns to live with those whom God has put at his or her side, accepting their positive traits along with their differences and limitations”⁵⁷. He also emphatically affirms, “at the same time, from the moment of initial formation, community life must disclose the essential missionary dimension of consecration”⁵⁸.

Religious formation therefore, helps her members to know that living together is not the same as living in community. Everyone should realize the joy and blessing in living together, which leads to commitment to mission. “The *Final Document* expresses awareness that the call to mission is, at the same time, the call to the conversion

⁵⁶ FRANCIS, *XVI Ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops...*, 4.

⁵⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, Rome 1996, 67.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*,

of each local Church and of the whole Church”⁵⁹ in which the Consecrated Life participate. Through their consecration, and living in community “Religious, are necessarily and deeply committed to the mission of Christ. Like him, they are called for others: wholly turned in love to the Father and, by that very fact, entirely given to Christ's saving service of their brothers and sisters”⁶⁰. Thus this should be the driving force of every Consecrated Person and it is a fundamental proposal of XVI Ordinary General Assembly on Synod of Synodality. Illustrating how this could be implemented Pope Leo XIV, admonish that Religious should learn how to harmonize together individual gifts as well as pursue mission in common”⁶¹. This proposal made by the synod is not extra-terrestrial to institutes of consecrated life rather it could be taken as a reminder call, which will reaffirm the very nature of Religious Community.

3.2. Purposeful Listening

This presupposes cultivating the art of speaking and listening, listening with heart and mind, and speaking from the point of view of respect and civility. At the inauguration of the Synod of Synodality, Pope Francis describe it as ‘you talk, I listen; I talk, you listen’. These are done with close attention to the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. This art of speaking and listening is not a new concept

⁵⁹ FRANCIS, *XVI Ordinary general assembly...*, 11

⁶⁰ SCRIS, *Essential Elements ...*, 24

⁶¹ Cf. Isabella H. Carvalho, <https://www.vaticannews.va/pope-leo-xiv-major-superiors-italy-synodality-religiouslife>. (access on Monday 24th November 2025 12:31pm).

in the Church. Pope Paul VI in his encyclical *Ecclesiam Suam*, reflected on healthy dialogue in the Church and gave its characteristics thus:

Dialogue, is a recognized method of the apostolate. It is a way of making spiritual contact. It should however have the following characteristics: clarity before all else, what is said should be intelligible. Dialogue must be accompanied by the meekness, which Christ bade us learn from Him avoiding all form of peremptory language, and makes no demands. Confidence that the dialogue will be for the good of both parties, promoting intimacy and friendship on both sides⁶².

These are how the proposals of Synod of Synodality could be implemented in the community of institutes of consecrated life. It implies the cultivation and promotion of intentional honest speaking and active listening with our hearts and not only our ears. According to the XVI Ordinary General Assembly, this type of listening that should exist in religious community is likened to the listen that happens at liturgical celebrations where Consecrated Persons often gathers to listen to voice of God. The *Final Document* has it thus; “The liturgy is a listening to the Word of God and a response to His covenantal initiative. Similarly, the synodal assembly is a listening to this same Word, which resounds as much in the signs of the times as in the hearts of the faithful, and also a response of the assembly

⁶² PAUL VI, *Ecclesiam Suam*, Rome 1964, 81.

that is discerning God’s will in order to put it into practice”⁶³. In this regard, the *modus vivendi et operandi*, of religious communities is to charitably listen to one another for the good of the community and the universal Church.

3.3. *Fostering the culture of dialogue*

There will be no implementation of synodality if there is no honest and sincere dialogue. This indicates where diverse voices are included to shape the community's life, from governance and formation to spirituality and mission. The practice encourages a shift from purely hierarchical structures to one of shared responsibility and fraternal collaboration. “Dialogue arises within a context characterized by pluralism and the close proximity of those holding contrasting views, even within the same Church or the same country. Gone are the days when homogeneity can be assumed”⁶⁴. Consecrated Persons in their communities through their fraternal life are meant to be examples of healthy dialogue that is grounded in mutual respect for the dignity of all members of the community and the entire humanity. Their daily witness to community life is enshrined in dialogue.

This type of dialogic, speech should characterize religious communities is what Susan K. Wood describes as seeking “to communicate the experience and perspective to the other and to

⁶³ FRANCIS, *XVI Ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops...*, 27.

⁶⁴ S.K. WOOD, *A synodal Church, A synodal Church: The Christian faithful on pilgrimage*, Aheed and Ward Book New York 2025, 146. Kindle.

receive that same message from the partner so as to be able to enter into as much as possible the experience of the other and so to see the other's perspective through their eyes"⁶⁵. She further opines that "dialogue has several dimensions: an individual's dialogue with God in prayer; dialogue with other people; dialogue within the Church; and the dialogue of the Church with the world, culture, and other faith traditions. Dialogue leads to both personal conversion and Church reform"⁶⁶. Stressing the inevitable practice of dialogue in the community of the institutes of consecrated life John Paul II in *Vita Consecrata* expresses "The consecrated life, by the very fact that it promotes the value of fraternal life, provides a privileged experience of dialogue. It can therefore contribute to creating a climate of mutual acceptance in which the Church's various components, feeling that they are valued for what they are, come together in ecclesial communion in a more convinced manner, ready to undertake the great universal mission"⁶⁷.

3.4. Communal discernment

Communal discernment is the clear method of synodality in community life. This entails the clean plan and future of not just the immediate community but also their congregation at large. Community life of the religious should reflect the spirit of working together through truthful discernment. With the practice of discernment everyone participate in the affairs of the community.

⁶⁵ Ibid., 147

⁶⁶ S. K. WOOD, 146.

⁶⁷ JOHN PAUL II, *Vita Consecrata*, Rome 1996, 74.

Echoing on the meaning of this concept Susan K. Wood avers, “Discernment may be an activity of an individual or a group. Communal discernment is not an exercise in democratic rule even though it is broadly participatory”⁶⁸. Thus, in Religious community proper care should be taken not to liken discernment to mere; deliberations, voting, and decision-making. It is rather a spiritual act of sincerely seeking for the truth through active participation of all. Hence, it could be stated that “communal discernment is a process that enables a group to be aware of, to invoke and to respond faithfully to the presence and movement of the Spirit of God, and thus to find God’s will”⁶⁹. For Pope Francis this concept is the trademark of his papacy, for him discernment leads to ‘purification and reforms’⁷⁰.

Communities of the Institutes of Consecrated Life should follow the examples of the Apostles who on normal basis had recourse to discernment in taking of important decision such as the appointment of the Deacons in Acts 6, on how to accept the Gentiles converts into the Christian community in Act 15, which led to the council of Jerusalem, and in Act 16:10 where Paul apply spiritual discernment to go on mission at Macedonia. Above all in Acts 5:1 Peter employ discernment to distinguish between truths and false, good and evil. Hence “communal discernment is a Spirit-inspired human activity

⁶⁸ S.K. WOOD, *Ibid.*, 179

⁶⁹ D. LONSDALE, *Dance to the music of the Spirit*, Longman and Todd London, 1992, 104.

⁷⁰ FRANCIS, *Evangelii Gaudium*, Rome 2011, 30.

employed by a faith community seeking to find the will of God in a corporate decision to be taken”⁷¹

Institutes of Consecrated Life by the structure and nature already have procedure to practice discernment in some of their important deliberations. Such as the convocation of; ‘General Chapter’, ‘Provincial Chapter and Assembly’, ‘Community Meeting’. These are opportunities for proper discernment for the growth of their respective congregation. In any of these gathering “they have to listen with their heart and not only their ears. This means listening with an attitude that we have something to learn from another. One should not be thinking about what I am going to say next, but seeking the truth in what another is saying”⁷².

The community life of all Institutes of Consecrated Life through discernment enable the entire members to participate in life of the community, which makes them to have sense of belonging and equal dignity. However, the prerequisites for discernment are invocations of the Holy Spirit, prayers, and interior freedom, prior personal discernment and adequate data and discerning judgment. These will enable all to go through discernment process to allow themselves to be “lead to a mature acceptance by all of the decision, even by those whose individual opinions are not accepted. The process should also provide for a period for reception by the community that will lead to further review and assessment”⁷³.

⁷¹ S.K. WOOD, *Ibid.*, 181

⁷² *Ibid.*, 148.

⁷³ FRANCIS, *XVI Ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops...*, 84f.

Pope Francis acknowledges the role of all forms of Institutes of Consecrated in the Church who have been since their establishment and through the moderation of the Church have been symbol of synodality. In his words, “Across their centuries-long history, the various forms of consecrated life elaborated what we now recognize as practices of synodal living. These include how to practice discernment in common and to harmonize together individual gifts as well as pursue mission in common. Orders and congregations, societies of apostolic life, secular institutes, as well as associations, movements and new communities, all have a special contribution to make to the growth of synodality in the Church”⁷⁴.

3.5. Governance of authority as service

This is a crystal-clear procedure where institutes of consecrated life serve their various congregations and the universal Church by applying the principle or concept of synodality. The governance of authority in Consecrated Life is known as a ministry of service. This idea of authority has been echoed and re-echoed by the magisterium base on the teachings of Christ that “He did not come to be served, but to serve” (cf. Mat 20:28; Mk.10:45). In concordance with this idea the publication on *The Service of Authority and obedience*, explains that the religious community, is communion of consecrated persons who professes to seek together and carry out God’s will there are variety of roles but with the same goal and the same passion. Hence, “some are called, usually temporarily, to exercise

⁷⁴ Ibid. 84f.

the particular task of being the sign of unity and the guide in the common search both personal and communitarian of carrying out the will of God. This is the service of authority”⁷⁵.

Inevitably, in consecrated life those in authority are meant to realize is first and foremost a spiritual mandate that involves oath taking to serve and uphold the teaching of Christ. It therefore implies that those bestowed with this burden should prayerfully cultivate in themselves an openness to make themselves available to serve others in a synodal manner. “Persons in authority recognize that they are called to serve an ideal that is much greater than themselves, an ideal which can be approached only in an atmosphere of prayer and humble seeking, which allows them to grasp the action of the same Spirit in the heart of every brother or sister. Persons in authority are “spiritual” when they place themselves at the service of what the Spirit wants to realize through the gifts, which he distributes to every member of the community, in the charismatic project of the institute.”⁷⁶. Also, “they are called to promote the dignity of the person, paying attention to the growth of the members of the community”⁷⁷. In addition, “they are to inspire courage and hope in the midst of difficulties”⁷⁸, “to give life for the sheep and above all to keep the charism of their own religious family alive”⁷⁹.

⁷⁵ CICLSAL, *The service of authority and obedience*, Rome 2008, 1.

⁷⁶ Cf. Ibid., 13a.

⁷⁷ Cf. Ibid., 13c.

⁷⁸ Cf. Ibid., 13d.

⁷⁹ Cf. Ibid., 13e.

The synodal dimension of the ministry of authority in perspective of Consecrated Life in Africa is anchored on the trust and respect the elders and those in authority enjoys from their subject. Remarking on this Pope Benedict XVI expresses elders are respectfully venerated in Africa, “they are an enrichment for all elements of the family ... not only have they given life, but they contribute by their actions to build up their family”⁸⁰. Both the Church and Society are in need of these elders because of their influence among their people. They serve the people by protecting them and making sure they are in harmony.

Similarly, the proposal of the *Final Document*, on they synodal concept of authority is that as they trust those in authority, decision making body, they should also be accountable of their responsibility. This is indeed needed among Consecrated Persons in authority in Africa, to prevent the abuses authority. Francis states, “Formation is needed in order to engage in decision-making processes grounded in ecclesial discernment and which reflect a culture of transparency, accountability, and evaluation. The formation required is not only technical; it also needs to explore theological, biblical and spiritual foundations”⁸¹. So the praxis of accountability especially in ministry of service will help to implement the proposals of Synod of Synodality on those saddled with the responsibility of making decision and leading those entrusted to them. Consequently,

⁸⁰ BENEDICT XVI, *Africae Munus*, Ouidah Benin 2011, 48.

⁸¹ FRANCIS, *Final Document ...*, 80.

formation of leader, decision-making body is needed regarding the ministry of authority.

In a synodal ambient the document state “Those in authority are, in several instances, obligated by current law to conduct a consultation before taking a decision”⁸². The absent of this practice will lead to clericalism or what Nigeria in West Africa called ‘*Big Man – Oga*’. Above all synodal approach to the ministry of service, and for its effective implementation will involve what Pope Leo calls “regular and fruitful rotation of responsibilities and offices, in order to avoid forms of stagnation that risk fostering rigidity and sclerosis”⁸³.

4. Implementation of synodality in the formation houses

The formation houses of Institutes of Consecrated Life are always taken seriously and call attention on how it is lived. This is so because formation houses are where future priests and consecrated persons are made.

As a formative community it should imbibe the proposals of the *Final Document*, and be the beacon in fostering the culture of listening, prayers, meditations, dialogues, accompaniments,

⁸² Ibid., 91.

⁸³ I.H. CARVALHO, <https://www.vaticannews.va/pope-leo-xiv-major-superiors-italy-synodality-religiouslife>. (access on Monday 24th November 2025 12:31pm)

discernment, decisions and actions⁸⁴. In a concisely manner CICLSAL, explains that “a community is formative to the extent that it permits each one of its numbers to grow in fidelity to the Lord according to the charism of his or her institute”⁸⁵. The dicastery went ahead to state, “Religious in formation should be able to find a spiritual atmosphere, an austerity of life, and an apostolic enthusiasm within their community, which are conducive to their following Christ according to the radicalism of their consecration”⁸⁶. Formation depends to a great extent on the quality of this community and the formators. The proposals of the *Final Document* could be implemented in these ways.

4.1. Holistic Formation

The *Final Document* illustrated the importance of holistic formation of the Consecrated Person towards the construction of a synodal Church. The formators in formation houses are the protagonists, the animators of the implementations of the proposal. It is their prerogative to ensure that in the formation houses of the Religious congregation they cultivate and promote the African concept of togetherness. This is an important approach that all Consecrated Institutes should embrace in all their stages of formation especially in the initial formation. For integral formation to be realized in a synodal way the dimensions of formation must be employed. That is

⁸⁴ Cf. FRANCIS, *Synodal Church communion, participations, mission: Final document*, Rome 2024, 29.

⁸⁵ CICLSAL, *Directives on formation in religious institutes*, 27§1.

⁸⁶ *Ibid.*, 27§3.

formation must not be one sided but holistic to realize this the *Final Document* states, “formation must consequently engage all the dimensions of human person (intellectual, affective, relational and spiritual) and include concrete experiences that are appropriately accompanied”⁸⁷..

Merlin R. Ambrose, reflecting on the *Final document of the Synod of Synodality*, writes “The *Final Document* calls for a thorough review of seminary formation to prepare candidates for the priesthood in a synodal way”⁸⁸. In this regard it is stated that for a holistic formation the formation houses of the Institutes of Consecrated Life ‘should have a significance presence of women. Nonetheless, this idea received 40 votes. The presence of women does not mean sharing in their community life but rather could be in the areas of lecturing or pastoral collaboration. This is so important because majority of the people that the seminarians are going to minister to in future are women. Achieving this requires courageous, commitment formators that will prepare formees adequately. The Assembly calls for revising the *Ratio Fundamentalis Institutionis Sacerdotalis* to include women and incorporate the insights shared during the Synod. These insights should be transformed into guidelines that promote a formation centered on synodality. Additionally, the formation pathways should inspire candidates to

⁸⁷ Ibid., 143.

⁸⁸ M. J. AMBROSE, *Life after Synod final document of the synod final document: Canonical reading*, in *Vidyajyoti journal of theological reflection*, vol. 88 no12 2024, 44.

develop a passion for their mission to all people. This will reawaken those in formation the values of synodality. This approach emphasizes collaborative and inclusive methodologies in shaping seminarians' education and spiritual development, ensuring that their formation is comprehensive and resonates with the contemporary needs of the synodal Church and its community.

Applying the concept of Synod of Synodality in the governance of formation houses of the Institutes of Consecrated Life entails: mutual listening, mutual dialogue, mutual witnessing, and mutual respect. The fruits of the Synod of Synodality become focal points for implementing these four concepts. Formators and those in the governing councils of various Institutes of Consecrated Life should be aware that the instinct of faith (*sensus fidei*) is a gift to all members of the congregation, which enables them to discern the will of the Spirit in respective communities for the growth of their congregation according to the mind of the Church. This synodal approach in formation houses will help Consecrated Persons to embrace the basic ontology of consecrated community, which the *Final Document* expresses in this manner “Formation in synodality and the Church’s synodal style will make people aware that the gifts received in Baptism should be put to use for the good of all: they cannot be hidden or remain unused”⁸⁹.

4.2. Mutual Listening

This has been one of the styles of formation, whereby the formators

⁸⁹ FRANCIS, *XVI Ordinary general assembly of the Synod of Bishops...*, 143.

endeavour to cultivate in the life of the formees the habit of listening. John Paul II reflecting on the importance of listening among Consecrated Persons affirms, “The word of God is the first source of all Christian spirituality. It gives rise to a personal relationship with the living God and with his saving and sanctifying will. It is for this reason that from the very beginning of Institutes of Consecrated Life, and in a special way in monasticism, what is called *lectio divina* has been held in the highest regard”⁹⁰. The importance of this virtue in formation houses in Africa cannot be over stated. The art of listening is one of the African values that are entrenched in their cultural values. It is a given that the young ones listen with kin interest to their elders they hold in high respect. The ideas on listening in the *Final Document* could only take root in formation houses in Africa if formators value the richness and the spirituality in attentive listening and implement it in the formation dynamism. Thus the *Final Documents*, made it clear that this must be done the way Christ did it. Hence the document proposes. “The Gospels present to us a Lord who is often in the act of listening to the people who come to Him along the roads of the Holy Land Jesus never sent anyone away without stopping to listen and to speak to them, whether men or women, Jews or pagans, doctors of the law or publicans, righteous men and women or sinners, beggars, the blind, lepers or the sick”⁹¹. If this act of listening could be cultivated in the formation houses of the Religious Institutes it will help to build the image of the universal

⁹⁰ JOHN PAUL II, VC, 94

⁹¹ Ibid., 51.

Church as a Church that listens without discriminations, that springs from an act of charity through dialogue, John Paul II says “dialogue is the new name of charity”. The central work of a formator is based on “the willingness to listen and to empathize with others, more than an instrument of evangelization, is precisely the environment where evangelization germinates, blossoms and bears fruit”⁹².

4.3. Common and shared formation

This idea was one of the issues that were discussed on the flow of the XVI Ordinary General Assembly. It involves a novelty that is deeply rooted in synodality. Pope Francis postulates “There was also a marked insistence throughout the synodal process upon the need for a common and shared formation, in which men and women, laity, consecrated persons, ordained ministers and candidates for ordained ministry participate together, thus enabling them to grow together in knowledge and mutual esteem and in the ability to collaborate”⁹³. This idea was first proposed by the dicastery of CICLSAL in their document *Inter-institute collaboration for formation*. They affirm, “Collaboration among institutes in the area of formation arose from the need to answer the challenges arising from concrete situations and from specific pedagogical needs”⁹⁴. For this to be realized and done well it “requires the presence of suitable and competent formators, capable of demonstrating with their lives what they

⁹² FRANCIS, *Address of His Holiness Pope Francis to participants in the course for seminary rectors and formators of Latin America*, Rome 2022, 4.

⁹³ FRANCIS, *XVI Ordinary general assembly...*, 143,

⁹⁴ CICLSAL *Inter-institute collaboration for formation*, Rome 1998, 3.

transmit with their words”⁹⁵. In an emphatic manner this is what will surely make formation in Africa to continue to produce mature men and women in the priestly and consecrated life.

4.4. Spirit of reciprocity

The profession of vows made by the Consecrated Persons indicate that we are equal in the ontology of Consecrated Life and the vows have made us for reciprocity, which is seen in our co-responsibility to each other. The spirit of reciprocity is manifested in the act of love and care we share among ourselves. This involves mutual exchange of spiritual and material obligations. It is the climax of the spirit of sharing among the members of consecrated life. The affective formation the consecrated persons receive in the formation houses and lived out in their continue formation in different community is a testament of reciprocal love that makes them a testament of ‘one heart, one soul’. This also helps them to have mutual relationship with the bishops and diocesans priest and other consecrated persons from different congregations. Pope Francis expresses, “The reality of brokenness and suffering experienced by families notwithstanding, they remain places where we learn to exchange the gifts of love, trust, reconciliation, forgiveness and understanding. Here, we learn that we are equal in dignity and created for reciprocity, that we need to be listened to, and that we are able to listen”⁹⁶.

⁹⁵ FRANCIS, *XVI Ordinary general assembly...*, 143.

⁹⁶ *Ibid.*, 35.

The equal dignity that comes from reciprocity helps to bear witness to the Gospel where no discrimination is entertained. It enables ideas to be shared in the spirit of discernment especially during congregational gathering such as Assemblies and Chapters. “For this reason, it is necessary to encourage procedures that make reciprocity between the assembly and the person presiding effective in an atmosphere of openness to the Spirit and mutual trust in search of a consensus that could, possibly, be unanimous. Once the decision has been reached, it requires a process of implementation and evaluation in which the various participants are once again involved, yet in new ways”⁹⁷. The institutes of consecrated life acceptance the concept of reciprocity becomes the network of relationships with prophetic witnessing among Consecrated Persons in Africa who enriched the Consecrated Life through their cultures which makes community life a blessing in many colours. This makes each one “to share its own resources in a spirit of solidarity, without paternalism or subordination, with respect for diversity and promoting healthy reciprocity.”⁹⁸.

5. Conclusion

The community of Religious Congregations and Societies of Apostolic life in African is constituted of people called from diverse cultures, lifestyles, and tribes into a form of life that is governed by rules and regulations of the congregation they are incorporated into.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*, 90

⁹⁸ *Ibid.*, 121.

This makes them unique and a testimony to the gift of the Holy Spirit. This communion makes common living a ‘sacramental sign’ of *koinonia* and faith. The proposal of the *Final Document* if implemented in religious communities and formation houses in African there will be more generative and harmonious vocation in the continent.

It is so because, synodality encourages a new way of leading and serving, where leaders listen and walk with others. It is seen as a way to address dominance and vulnerability within communities, fostering freedom and fraternity. It is a way of letting all baptized Catholic not to feel it but to know that they fully belong to the Church and their voice matters. African culture supports this method of life but need to bridge the gap that exist between the superiors and the subjects. Proper implementations of the proposal of the *Final Document*, of the Synod of Synodality will help the consecrated institutes in Africa to eradicate the wrong concept of clericalism and see the positions of superiors and clerics as an office to serve and give voice to the voiceless. The Religious community then will be where love and charity abide. A community that will be likened to the expression in Psalm 133:1 “Behold how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity”. Pope Francis calls it “a way of being and working together, young and old, in listening and in discernment, in order to arrive at pastoral choices that respond to reality”⁹⁹.

⁹⁹ FRANCIS, *A way of Being and working together*, Angelus, Saint Peter’s square, October 28th 2028, in Dicastery for communication, walking together: The Way of synodality, 77.

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Studies & Perspectives

**“They Have No Wine” (John 2:3): Biblical Witness to
Mary’s Intercessory Role in Salvation History**

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Abstract

The wedding feast at Cana narrative (John 2:1-11) presents Mary as a relevant intercessor in the inauguration of Jesus’ public ministry, highlighting her central role in salvation history. Through an examination of the pericope’s theological and cultural context, this paper explores Mary’s intercessory actions and addresses contemporary interpretations of her role through historical-critical

and theological methodologies. The analysis includes multiple dimensions: textual and linguistic studies, Second Temple Judaism's marriage customs, patristic interpretations, and the historical development of Marian intercession doctrine. Drawing from archaeological evidence, biblical scholarship, and theological tradition, the paper argues that Mary exemplifies a paradigmatic model for Christian faith, obedience, and devotion. This exemplarity substantiates her enduring relevance in ecclesial life and spiritual formation, while offering insights into the broader dynamics of divine-human interaction in salvation history. The paper's findings contribute significantly to contemporary Mariological discourse and provide frameworks for understanding intercessory prayer within Christian spirituality.

Keywords: Cana of Galilee, Scripture, Blessed Virgin Mary, Intercession

Introduction

The Gospel of John inaugurates Jesus' public ministry with the remarkable miracle at Cana, where he transforms water into wine. As Schnackenburg (1980) observes, this narrative serves as more than a mere historical account; it functions as a theological prologue to Jesus' public ministry and establishes fundamental patterns that will characterize his mission. Central to this account is Mary, the mother of Jesus, who initiates the miracle by informing Him of the wine shortage and instructing the servants to follow his commands. According to Brown (2019), this episode not only marks Jesus' first

public sign (*semeion*) but also underscores Mary’s unique role as an intercessor and participant in the unfolding of salvation history.

This study aims to contribute to the scholarly discourse on Marian theology through an analysis of the Cana narrative (Fitzmyer, 1997). By examining the cultural, linguistic, and theological dimensions of the text, as well as its reception in Christian tradition, the paper highlights Mary’s significance as a mediator between human need and divine provision (Miravalle, 2008). The methodology employed combines historical-critical analysis with theological interpretation, engaging both ancient and contemporary scholarship. This approach allows us to explore the rich layers of meaning embedded in the text while remaining attentive to its significance for contemporary Christian faith and practice. The paper’s structure progresses from historical and literary analysis through theological reflection to contemporary application. It begins by examining the cultural context of first-century Palestinian wedding celebrations and the literary structure of John’s Gospel. This foundation enables us to appreciate the multiple layers of meaning in the text’s key phrases and actions. The study then explores the theological implications of Mary’s role, considering both traditional interpretations and contemporary perspectives. Finally, it considers the narrative’s ongoing significance for Christian life and worship (Meier, 2022; Ratzinger, 2005).

Historical and Literary Context

The Gospel of John's distinctive theological perspective frames the Cana narrative within its larger purposes. As Carson (1991) argues, the evangelist's careful selection and arrangement of material suggests that the placement of this miracle at the beginning of Jesus' ministry serves specific theological aims. The transformation of water into wine appears as the first of Jesus' "signs" (*semeia*), establishing a pattern of revelation that culminates in the cross and resurrection (Brown, 2019). This positioning is particularly significant as it introduces major Johannine themes: transformation, abundance, and the relationship between the old and new covenants. Marriage celebrations in Second Temple Judaism were elaborate social events, often lasting up to several days (Crossan, 2021). Contemporary archaeological findings from sites across Palestine have revealed the scale and significance of these celebrations, including evidence of large wine storage facilities and ceremonial vessels (Sanders, 1992). The responsibility for providing adequate provisions fell to the bridegroom's family, and wine played a central role in these festivities. Beyond its practical function, wine carried rich symbolic meaning in Jewish tradition, associated with joy, celebration, and divine blessing (Jeremias, 2017).

Archaeological studies from first-century Palestine indicates that wedding celebrations were community events that reflected and reinforced social bonds. Excavations of domestic structures from this period reveal architectural features designed to accommodate large gatherings, suggesting the central importance of these

celebrations in community life (Reed, 2002; Horrell, 2016; Pilani, 2023). As Wright (1996) notes, the depletion of wine represented not merely a practical inconvenience but a potential social catastrophe that could damage family honor and community relationships (Usman & Paul, 2024). Understanding this cultural context helps us appreciate the gravity of the situation Mary addresses and the significance of Jesus’ response. The literary structure of the Cana account reveals careful composition. The narrative is bracketed by temporal markers and geographic references that place it within a broader sequence of events. The mention of “the third day” (v. 1) carries potential symbolic significance, possibly foreshadowing the resurrection (Schnackenburg, 1980). The presence of the stone water jars, specifically identified as those used for Jewish purification rites, suggests a theological statement about the relationship between Jewish ceremonial law and the new reality Jesus inaugurates (Brown, 1966).

Textual Analysis

Mary’s statement, “They have no wine” (*oinon ouk echousin*), demonstrates remarkable economy of expression while conveying multiple layers of meaning (Barrett, 2018). The present tense of *echousin* suggests an ongoing situation requiring immediate attention, as Fitzmyer (1997) observes. According to Brown (2019), this simple declaration operates on multiple levels simultaneously: as a practical observation, a request for intervention, and a statement

of faith in Jesus' ability to address the situation. The precise Greek construction emphasizes the completeness of the lack - not merely a shortage, but a complete depletion of resources. The evangelist's careful narration presents Mary's role with subtle but significant details. Her presence at the wedding is mentioned before Jesus', and her initiative in addressing the wine shortage reveals both her sensitivity to human need and her confidence in her son's ability to respond. The narrative suggests her awareness of Jesus' identity and mission, even before His public revelation through signs (McHugh, 2009).

Jesus' reply to Mary has generated considerable scholarly debate (Meier, 2022). The address "Woman" (*Gynai*) and the phrase "what concern is that to you and to me?" (*ti emoi kai soi*, v. 4) require careful analysis. While seemingly stark in English translation, *Gynai* represents a dignified form of address in Koine Greek, used in contexts of respect and honor (Barrett, 2018). As Brown (1988) notes, its use elsewhere in John's Gospel (19:26) at the cross suggests a deliberate literary connection between these two scenes, bookending Jesus' public ministry with references to His mother's presence and role. The same address appears in other significant encounters in the Gospel (Matthew 15:28), indicating its special theological significance.

The phrase *ti emoi kai soi* has parallels in both Hebrew Scripture and Greek literature, where it often appears in contexts of divine-human interaction (Barrett, 1978). Rather than expressing distance or rebuke, it frequently serves to establish the proper relationship

between parties of unequal status or authority. This understanding helps illuminate the complex dynamics at work in Jesus’ response to Mary. Jesus’ reference to His “*hour*” (*hora*) introduces a major Johannine theme that will resonate throughout the Gospel. The tension between “my hour has not yet come” and His subsequent action suggests that Mary’s intervention plays a role in the unfolding of divine timing, a theological point that merits further exploration (Schnackenburg, 1980; Carson, 1991). This apparent contradiction serves to highlight the mysterious interplay between divine sovereignty and human intercession.

Theological Implications

The Cana narrative establishes several key aspects of Mary’s mediatorial function that have profound implications for Christian theology and spirituality (O’Collins, 2021). Through her awareness of human need, direct access to divine power, authority to instruct others regarding Christ, and model of perfect discipleship, Mary embodies the ideal intercessor (Ratzinger, 2005). Her role at Cana exemplifies the theological principle of mediated grace, demonstrating how human agents can participate in divine action without diminishing divine sovereignty (Pilani, 2022). As von Balthasar (2019) argues, the transformation of water into wine carries rich typological meaning that the early Church Fathers extensively explored. This miracle connects to Old Testament prophecies of eschatological abundance, particularly those found in Amos and Joel, where flowing wine symbolizes the messianic age

(Fitzmyer, 1997). The replacement of water meant for purification with wine of exceptional quality signals the new covenant superseding the old, while the Eucharistic implications of wine as a sign of Christ's blood have been recognized since the patristic period.

Mary's role at Cana prefigures her ongoing role in the Church through maternal mediation, intercessory prayer, and as a model of discipleship (Brown, 1978; Lukefahr, 2016). Her command to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you," becomes a paradigmatic expression of Christian discipleship (Ratzinger, 2005). She serves as a bridge between human need and divine provision, demonstrating both the efficacy of intercessory prayer and the proper disposition of faith required for such intercession (Johnson, 1995). The theological anthropology suggested by this account merits attention. Mary's interaction with Jesus reveals a profound truth about human participation in divine action (von Balthasar, 2004). Her intercession demonstrates that human initiative and divine sovereignty are not competing forces but can operate in harmonious conjunction (Weinandy, 2019). This understanding has important implications for theological discussions of grace, free will, and human cooperation with divine purposes (Levering, 2017).

Contemporary Applications

The Cana narrative continues to inform Catholic and Orthodox liturgical life through multiple channels and expressions (Johnson, 1995). According to Schmemmann (2001), feast day celebrations

commemorating the miracle at Cana provide opportunities for theological reflection on Mary’s intercessory role and the significance of Jesus’ first sign. Marriage liturgies frequently reference this account, drawing upon its rich symbolism of transformation and abundance to illuminate the sacramental nature of Christian marriage. The integration of Marian devotion into Christian spirituality finds strong support in the Cana narrative. Mary’s role as intercessor has inspired countless prayers, devotions, and spiritual practices throughout Christian history. Contemporary spiritual writers continue to find in Mary’s actions at Cana a model for authentic Christian response to human need and divine initiative.

Different Christian traditions interpret Mary’s role variously, necessitating careful theological dialogue regarding several key issues (Brown, 1988). As Kasper (2021) notes, the nature of intercession itself requires careful theological articulation that maintains both divine sovereignty and meaningful human participation in God’s purposes. The communion of saints, a doctrine closely related to Marian intercession, calls for renewed examination in light of ecumenical concerns and contemporary theological developments. The relationship between Scripture and Tradition in understanding Mary’s role presents both challenges and opportunities for ecumenical dialogue (Dulles, 2019). While Protestant traditions typically emphasize the biblical witness alone, Catholic and Orthodox approaches integrate scriptural testimony with the Church’s developing understanding through history. The Cana narrative provides common ground for exploring these

different hermeneutical approaches. The development of doctrine regarding Mary's role raises important questions about theological method and the nature of doctrinal development itself. How the Church's understanding of Mary's role has grown and developed through history offers insights into broader questions about the development of Christian doctrine and the relationship between biblical revelation and theological reflection.

Conclusion

The wedding at Cana narrative provides a rich theological foundation for understanding Mary's role in salvation history. Through careful analysis of the text's linguistic, historical, and theological dimensions, this paper has demonstrated that Mary's intervention at Cana establishes a paradigm for her ongoing intercessory role in the Church. Her simple statement, "They have no wine," continues to echo through Christian history as an example of perfect trust and effective intercession. This study contributes to Marian scholarship in several significant ways. First, it offers detailed analysis of the Greek text, illuminating nuances often overlooked in previous studies. Second, it contextualizes the narrative within first-century Jewish culture, drawing on recent archaeological and historical research. Third, it explores theological implications for contemporary ecclesial life, demonstrating the continuing relevance of this account for Christian faith and practice. Finally, it proposes frameworks for ecumenical dialogue that honor

both the biblical text and various Christian traditions’ interpretations of Mary’s role.

Future research might profitably explore several directions suggested by this study. Comparative analysis with other Johannine mother-son dialogues could yield additional insights into the evangelist’s theological purposes. Investigation of early Christian interpretations, particularly in patristic sources, might reveal how the Church’s understanding of Mary’s role developed in its formative period. Study of the narrative’s influence on Marian doctrine development could illuminate broader questions about doctrinal development in Christian theology. Examination of contemporary liturgical applications could suggest ways to make the narrative’s rich theological content more accessible to contemporary believers. The continuing significance of the Cana narrative for Christian faith and practice suggests its inexhaustible theological richness. As contemporary Christians seek to understand and embrace Mary’s role in salvation history, this account provides both inspiration and instruction. It reminds us that divine grace often works through human mediation, that simple trust can initiate profound transformation, and that Mary continues to direct all to her Son with the timeless instruction, “Do whatever he tells you.”

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Studies & Perspectives

**Rethinking Religious Life Today: A Synodal Approach
to Mission and Authenticity¹**

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Abstract

This essay reflects on the decline in vocations to religious life and proposes a renewal rooted in Pope Francis' call for a synodal Church—centered on communion, participation, and mission. While religious institutes remain institutionally strong and financially secure, they face a growing shortage of personnel, especially in the West. The paper suggests that instead of retreating inward, religious communities must look outward—toward the peripheries—where authentic lives are being lived in pursuit of justice, dignity, and service. Citing figures like Greta Thunberg, Malala Yousafzai, and others, it calls for religious institutes to foster such authenticity within their own charisms. A key proposal is to

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embrace "creative fidelity"—faithfulness to the founding spirit while responding to contemporary needs. The example of Teresa of Kolkata is considered from a different perspective. Drawing on theology, philosophy (Gabriel Marcel's "I-Thou"), and spirituality (compassion, discernment, stages of growth), the essay calls for a transformation of religious life into a prophetic witness that engages the world meaningfully. Ultimately, it sees religious life as a "gift within the Church," part of the divine-human exchange ("sacrum commercium") initiated in the Incarnation. It asks: what "drop of water" can religious life today contribute to this ongoing exchange? The essay provides what could prepare the ground for religious to make a contribution.

Religious institutes² and personnel³ exist. They do not lack financial resources; but especially in the west, they lack personnel. Secondly,

² Catholic institutes: Religious Institutes (men & women): ~2,300–2,500; Secular Institutes: ~200; Societies of Apostolic Life: ~250

³ Overall, the number of priests (secular and religious) worldwide has increased from 404,628 to 407,730 over the twenty-five years covered. While the number of men and women religious has decreased. According to the data, the number of religious brothers has never exceeded 60,000 over the twenty-five years covered. The same downward curve is also evident in the case of women religious, whose number has fallen from 814,779 to 559,228 in twenty-five years. <STATISTICS_2024_002_.pdf.pdf> Note: Numbers of women religious have been declining in Europe and North America, but growing or stabilizing in Africa and Asia.

there are individuals who are working in the periphery (cf. table below). So, this essay would like to ask a couple of questions.

- Is it possible for established institutes to point their membership and those who may be interested towards the periphery?
- But pointing to the periphery is not chasing after everything that is good, noble and honourable, but with *creative fidelity* within the context of the charism of the Institute – that is a twofold perspective (a) looking at the founder in an “I-Thou” perspective (b) looking at the situation in the world and its needs today in terms of the specific focus of the founder.

Overall, what I am speaking of a “reverse” movement of what took place in the case of Teresa of Kolkata (1910-1997). She belonged to a religious institute (Sisters of Loretto) that catered for schools in India. They had two set of schools, one for well to do and the other, poor. Teresa belonged to a school that catered to the poor. But she wanted to go further. In 1948 the Vatican gave her permission to leave the Sisters of Loretto and to start a new work under the guidance of the Archbishop of Calcutta. My question is could this venture of hers have been sponsored *within* the sisters of Loretto⁴. And then, history would decide its future.

⁴ Think of some reforms within major religious families: From the Benedictine Tradition - Cistercians (1098) – Founded by St. Robert of Molesme as a reform of the Benedictines, emphasizing stricter observance of the Rule of St. Benedict;

Any institution needs finances and personnel for its survival. Canon Law 610 §2 states “No house is to be established unless it is prudently foreseen that the needs of the members can be suitably provided for.” But personnel? It is a major issue especially in the west with dwindling vocations and somewhat weakening enthusiasm in the south. This situation can be attributed to many causes – social, sociological, economic etc. In former times as well as now, it must be admitted that God calls. It is his gift to the community. It needs to be presumed that he provides sufficiently for the nourishment and growth of ministry in the community – not necessarily through professed religious, but also by other religious and human initiatives, which lead the community beyond

Trappists (1664) – A stricter branch of the Cistercians (Reformed Cistercians of the Strict Observance), focusing on silence and austerity. From the Franciscan Family - Capuchins (1525) – A reform of the Observant Franciscans, emphasizing greater poverty and simplicity; Conventual Franciscans and Observant Franciscans – Earlier splits based on differing interpretations of St. Francis’s rule, especially regarding poverty. From the Carmelite Tradition - Discalced Carmelites (1562) – Founded by St. Teresa of Ávila and St. John of the Cross as a reform of the Carmelites, with stricter enclosure and poverty. From the Dominicans - While the Dominicans remained relatively unified, tertiary orders and congregations of Dominican sisters formed later, adapting the Dominican charism to active apostolates like education and healthcare. From the Jesuit *Spirit* - Although the Jesuits (founded 1540) did not spawn direct offshoots, many modern congregations were inspired by their model of formation, apostolic zeal, and education.

themselves to self-transcendence, which we Christians recognize as God. “And this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent.” (Jn 17:3).

The issue I am trying to face in this essay is rather simple. Institutions and structures are needed for permanence and stability. But problems arise due to attachment to these institutional structures and the unwillingness to change. The story of the ashram cat is well known (Tony De Mello). In this regard, the words of Pope Francis⁵ are relevant.

Less attached to institutions? I’d say less attached to certain ways of thinking. Because the Church is institution. The temptation is to dream of a de-institutionalized Church, a gnostic Church without institutions, or one that is subject to fixed institutions, which would be a Pelagian Church. The one who makes the Church is the Holy Spirit, who is neither gnostic nor Pelagian. It is the Holy Spirit who institutionalizes the Church, in an alternative, complementary way, because the Holy Spirit provokes disorder through the charisms, but then out of that disorder creates harmony. A Church that is free is not an anarchic Church, because freedom is God’s gift. An institutional Church means a Church institutionalized by the Holy Spirit. A tension between disorder and harmony: this is the Church that must come out of the crisis. We have to learn to live in a Church that exists in the tension between harmony and disorder provoked by the Holy Spirit. If you ask me which book of theology can best

⁵ <An Interview with Pope Francis | Commonweal Magazine>

help you understand this, it would be the Acts of the Apostles. There you will see how the Holy Spirit de-institutionalizes what is no longer of use, and institutionalizes the future of the Church. That is the Church that needs to come out of the crisis.”

Lack of numbers? In a former era and ethos (e.g. Ireland) religious life attracted persons – each family was proud to have at least one religious from their family. But with nuclear families – more economic opportunities and other social and sociological circumstances, things have changed. Some have merged with other institutes, others have disbanded; have gone out of existence with the death of its last living member. Some have opted for “voluntary death” by not enrolling further vocations.

Can some re-thinking be done? Vatican II in *Perfectae Caritatis 2*, called for a balancing of the gospel, the founding stories, developments in theology, the signs of the times, and the spirit of renewal. In the process of renewal, the council foresaw the need to involve all members of each institute, so that the renewal would not simply remain on paper, but would be an authentic renewal of the life and ministry of religious. My proposal in this paper is to look at this called for renewal in religious life according to the spirit (not necessarily the letter) of Pope Francis call: Towards a synodal church: Communion, Participation, Mission, The presupposition is that new thrusts may emerge and as a result, through a process of creative fidelity to their own charisms, religious institutes may spawn fresh thrusts within the community in the interests of mission, with the possibility that this may lead others to seek within religious

life “the content” of authenticity, while respecting such goals as the self-fulfillment dimension of authenticity.

Today’s Situation According to the Vision of Pope Francis:

Pope Francis⁶ suggests that we look especially to the periphery “to see”:

You have to go to the edges of existence if you want to see the world as it is. I’ve always thought the world looks clearer from the periphery, but in these last seven years as Pope, it has really hit home. You have to make for the margins to find a new future. When God wanted to regenerate creation, he chose to go to the margins – to places of sin and misery, of exclusion and suffering, of illness and solitude – because these were also places full of possibility. Where sin increased, grace abounded all the more (Rom 5:20).

This excludes any kind of lobbying and oligarchy. Seeing and acting in the periphery is not an antiseptic exercise. One can get dirty in the process. A shepherd takes on the smell of the sheep. *Evangelii Gaudium* 49 states:

Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ. Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets,

⁶ In conversation with Austen Ivereigh, *Let us Dream: The Path to a Better Future* (London: Simon and Schuster 2020) <[PDF] [EPUB] Let Us Dream: The Path to a Better Future Download (oceanofpdf.com)>

rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. ... More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37).

Seeing the needs of our world: The conditions in which humans live can and do change, as indeed they have since the time of Vatican II⁷. We are now into digitalization, automation, computers, robotics etc., involving the areas of smart systems, cloud computing, a focus on sustainability etc. We are moving into what is a fifth stage of industrialization – artificial intelligence. The consequence of these developments is a high rise in both individual and group egotism⁸. There are a variety of responses, each claiming to be Christian⁹ -

⁷ H. Von Scheel - C. Popa - J. Von Scheel, *Strategy in the age of disruption: A Handbook to Anticipate Change and Make Smart Decisions* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley 2024).

⁸ As measured by the Narcissist Personality Inventory (NPI) developed by Raskin and Bell in 1979. Cf. R. Raskin - H. Terry, “A principal-components analysis of the Narcissistic Personality Inventory and further evidence of its construct validity”, *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology* 54/5 (1988) 890-902 <<https://doi.org/10.1037/0022-3514.54.5.890>>; P. MacDonald, “‘Narcissism’ in the modern world” at <<https://doi.org/10.1080/14753634.2014.894225>>

⁹ See e.g. S.J. Hunt, *Handbook of Global Christianity: Movements, Institutions and Allegiance* (Leiden: Brill 2016).

what would often seem to be each claiming to be “expert” disregarding the norms of the universal Church¹⁰, and even the norms of basic human decency, making individualism the organizing principle of society¹¹.

Lack of fraternity: As Pope Francis¹² says: Now more than ever, what is revealed is the fallacy of making individualism the organizing principle of society. What will be our new principle? We need a movement of people who know we need each other, who have a sense of responsibility to others and to the world. We need to proclaim that being kind, having faith and working for the common good are great life goals that need courage and vigour; while glib superficiality and the mockery of ethics have done us no good. The modern era has developed equality and liberty with such determination, now needs to focus on fraternity with the same drive and tenacity to confront the challenges ahead. Fraternity will enable equality to take its rightful place in the symphony¹³.

¹⁰ Cf. *Gestis Verbisque* (2024) which draws attention to individuals often administering sacraments invalidly in <Note Gestis Verbisque on the Validity of the Sacraments (2 February 2024) (vatican.va)>

¹¹ Pope Francis calls it a fallacy and rightly so in terms of ultimate ends, but in the “pilgrim” situation it is a *de facto* operating principle, cf. K. Sigmund, *The Calculus of Selfishness* (Princeton University Press 2010) vii: “enlightened self-interest”.

¹² *Let us Dream...; Fratelli Tutti* (2022) mentions fraternity 55 times.

¹³ Two books represent the extremities of the spectrum. R. Dawkins, *The Selfish Gene* (Oxford University Press 40th Anniversary Ed. 2016, original 1976) argues

In this context, as Pope Francis said during his 2023 visit to Mongolia.¹⁴ The social significance of our religious traditions can be gauged by the extent to which we are capable of living in harmony with other pilgrims on this earth and can foster that harmony in the places where we live. Every human individual, and even more every religion, must be measured by the standard of altruism. Not altruism in the abstract, but in the concrete: an altruism that translates into concern for others and generous cooperation with them.

Pope Francis in his message to the Security Council of the United Nations (14 June 2023) read by Archbishop Paul Gallagher stated:¹⁵ Today's globalized world has brought all of us closer together, yet it has not made us any more fraternal. Indeed, we are suffering from a *famine of fraternity*, which arises from the many situations of injustice, poverty and inequality and also from the lack of a culture of solidarity. ... It seems, though, that we are going backwards in history, with the rise of myopic, extremist, resentful and aggressive

that competitiveness is the key to survival; M. Nowak, *Super Cooperators: Altruism, Evolution and Why We need Each Other to Succeed* (New York: Free Press 2011).

¹⁴ <Apostolic Journey to Mongolia: Ecumenical and Interreligious Meeting in the "Hun Theatre" (Ulaanbaatar, 3 September 2023) | Francis (vatican.va)>

¹⁵ <To the Security Council of the United Nations (14 June 2023) | Francis (vatican.va)>

nationalisms that have kindled conflicts which are not only anachronistic and outdated, but even more violent.

Challenged by the Parable of the Good Samaritan: In *Fratelli Tutti*¹⁶ 69, he observes, Each day we have to decide whether to be Good Samaritans or indifferent bystanders. And if we extend our gaze to the history of our own lives and that of the entire world, all of us are, or have been, like each of the characters in the parable. All of us have in ourselves something of the wounded man, something of the robber, something of the passers-by, and something of the Good Samaritan.

St. Teresa of Kolkata, echoes these same sentiments: The greatest disease in the West today is not TB or leprosy; it is being unwanted, unloved, and uncared for. We can cure physical diseases with medicine, but the only cure for loneliness, despair, and hopelessness is love. There are many in the world who are dying for a piece of bread but there are many more dying for a little love. The poverty in the West is a different kind of poverty -- it is not only a poverty of loneliness but also of spirituality. There's a hunger for love, as there is a hunger for God.

And again, she says: “When a poor person dies of hunger it has not happened because God did not take care of him or her. It has happened because neither you nor I wanted to give that person what he or she needed.” And again, “If you can't feed a hundred people, then feed just one”. More than ever today, a children's hymn

¹⁶ <Fratelli tutti (3 October 2020) | Francis>

(composed by Julia A Carney first appeared in 1845 in Boston) is relevant: Little drops of water little grains of sand, Make the mighty ocean, And the beautiful land ...

“Famine of Fraternity” – Cult of Authenticity:

Frank Sinatra’s signature tune in his later years was the Paul Anka song “I Did It My Way,” and it is the ultimate expression of self-reliance: “I planned each charted course, each careful step along the byway, but more, much more than this, I did it my way.” Needless to say, this is the siren voice of the ego, of personal autonomy and self-sufficiency. And this is what is considered authenticity in today’s world. The Pew Research Centre describes itself as a nonpartisan fact tank in 2017 conducted a survey tackling the question, what makes life meaningful? The late Rabbi Jonathan Sacks¹⁷ comments on the findings of this survey. He begins by making the observation that philosophers have traditionally identified the search for a meaningful life with service to a moral cause, a community, a country, or God. However, people in this survey, by contrast, tended to describe moments when they felt good about themselves. It is as if they have lost the sense of vocation, the pursuit of meaning, a calling to something larger than the self.” As Charles Taylor has suggested,

¹⁷ *Morality: Restoring the Common Good in Divided Times* (New York: Basic Books 2020)

What we need to understand here is the moral force behind notions like self-fulfilment. Once we try to explain this simply as a kind of egoism, or a species of moral laxism, a self-indulgence with regard to a tougher, more exigent earlier age, we are already off the track. Talk of ‘permissiveness’ misses this point. Moral laxity there is, and in our age ‘The Inarticulate Debate’ is not alone in this. What we need to explain is what is peculiar to our time. It's not just that people sacrifice their love relationships, and the care of their children, to pursue their careers. Something like this has perhaps always existed. *The point is that today many people feel called to do this, feel they ought to do this, feel their lives would be somehow wasted or unfulfilled if they didn't do it*¹⁸ (emphasis added). There is now what can be called the cult of authenticity.

On one level, it clearly concerns the manner of espousing any end or form of life. Authenticity is clearly self-referential: this has to be my orientation. But this doesn't mean that on another level the content must be self-referential: that my goals must express or fulfil my desires or aspirations, *as against something that stands beyond these*. I can find fulfilment in God, or a political cause, or tending the earth. Indeed, the argument above suggests that we will find genuine fulfilment only in something like this, which has significance independent of us or our desires. To confuse these two kinds of self-referentiality is catastrophic. It closes off the way

¹⁸ Charles Taylor, *The Ethics of Authenticity* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press 2016, 11th printing) 16-17.

ahead, which can't involve going back behind the age of authenticity¹⁹. (emphasis added)

What we need is to rediscover a sense of vocation within the search for authenticity. Looking at the peripheries, we see individuals – authentic (self-referential) pursuing fulfilment in something beyond the self. A few of such initiatives would be:

Name of Group	Country	Cause	Sacrifice	Impact
Greta Thunberg	Sweden	Climate Justice	Left school, faced global scrutiny	Global youth Climate Movement
Water Protectors (Standing Rock)	USA	Climate Change/ Indigenous Rights	Harsh Conditions arrests	Raised awareness of indigenous land right
Colin Kaepernick	USA	Racial Justice	Lost NFL Career	Symbol of resistance to police brutality.

¹⁹ *Ibid.* 82

Ananda Teltumbde	India	Caste Justice, LGBTQ+ Rights	Imprisonment	Highlighted Caste Oppression
Marielle Franco	Brazil	Racial Justice	Assassinated	Symbol of resistance in Brazil
Yulia Tsvetkova	Russia	LGBTQ+ Rights	House arrest, legal persecution	Visibility for LGBTQ+ issues in Russia
Dr. Denis Mukwege	Congo	Health Equity	Death threats	Treatment for thousands of sexual violence survivors
Malala Yousafzai	Pakistan	Girls' Education	Survived Taliban attack	Global advocate for education
Edward Snowden	USA	Digital Rights	Exile	Global debate on surveillance
Chelsea Manning	USA	Anti-War / Government Transparency	Imprisonment	Exposed civilian deaths, ethics in warfare

Berta Căjceres	Honduras	Indigenous Rights / Environmental	Assassinated	Symbol of land defense
Israeli Refuseniks	Israel	Anti-War	Jail time	Conscientious objection to occupation
Amy Bleuel (Project Semicolon)	USA	Mental Health Advocacy	Shared personal trauma	Global mental health awareness

The question that I want to raise in the situation of the initiatives in the modern world is whether there is something existing religious institutes can do to foster initiatives in the content of authenticity with a possibility of change – orientation and commitment to something beyond the self. As Pope Francis has said “Less attached to institutions? I’d say less attached to certain ways of thinking”?

Preconditions for this Possibility: A Different Approach to Spirituality and to the World – Towards Reading the Signs of the Times

There needs to be a re-think of the spirit that dominated and arguably still dominates mainstream religious life today - the dominant negative spirituality, the culture of control, the rigid uniformity and

inflexible legalism of most apostolic institutes²⁰. There is Unity, but the stress seems to be more on members doing the same thing at the same time (so-called, common acts). Relationships seem to be more on the functional level rather than on a personal level. All these have left us seriously unprepared to cope with what happened to our society and culture in the sixties and seventies; and much more so what is happening now in the 21st century.

“Much of the writing, discussion, and even policy-making within religious life is done in a style of language, and using a terminology, which does not properly connect with real experience. Let me illustrate: We don't do an ordinary job of work anymore. Instead, we 'initiate' a 'process' of 'sharing' in 'community' to 'discern' what 'ministry' we are 'called' to on our 'journey'. We look to our 'leadership team' to 'facilitate', 'animate' and 'energize' us in 'owning' our 'steward ship'. In this we are 'making a statement', while 'affirming' and 'articulating the pain' of one another”²¹; but what are we working towards?

So, my proposal is a movement/ process within existing religious institutes;

- (a) based on the theology of the thrust of Francis: Towards a synodal church: Communion, Participation Mission.

²⁰ Tony Flannery, *The Death of Religious Life* (Dublin: Columba Press 1997) Ch 2.

²¹ Tony Flannery, “Religious in Decline: 'Articulating the Pain' “, *The Furrow* 43/1 (1992) 33 cf. 32-35.

- (b) against that background search in creative fidelity
- (c) envisage an apostolate that conveys a spirituality of mission linked to communion and participation
- (d) move towards the future in hope

Theological Thrust of a Synodal Church

The emerging paradigm for theology emerging from the move towards a synodal church, could be outlined as follows – a theology for a pilgrim Church (as presented in Vatican II/ Sacrament) on the move (missionary = *Syn+hodos* as *Ex+hodos*) embracing all creation (human and the earth) until the Lord comes again.

The notion of pilgrimage is a liminoid phenomenon (Turner)²², which is productive of social encounters without hierarchical constraints. The image has proved immensely resonant. To set out on pilgrimage, is to be accompanied along the journey by the divine presence in the sanctuary.

The power of divine presence on the journey is perceived as proleptically related to the experience of presence in the shrine: the pilgrims not only journey to the shrine to meet Yahweh, but the

²² V.W. Turner, *From Ritual to Theatre: The Human Seriousness of Play* (New York: PAJ Publications 1982) 20-88 (untitled chapter “Liminal to Liminoid in play and flow ritual); cf. also V. Turner – E. Turner, *Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press 2011, original 1978).

divine power journeys out to pilgrims on their way to meet their deity at the shrine.²³

The divine power may at times be a pillar of fire (“Your word is a lamp to my steps” Ps 119:105) and at times a cloud of protection (“The Lord is my Shepherd” Ps 23; “I am with you always” Mt 28:20). We engage in this journey in dialogue with all disciplines – transdisciplinarity. Transdisciplinarity is a way of bearing witness to our presence in the world and our lived experience linking the amazing ways of knowing in our time – living our faith concretized in such a manner that the one Christ is at the same time perfect God and perfect man.

For us, followers of Christ, this derives from and is founded on the event of Jesus. The specific characteristic of Christianity in the understanding of that event is the Chalcedonian key. In Christ the mystery (infinite-finite, immanent-transcendent, unity-duality etc.) is concretized in such a manner that the one Christ, he who is, is at the same time perfect God and perfect man. This is without confusion between divinity and humanity, without separation of these two, not by juxtaposition, but in a manner that the divinity is the determining element in the ultimate analysis (not under any given particular aspect), always, however, safeguarding the integrity of humanity.

²³ M.S. Smith, *The Pilgrimage Pattern in Exodus* (London: Bloomsbury 1997) 57.

Journeying in Creative Fidelity to One's Proper Charism:

Here, two questions arise: First, how may one promote, foster and enable religious to look around the peripheries and identify what they could contribute in creative fidelity – that is understanding the charism of founder as “I-Thou” and the vision of founder as “I-Thou” compassion. “I assure you that there were many widows in Israel in Elijah’s time, when the sky was shut for three and a half years and there was a severe famine throughout the land. and yet Elijah was sent to none of them, but only to Zarephath, in the land of Sidon, to a woman who was a widow. And there were many lepers in Israel in the time of Elisha the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, but only Naaman the Syrian.” (Lk 4:25-27). This is focused compassion. This is the spirituality that each religious institute promotes among its membership and if possible, reaches out to a wider world of persons.

The fact is that when I commit myself to follow Christ, according to a given charism, (basically a more intense form of the baptismal commitment), I grant in principle that the commitment will not again be put into question. And it is clear that this active volition not to question something again, intervenes as an essential element in the determination of what in fact will be the case. It bids me to invent a certain *modus vivendi*, which is a rudimentary form of creative fidelity. The truest fidelity is creative, that is, a fidelity that creates the self in order to meet the demands of fidelity to the person of the founder, now living in the community of disciples and being challenged by the signs of the times.

Gabriel Marcel distinguishes two kinds of relationships: “I-Thou” and the “I-It, She or He” relationships. The latter kind of relationship is an inauthentic kind of relationship. It is characterized by egocentrism and pride. In this kind of relationship, I look at the “other” not as a subject to be loved and cherished but as an object to be exploited, as a freedom to be possessed and appropriated. In this relationship, I am not present to the other, I am closed off and indifferent to the presence he or she offers me; I keep the other at arm's length but still within my grasp, to be used or manipulated. Also, I value the other based on his or her functions, on what he or she can offer. Marcel warns that this relationship is dangerous because when I treat the other as a “He” or “She”, I become incapable of seeing myself as a “Thou”, since in depreciating the other, I depreciate myself; in dehumanizing the other person, I dehumanize myself. The first kind of relationship, the “I-Thou” relationship, is an authentic kind of relationship which occurs between two subjects. For Marcel, it is only when I see the other as a "Thou" that I see him or her as a person. In this relationship, I become present to the other in a mutual openness and self-giving. In this, the two people involved in this relationship are no longer strangers waiting to plunder each other's freedom. No, they are intimately bound to each other and they discover their freedom by being.

Secondly, As Pope Francis says in *Evangelii Gaudium* 49, Let us go forth, then, let us go forth to offer everyone the life of Jesus Christ.

Here I repeat for the entire Church what I have often said to the priests and laity of Buenos Aires: I prefer a Church which is bruised, hurting and dirty because it has been out on the streets, rather than a Church which is unhealthy from being confined and from clinging to its own security. I do not want a Church concerned with being at the centre and which then ends by being caught up in a web of obsessions and procedures. If something should rightly disturb us and trouble our consciences, it is the fact that so many of our brothers and sisters are living without the strength, light and consolation born of friendship with Jesus Christ, without a community of faith to support them, without meaning and a goal in life. More than by fear of going astray, my hope is that we will be moved by the fear of remaining shut up within structures which give us a false sense of security, within rules which make us harsh judges, within habits which make us feel safe, while at our door people are starving and Jesus does not tire of saying to us: “Give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37).

The second question is in the spirit of I-Thou relation to the founder, what did the founder provide/ what can I (institute today) provide? And that is to be identified in terms of the compassion of the founder. It is a focused compassion. In the case of Jesus: “You give them something to eat” (Mk 6:37) or “They were like sheep without a shepherd” (Mt 9:36) etc. Cf. Lk 4:25-27).

The Greek word for compassion - *splánchnon* [compassion], *splanchnízomai* [to have compassion]. In the Synoptics, the verb *splanchnízomai* occurs in three parables and it denotes human

attitudes (e.g. Mt 18:27; Lk 15:20 and Lk. 10:33). The verb has messianic significance, for it is only Jesus who shows compassion, as in Mk. 1:42; 6:34; 8:2; 9:22; Mt. 14:14; 20:34. In each case what we have is not so much the description of a human emotion as a messianic characterization. (Cf. also Lk. 7:13)²⁴. These two words and their meaning in NT indicates that the exercise of power or authority has to do with relation to God and community and involves a “gut-feeling” (compassion) in the one exercising power. This NT background lies behind the denunciation of clericalism by Pope Francis²⁵ and his desire for pastors who identify with their flock (having the smell of the sheep).

Kpanie Addy, “Creative Fidelity: Appreciated through the Prism of Three Lives”²⁶ suggests that the establishment of the Jesuit Refugee Service in 1980 in response to the Vietnamese Boat People was an act of creative fidelity. Its spirit is embodied in the prayer of Pedro

²⁴ G. Kittel & G. Friedrich (Eds.), *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament* (Tr. G.W. Bromiley; abridged in one volume Geoffrey W. Bromiley, Grand Rapids, Mich: William B. Eerdmann 1985) 964-965.

²⁵ See <People discarded (13 December 2016) | Francis (vatican.va)>: “Clericalism in the Church is a terrible evil with ancient roots and always victimizes “poor and humble people”; < Apostolic Journey to Chile: Meeting with the Bishops in the Sacristy of the Cathedral (Santiago, 16 January 2018) | Francis (vatican.va)>: Clericalism forgets that the visibility and the sacramentality of the Church belong to all the faithful people of God (cf. *Lumen Gentium*, 9-14), not only to the few chosen and enlightened”.

²⁶ <https://www.academia.edu/28746139/Creative_Fidelity_Appreciated_through_the_Prism_of_Three_Lives>

Aruppe: “Grant me, O Lord, to see everything now with new eyes, to discern and test the spirits that help me read the signs of the times, to relish the things that are yours, and to communicate them to others. Give me the clarity of understanding that you gave Ignatius. Amen”. Could each religious institute search for such acts of creative fidelity?

Envisage and enable an Apostolate that conveys a Spirituality of Mission linked to Communion and Participation

The process enabling such a movement is *listening – discernment – accompaniment*. The first step is listening. It needs to be whole and entire, a Church governed by the practice of mutual listening. This listening is rooted in Vatican II (LG 35) teaching that all the faithful were given a supernatural instinct, a *sensus fidei*, for discerning God’s Word, penetrating its meaning and applying that Word more fully in their lives. In discerning, we ask the Holy Spirit first of all for the gift of listening, so that we may hear the cry of his people; to listen to his people until we are in harmony with the will to which God calls us.

In this discernment process, there is no question of the majority voice prevailing. Majority consensus does not automatically mean submission to, and unity in the truth. Heeding every voice means obedient listening, a call to constant conversion and reformation (cf. LG 48), since sin is always with us in our pilgrim journey. That is the basic accompaniment that is needed. The entire process is established on the foundation: To adore God and to serve people

with a certain “indifference” to everything else. As we say in the liturgy “May these mysteries, O Lord, in which we have participated, profit us, we pray, for even now, as we walk amid passing things, you teach us by them to love the things of heaven and hold fast to what endures” (post-communion, 1st Sunday in Advent).

Thus, each religious can consider embodying into its training programmes and renewal programmes

- (i) learning and practicing a listening – discernment – accompaniment process
- (ii) In the basic doctrinal formation given to candidates, be aware of the distinction between notional assent and real assent. Strive to promote real assent. Real assent is when we accept and enter into a relationship with the realities that the propositions represent. As Pope Francis has said, “time is needed in order to arrive at decisions that involve the whole Church”. Real apprehension is supplied by (1) our bodily senses or our mental sensations or indirectly by means of a picture or even a narrative, (2) by a memory, and (3) by means of the inventive faculty. In real assent, the mind is directed towards the things represented by the impressions they have left on the imagination.
- (iii) Being aware at what point of development each religious is and enable progression. Basically, the outline is: Initial awakening → Commitment and struggle → Integration

and surrender → Living in God. The classical listing of the Purgative-Illuminative-Unitive ways is well known²⁷.

Another is the categorization of Kierkegaard, First is the Aesthetic Stage. The main motivation in this stage is pleasure. You could think of this stage as basically a form of psychological hedonism (i.e. if it feels good, it is good). The individual is focused on the present, and entirely focused on oneself. In the aesthetic sphere, faith signifies a man's immediate attachment to life, his animal conviction in the reality of the world and perhaps, functioning as its supreme principle²⁸. Next, comes the Ethical Stage. Whereas the aesthete attempts to live solely in the here and now, the ethical individual goes beyond the immediacy by a commitment to duty. When we commit to something, such as duty,

²⁷ Cf. e.g. (A). Stages of Prayer (St. Teresa of Avila's Interior Castle): Seven Mansions representing degrees of intimacy with God: Mansions 1–3: Purgative; Mansions 4–6: Illuminative; Mansion 7: Unitive (B). Ignatian Spirituality (Discernment-based as referred to earlier) Movements between consolation and desolation as a way to discern God's presence and direction. (C) The Dark Night (St. John of the Cross) Dark Night of the Senses (purgative); Dark Night of the Spirit (transition from illuminative to unitive); These are passive purifications where God strips the soul of attachments, even to spiritual consolations.

²⁸ The dialectic of aesthetic inwardness has arrived at what appears to be a spiritual *cul-de-sac*, with nowhere to go but into the ethical because of the inherent contradiction in the feelings the aesthetic evokes; cf. S.N. Dunning, "The Dialectic of Contradiction in Kierkegaard's Aesthetic Stage", *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* 49/3 (1981) 383- 404, esp. the chart 405.

we are bound to something beyond the present. In the Ethical Stage, a person has risen above his/her aesthetically focused mode of operation, and has begun to follow the rules and laws of his/her society. Inclinations give way to obligations. We also tend to understand *who we are* in terms of those commitments and absolute values²⁹. For Kierkegaard, the highest stage of life that humans can hope to come to is what he calls the Religious” Stage. The position of Kierkegaard in respect to the spheres of existence and the idealistic philosophy of religion provides the indispensable background for understanding three of his well-known descriptions of religious faith: (1) He refers to religious faith as the absurd or the paradoxical; (2) He calls it an immediacy after reflection; (3) He characterizes it as becoming contemporaneous with Christ. The first description marks off religious faith from Hegelian philosophies of religion (it is not thesis-antithesis-synthesis); the second one differentiates it from the two previous stages of existence; the third one brings out the specific character of Christian religious faith. By using these markers of Kierkegaard perhaps religious especially in their listening-discernment-accompaniment processes may be able

²⁹ Note that Congar says that a non-Christian can be saved “by virtue of an intention unconsciously, but really, ordained to God and His plan of salvation, under the form of a consecration to an absolute value as is able to be known and recognized by conscience”. Cf. Y. Congar, “Les religions non bibliques sont-elles des médiations de salut?”, in *Ecumenical Institute for Advanced Theological Studies, Year Book 1972-1973* (Jerusalem: Tantur 1973) 289, cf. 271-296.

to identify whether hedonistic value, legal values or religious values animate them and then, keep moving ahead.

Move Towards the Future in Hope

What is important to ensure is that there are signs of growth and forward movement. These signs may not be necessarily and specifically religious. Some examples could be a growing Sense of wonder and awe (especially in nature, art, life), Awareness of self and others, Empathy and compassion, Questioning and seeking meaning, Commitment to values and ethical behavior, Sense of connectedness (to others, nature, God, or the transcendent), Peacefulness and ability to reflect, Desire for justice and service to others etc. The attitudes and spirit from which this spirit grows is different from those referred to earlier in terms of pre-Vatican II formation, and still continues with an emphasis on “blind obedience”, loyalty to the institution at all costs etc.

An entire range of literature on this thrust could be listed for evaluating human and religious growth as opposed to stagnation at

some stage of development³⁰. Jean Vanier³¹ points out seven thrusts that could lead to reading the signs of the times.

³⁰ Other examples for the purpose of identifying growth/ stagnation in terms of human and religious development could be

- James W. Fowler – Stages of Faith (1981) based on psychological models of Piaget, Kohlberg, and Erikson with the notable concept of Faith as a universal human concern, not restricted to religious belief

- John Westerhoff – Will Our Children Have Faith? (1976, revised 2000) with a focus on Faith as a social and communal process and highlighting the Role of family, church, and culture in shaping faith

- Fritz Oser & Paul Gmünder – Religious Judgment and Development (1991) with a focus on the Five stages of religious judgment development, for Integrating faith with moral reasoning and cognitive development

- Sharon Parks – The Critical Years: Young Adults and the Search for Meaning, Faith, and Commitment (1986) Explores the transitional phase between adolescence and mature adulthood

- Elizabeth Liebert – The Way of Discernment (2008). while not a formal model of faith development, it addresses spiritual growth and discernment in adult faith journeys.

- Robert Kegan – The Evolving Self (1982), In Over Our Heads (1994) Not a theologian, but his constructive-developmental theory (meaning-making over time) parallels Fowler's work and is often used in spiritual direction and adult faith formation

- Heidi A. Campbell and Stephen Garner – Networked Theology (2016) Focuses on how digital culture is reshaping faith formation, particularly among younger generations

³¹ Jean Vanier, *Signs of the Times: Seven Paths of Hope for a troubled world* (Tr Ann Shearer, London: Darton, Longman, Todd 2013).

1. From humiliation to humility
2. From conformity to conscience
3. From exclusion to encounter
4. From power to authority
5. From isolation to community
6. From strength to vulnerability
7. From secret to mystery.

In the light of these thrusts, there are initiatives that will emerge at the periphery. Some of these initiatives will die with the person who initiated them. Others may have a longer duration over several

decades³². Others may even emerge into institutions with their own life³³

But the important thing is that all these are moments in a journey and they contribute to what Pope Francis called “Conversion by attraction”. As he himself states: "Time is greater than space means that we must act with urgency, but also with patience and perseverance, recognizing that real change takes time." This concept is rooted in the idea that progress and change occur over time, and

³² Vito Perniola (1913-2016), an Italian, came to Sri Lanka as a Jesuit scholastic. He decided to read for his B.A. Honours London in Pali and Buddhism in the main, and Sanskrit and Hinduism as the subsidiary subjects! He was the first Catholic Priest to undertake such a study. He was an exemplary Pali Scholar, known for his Pali Grammar (which is still in use even by Buddhist monks to learn the language for their ministry). In compiling this work, he relied on previous German work. He produced his 19 volumes on the Roman Catholic Church of Sri Lanka. He spent 80 years of his life in this country. He has no successor in his thrust, but his work will live on at least for a long time after him.

Reference can be made to many persons including the Catholic Bishops Conference in India, who were active in the introduction of legislation for safeguarding domestic workers in India (Cf. Nicola Cunningham Armacost, Nicola Cunningham Armacost, “Domestic Workers In India : A Case For Legislative Action”, *Journal of the Indian Law Institute* 36/1 (1994) 53-63. One can also mention: Jean Vanier (1928–2019) – Founder of L'Arche communities, who created a movement for living with and supporting persons with disabilities; Fr. Joseph Kentenich (1885–1968) – Founder of the Schoenstatt Movement

³³ Cf. note 3 above.

that creating lasting change requires a long-term commitment to the process.

Pope Francis said during his recent visit to Mongolia.³⁴ The social significance of our religious traditions can be gauged by the extent to which we are capable of living in harmony with other pilgrims on this earth and can foster that harmony in the places where we live. Every human individual, and even more every religion, must be measured by the standard of altruism. Not altruism in the abstract, but in the concrete: an altruism that translates into concern for others and generous cooperation with them.

A kind of knowledge *per modum instinctus conaturalitatis* (by way of connatural instinct) something like “sympathetic vibration,” needs to be pursued. This is implied in what Pope Francis said:

Another myth needing to be dispelled is that the Catholic Church, distinguished throughout the world for its great commitment to works of social promotion, does all this to proselytize, as if caring for others were a way of enticing people to ‘join up.’ No! The

³⁴ <Apostolic Journey to Mongolia: Ecumenical and Interreligious Meeting in the “Hun Theatre” (Ulaanbaatar, 3 September 2023) | Francis (vatican.va)> [\[accessed 01.09.2023\]](#)

Church does not go forward by proselytism, *it goes forward by attraction.*”³⁵ (emphasis added).

Christian witness “that goes forward by attraction” is aesthetic experience³⁶ understood as (i) sensing, or making us aware of, some hidden principles of reality and therefore, (ii) orienting us toward higher spiritual, intellectual, or moral goals - by a certain type of pleasurable (beauty) or unusual (awe, sublimity, transcendence) reaction.³⁷ Being (God) has a certain luminosity and intrinsic attractiveness or splendour, and it is linked in particular with the theme of *eros*, as the active principle of longing or attraction. That is a process in which the person is involved by authentic witness to Transcendence.

³⁵ <*Apostolic Journey to Mongolia: Meeting with Charity Workers and Inauguration of the House of Mercy* (Ulaanbaatar, 4 September 2023) | Francis (vatican.va)> [[accessed 02.09.2023](#)].

³⁶ Charles de Foucault (1858-1916) after ordination as priest (1901) lived at first in Beni Abbès and later at Tamanrasset among the Tuaregs of the Hoggar. He wanted to be among those who were, the furthest removed, the most abandoned as a universal brother. Killed by a band of marauders in 1916 says: “I would like to be sufficiently good that people would say, ‘If such is the servant, what must the Master be like?’”

³⁷ Cf. O. Bychkov, *Aesthetic Revelation: Reading Ancient and Medieval Texts after Hans Urs Von Balthasar* (Washington DC: Catholic University of America Press 2010) 324-325.

\Conclusion

Cardinal Bergoglio (prior to his election as Pope) had said during the general consistory session prior to the conclave³⁸.

When the Church does not come out of herself to evangelize, she becomes self-referential and then gets sick. (cf. The deformed woman of the Gospel [Luke 13:10-17]). The evils that, over time, happen in ecclesial institutions have their root in self-referentiality and a kind of theological narcissism. In Revelation, Jesus says that he is at the door and knocks [Rev. 3:20].

During the spiritual addresses prior to the meetings of the synod on synodality, Timothy Radcliffe had said: Our very love of the Church, in utterly different ways, can us lock inside a narrow world, gazing at our ecclesiastical navels, watching others, ready to spot their deviations and denounce them. Pope Francis, before his election, said that the Lord would come knocking on the door and demanding to be let out of the sacristy! Of course, there are changes for which some of us long, but let that not lock us inside our little churchy world. We shall be boring! God is revealed on mountain tops with unbounded horizons and outside the camp.

Our liberation from these rooms needs not just courage, but God's healing forgiveness. The Risen Lord says, 'Whose sins you forgive, they are forgiven; whose sins you retain, they are retained.'

³⁸ < *The 4-Minute Speech That Got Pope Francis Elected?* | Catholic Answers Magazine >

Sin locks us inside prisons of narcissism and party politics, like the eldest son who sulks and will not join in the party to welcome home his prodigal brother. Herbert McCabe again: ‘Our very nature calls us to something new and frightening... We are the kind of being that finds its fulfilment, its happiness and flourishing only in giving itself up, and getting beyond itself. We need to lose our selves in love; that is what we fear. We are summoned to venture into what is unknown, to abandon what is familiar and safe, and set out on a journey or quest. .And yet we do not like to take risks. We settle for the person that we have achieved or constructed because we are afraid of being made in the image of God. This failure to respond to the summons into life, this failure of faith, is called sin.’

This is exactly what this article envisages – Jesus stands within the structural forms of religious life, knocking to let the doors of the sacristy open to let him preach his message again in today’s world.

Creation and grace are gifts; Incarnation is the supreme gift; the Fall, evil and violence are the refusal of gift; atonement is the renewed and hyperbolic gift that is for-giveness; the supreme name of the Holy Spirit is *donum* (according to Augustine); the Church is the community that is given to humanity and is constituted through the harmonious blending of diverse gifts. Religious life is a gift within the church³⁹. It is a gift for others and continues the “holy exchange” (*sacrum commercium*) initiated by the Incarnation - “By

³⁹ Cf. Vatican II, particularly in PC 1, LG 43-47.

the mystery of this water and wine may we come to share in the divinity of Christ who humbled himself to share in our humanity” are words that not only characterize the theological premise of God inviting us to understand this union, but becoming the action of the Blood shed on Calvary through the sign of blending with a drop of water. What is the drop of water that religious institutes of today can contribute to the continuing exchange between God (transcendence) and humanity? Looking to the peripheries and inspiring possibilities of viewing authentic self-referentiality in the light of what is beyond – for this, the present article tries to set a background.

Studies & Perspectives

**Racial Supremacy and Discrimination in the Light of
Romans (10:12)**

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Abstract

This study explores the theological and socio-historical implications of Romans 10:12 as a critique of racial supremacy ideologies. Through an exegetical analysis of the biblical text, the research investigates the Paul's message of equality between Jews and Gentiles, emphasizing its radical challenge to the prevailing ethnic hierarchies of the 1st-century Roman Empire. The paper situates Paul's teachings within their historical context, and traces the

enduring impact of such interpretations in relation to colonialism, slavery, and racial discrimination. The study employs a combination of historical-critical methods of exegesis as well as the rhetorical and analytical methods, analyzing ancient sources and modern theological perspectives to demonstrate how Paul's message calls for the dismantling of racial hierarchies in both ancient and contemporary contexts. Moreover, this paper argues that Romans 10:12 provides a biblical framework for challenging modern racial supremacy ideologies and promoting a more inclusive Christian theology that transcends ethnic and racial divisions.

Keywords: Racial Supremacy, Romans, Colonialism, Theology

Introduction

Racial supremacy ideologies continue to present one of the most challenging obstacles to human dignity and social justice in contemporary society. Despite significant progress in civil rights legislation and social attitudes, racial hierarchies remain deeply embedded in social, political, and religious institutions (Bonilla-Silva, 2010; Alexander, 2012). These hierarchies manifest through both overt expressions of white supremacy and more subtle forms of structural racism that perpetuate systemic inequalities (Wodak, 2015). Within Christian communities, these ideologies have historically found both support and opposition, making theological analysis of racial supremacy particularly significant for understanding and addressing its contemporary manifestations (Cone, 2011; Jennings, 2010). The theoretical framework for this

study integrates critical race theory (CRT) with biblical hermeneutics and postcolonial theology. CRT provides essential tools for analyzing how racial hierarchies are maintained through legal and social structures (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017), while postcolonial theology offers insights into how religious texts can be reinterpreted to challenge colonial and racist ideologies (Tinker, 1993). This interdisciplinary approach allows for a nuanced examination of how biblical texts can inform contemporary discussions of racial justice.

The Apostle Paul's declaration in Romans 10:12 that "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all" presents a powerful theological framework for critiquing racial supremacy ideologies. This statement, radical in its first-century context, continues to challenge contemporary assumptions about racial hierarchy and divine favouritism (Wright, 2015; Dunn, 2009). While scholars have extensively analyzed this passage's implications for Jewish-Gentile relations in early Christianity (Sanders, 1977; Jewett, 2007; Kanu 2020), less attention has been paid to its potential application as a theological critique of modern racial supremacy ideologies. The historical misuse of Christian scripture to justify racial hierarchies, particularly during periods of colonialism and slavery, adds urgency to the task of developing robust theological responses to racial supremacy (Hawkins, 1997; Mills, 1997). Religious institutions played a significant role in both supporting and opposing racial hierarchies, creating a complex legacy that continues to influence contemporary Christian responses

to racism (Raboteau, 2004). As Emerson and Smith (2000) note, Christian communities continue to struggle with racial divisions, often reflecting rather than challenging broader societal patterns of segregation and inequality.

This present study employs a multi-method approach combining: historical-critical exegesis to understand the original context and meaning of Romans 10:12; rhetorical analysis to examine Paul's argumentative strategies; social-scientific criticism to explore the text's implications for community formation; and contemporary hermeneutical approaches informed by liberation theology and critical race theory. The study tries to situate Paul's universal vision within both its historical context and contemporary applications in order to contribute to ongoing discussions about Christianity's role in addressing racial inequality. The investigation builds upon recent scholarship in critical race theory and postcolonial theology, while focusing specifically on the theological implications of Paul's assertion of equality in Christ. Drawing from both ancient sources and modern theological perspectives, this paper argues that Romans 10:12 provides a foundational biblical framework for challenging modern racial supremacy ideologies and promoting a more inclusive Christian theology. Through careful exegetical analysis and contemporary application, this study demonstrates how Paul's radical message of equality continues to offer relevant insights for dismantling racial hierarchies in both religious and secular contexts.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical framework for this study integrates Critical Race Theory (CRT), Postcolonial Theology, and Biblical Hermeneutics to critically evaluate racial supremacy and discrimination in the context of Romans 10:12. This interdisciplinary approach facilitates a comprehensive analysis of Paul's declaration that "there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all" within both ancient and modern settings (Wright, 2015; Dunn, 2009). This proposed framework seeks to explore Romans 10:12 as a theological foundation for anti-racist and inclusive Christian theology by examining how historical interpretations of this biblical text have been both appropriated to justify and resisted against racial discrimination.

Critical Race Theory (CRT)

Critical Race Theory (CRT) includes analytical tools to examine how racial hierarchies are upheld within legal and social systems (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). By addressing the perpetuation of racial supremacy through systemic inequalities, CRT sheds light on how ideological structures can sustain racial divisions in secular and religious contexts (Alexander, 2012; Bonilla-Silva, 2010). In Christianity, racialized interpretations of scripture have historically contributed to systemic inequalities, as noted by Cone (2011), whose work in Black Liberation Theology critically examines how the faith tradition has been weaponized to sustain social and racial hierarchies. Applying CRT, this study explores how Pauline

theology in Romans 10:12 can serve as a scriptural critique of racial superiority by negating racial distinctions within the Christian identity framework.

Postcolonial Theology

Postcolonial theology critiques the ways in which religious doctrines were historically used to justify colonialism and racial domination (Tinker, 1993). This study employs postcolonial perspectives to analyze how Romans 10:12 challenges not only ancient Jewish-Gentile hierarchies but also the colonial ideologies that have used scriptural texts to support racial supremacy and discrimination (Kidd, 2006). By reinterpreting scripture through a postcolonial lens, this framework argues that Romans 10:12 advocates for an inclusive faith community that transcends cultural and ethnic boundaries, aligning with contemporary calls to decolonize theology and dismantle hierarchical structures within Christian institutions (Jennings, 2010).

Biblical Hermeneutics

Biblical hermeneutics, particularly historical-critical and rhetorical analyses, are utilized to contextualize Romans 10:12 within the socio-political environment of the Roman Empire. Here, Paul's statement is seen as radical within a Greco-Roman worldview that classified individuals based on ethnicity and status (Esler, 2003). Through textual analysis, this framework examines the linguistic and theological nuances in Paul's assertion of equality in Christ,

which Paul positions as a direct challenge to the ethnic exclusivity prevalent in both Jewish and Greco-Roman society (Dunn, 1988). This hermeneutic approach provides a foundation for understanding how Romans 10:12 articulates a universalistic theology that counters racial exclusivity by emphasizing divine impartiality.

Indeed, by integrating CRT, postcolonial theology, and biblical hermeneutics, this theoretical framework contends that Romans 10:12 has transformative implications for both ancient and contemporary contexts. Paul's message of ethnic non-distinction offers a theological critique of racial supremacy ideologies, promoting a faith community rooted in the universality of divine grace. This study thus aims to demonstrate how Romans 10:12 can contribute to ongoing dialogues on racial justice and inclusivity within Christian theology, challenging the legacies of racial discrimination and promoting an egalitarian ecclesial vision.

Aim and Objectives

The primary aim of this paper is to critically evaluate the ideologies of racial supremacy and discrimination through the theological lens of Rom 10:12, exploring how the Apostle Paul's assertion of ethnic equality provides a foundational framework for addressing racial divisions in both historical and contemporary Christian contexts (Wright, 2015; Dunn, 2009). This study seeks to demonstrate that Romans 10:12 offers not only theological insights but also practical applications for challenging racial hierarchies and promoting

inclusivity within Christian doctrine and practice. Meanwhile, the objectives are:

- i. To examine the socio-historical context of Rom 10:12 and its impact on Jewish-Gentile relations, focusing on how Paul's message of "no distinction between Jew and Greek" challenged existing ethnic hierarchies in the first-century Roman Empire.
- ii. To explore the interpretation of Romans 10:12 in Christian theology as a critique of racial supremacy, focusing on how Paul's message of equality has been applied in both its original context and modern applications, particularly in challenging ideologies that perpetuate racial discrimination.
- iii. This study examines the historical misuse of Christian scripture to justify racial discrimination and supremacy, highlighting the theological significance of Romans 10:12 as a counter-narrative against ideologies such as colonialism and slavery.
- iv. The study aims to reinterpret Romans 10:12 using Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Postcolonial Theology, aiming to inform Christian responses to racial inequality and encourage inclusive practices rooted in theological inclusivity, thereby promoting a more inclusive society.
- v. To propose a framework for addressing racial supremacy within Christian communities today based on the teachings of Romans 10:12. This is to offer practical recommendations for

Christian communities seeking to address and dismantle racial hierarchies, emphasizing how Paul's theology of equality calls for active efforts towards reconciliation and justice.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to critically examine the theological implications of Romans 10:12 in confronting and dismantling ideologies of racial supremacy and discrimination within both historical and modern Christian contexts. By situating Paul's declaration of ethnic equality in its first-century socio-political setting and analyzing its relevance today, the study aims to demonstrate that Romans 10:12 serves as a foundational text advocating for inclusivity and racial justice in Christian theology. Furthermore, the study seeks to offer a re-interpretation of the verse through the lenses of Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Postcolonial Theology to develop actionable insights for addressing racial divisions within Christian communities, nurturing unity, and promoting an anti-racist faith that aligns with Paul's vision of spiritual and social equality (Wright, 2015; Jennings, 2010). Thus, by examining both the historical misuse of scripture to justify racial hierarchies and the transformative potential of Romans 10:12, this study aims to offer a theological framework that supports active reconciliation, justice, and inclusivity within contemporary Christian practice (Cone, 2011; Dunn, 2009).

Methodology

This study uses a qualitative, interdisciplinary approach to examine Romans 10:12 as a theological framework for critiquing racial supremacy. The methodology combines historical-critical exegesis, rhetorical analysis, social-scientific criticism, and contemporary hermeneutical approaches informed by Critical Race Theory (CRT) and Postcolonial Theology. This multi-method approach provides an in-depth understanding of the original context of Romans 10:12 and its implications for contemporary issues of racial discrimination within Christian communities. Historical-critical exegesis explores the socio-political and cultural background of the first-century Roman Empire, examining how Paul's message of "no distinction between Jew and Greek" would have challenged established ethnic hierarchies. Thematic analysis is used to identify and trace key concepts related to racial and ethnic equality, connecting Pauline theology with broader biblical themes of justice and inclusion.

Social-scientific criticism examines the societal and cultural forces influencing racial dynamics in both ancient and modern contexts. Insights from social identity theory and CRT are incorporated to understand how concepts of racial identity and hierarchy persist within institutional settings, addressing the application of Romans 10:12 in contemporary Christian communities. Contemporary hermeneutics through CRT and Postcolonial Theology reinterpret Romans 10:12 as a call for active resistance against racial discrimination. CRT provides tools for critiquing systemic racial structures, while Postcolonial Theology addresses the historical

misuse of scripture to justify oppression and colonialism. This qualitative methodology connects ancient theological insights with current sociocultural challenges, providing a grounded and theologically sound basis for confronting racial supremacy within Christianity.

Understanding the Dynamics of Racial Supremacy

Meaning, Roots, and Psychological Mechanisms of Racial Supremacy

Racial supremacy refers to the ideology that one race is inherently superior to others and should therefore dominate or have privileged status over other races. This concept has had significant social, political, and economic ramifications throughout history. The dynamics of racial supremacy are many-sided, involving historical roots, socio-political structures, and psychological mechanisms that perpetuate these beliefs. Understanding these dynamics requires analyzing historical narratives, the role of institutions, and contemporary manifestations of racial supremacy. The roots of racial supremacy are deeply embedded in colonialism and the transatlantic slave trade, where European powers justified their domination and exploitation of non-European populations through claims of racial superiority (Quijano, 2000; Kanu 2018). European colonizers utilized pseudo-scientific theories of race to classify people into hierarchies, with Caucasians positioned at the top. These classifications served as a means to rationalize the subjugation of African, Indigenous, and Asian populations, thus creating a racial

order that persisted even after the formal end of colonialism (Mills, 1997). During the 19th and early 20th centuries, theories such as Social Darwinism further legitimized the ideology of racial supremacy by misapplying Charles Darwin's theory of natural selection to human societies (Hawkins, 1997). These theories asserted that racial differences were not only biological but also determined intelligence, morality, and civilization levels. As a result, colonial powers continued to exploit these narratives to justify segregation, apartheid, and systemic racism (Bonilla-Silva, 2010).

Racial supremacy is sustained through various socio-political structures, including legal systems, economic policies, and educational institutions. Critical Race Theory (CRT) has been instrumental in exposing how legal systems perpetuate racial hierarchies by favouring the interests of dominant racial groups (Delgado & Stefancic, 2017). For example, during the Jim Crow era in the United States, laws enforced racial segregation, creating barriers to economic and social mobility for African Americans. Even after the Civil Rights Movement, systemic racism persists through practices such as redlining, mass incarceration, and voter suppression, which disproportionately affect racial minorities (Alexander, 2012; Kanu 2013). Similarly, economic policies have historically favoured white populations, contributing to the racial wealth gap. For instance, the New Deal programs of the 1930s, while transformative for many white Americans, systematically excluded African Americans from certain benefits like Social Security and

access to federally subsidized housing (Katznelson, 2005). These policies reinforced economic disparities and created enduring socio-economic inequalities between racial groups.

The psychological aspects of racial supremacy are significant. Social Identity Theory suggests that individuals derive part of their identity from their membership in social groups, including racial groups (Tajfel & Turner, 1986). This need for a positive social identity can lead to in-group favouritism and out-group derogation, particularly in societies where racial hierarchies are entrenched (Kanu, Paul and Omenukwa, 2024). The belief in the superiority of one's racial group can nurture prejudice and discrimination against those perceived as racially inferior (Usman and Paul, 2024). Moreover, studies on implicit bias have revealed that stereotypes and prejudices often operate unconsciously, even among those who claim to reject racist ideologies (Greenwald & Krieger, 2006). These implicit biases contribute to the persistence of racial supremacy in everyday interactions, as they can influence decisions in hiring, law enforcement, and education, leading to disparate outcomes for racial minorities.

Contemporary Manifestations of Racial Supremacy

In contemporary society, racial supremacy manifests in both overt and covert forms. While explicit white supremacist groups like the Ku Klux Klan and neo-Nazi movements have garnered attention, more subtle forms of racial supremacy are pervasive in mainstream discourse and policies. Bonilla-Silva (2010) introduces the concept of "colorblind racism," where individuals claim to ignore race while

simultaneously upholding systemic inequalities through policies that fail to address the structural disadvantages faced by racial minorities. This ideology allows racial supremacy to adapt to changing social norms while maintaining its core belief in the inherent superiority of certain racial groups, sometimes symbolically, given the power of symbolic representations (Kanu & Pilani, 2024a). The rise of nationalism and anti-immigrant rhetoric in many Western nations has also been linked to underlying ideologies of racial supremacy. Scholars have observed that such movements often frame immigration as a threat to the cultural and racial purity of the nation-state, echoing historical themes of racial superiority and exclusion (Wodak, 2015). These narratives reinforce racial hierarchies by positioning immigrants and non-white populations as outsiders who undermine national identity and social cohesion.

In sum, the dynamics of racial supremacy are complex, involving historical justifications, institutional reinforcement, and psychological mechanisms. From its roots in colonialism and slavery to its modern expressions in systemic racism and nationalist rhetoric, racial supremacy continues to shape societies and influence global power structures. Understanding these dynamics is crucial for developing strategies to combat racial inequality and foster more inclusive societies. By addressing both the structural and psychological aspects of racial supremacy, scholars and activists can work towards dismantling these ideologies and promoting equity across racial lines.

Racial supremacy in Christian history

The relationship between Christianity and racial supremacy is complex and often contentious. Historically, Christian teachings have been interpreted in ways that both challenge and reinforce ideas of racial hierarchy. While the core message of Christianity promotes love and equality among all people (Galatians 3:28), certain interpretations and institutions within Christianity have been complicit in supporting racial supremacy. This discussion examines the dynamics of racial supremacy in Christian history, focusing on the role of theological interpretations, the colonial and missionary activities of European Christians, and the ways in which Christianity has both reinforced and challenged racial hierarchies. One of the critical ways that Christianity has intersected with racial supremacy is through theological interpretations that justify the subordination of particular racial groups. The “Curse of Ham” narrative, derived from Genesis 9:20-27, is one of the most significant biblical interpretations used to legitimize racial hierarchy. In this story, Noah curses Ham’s son, Canaan, which later Christian interpreters linked to Africans, suggesting that black people were divinely ordained to serve others (Haynes, 2002). This interpretation became especially prominent during the transatlantic slave trade, as European and American Christians used it to justify the enslavement of Africans, and perhaps neo-colonialism as the case may be (Kanu & Pilani, 2024b).

Such theological rationalizations were not limited to the biblical text but extended to a broader Christian cosmology that saw Europeans

as spiritually and intellectually superior. Kidd (2006) notes that during the colonial era, Christian missionaries often viewed Indigenous peoples as “heathens” whose spiritual and cultural practices were inferior to European Christian norms. This ideology was instrumental in justifying the colonial project, as it framed the conversion and “civilizing” of non-European peoples as part of a divine mandate. The role of Christianity in colonialism is a critical aspect of how racial supremacy was propagated through Christian history. The European colonial powers, particularly Spain, Portugal, and later Britain, used Christianity as a tool to legitimize their expansion into Africa, the Americas, and Asia. Christian missions were often established alongside colonial administrations, working hand-in-hand to convert Indigenous populations while simultaneously promoting European cultural norms (Comaroff & Comaroff, 1991).

For instance, the Doctrine of Discovery, sanctioned by papal bulls such as *Inter Caetera* in 1493, provided theological support for European conquest by granting Christian rulers the right to claim territories inhabited by non-Christians (Miller et al., 2010). This doctrine reinforced racial hierarchies by framing non-European lands as rightfully belonging to Christian (and thus, European) sovereigns. Such theological constructs positioned Indigenous peoples as racially and spiritually inferior, making their subjugation appear as a natural extension of Christian expansion. Moreover, in the United States, Christian doctrine was used to justify the displacement and assimilation of Native American populations.

Mission schools, often run by Christian denominations, sought to “civilize” Native children by eradicating their languages and cultures, promoting the idea that their indigenous identities were inferior to Christian European norms (Adams, 1995). This process of cultural erasure was fundamentally tied to ideas of racial supremacy, as it sought to replace Indigenous identities with those deemed more aligned with Christian values.

The transatlantic slave trade is another significant context in which Christianity intersected with racial supremacy. European and American Christians used biblical justifications to defend the institution of slavery, particularly in the American South. Pro-slavery theologians argued that the Bible condoned slavery, citing passages like Ephesians 6:5 (“Slaves, obey your earthly masters”) to support their stance (Raboteau, 2004). The belief that Africans were inherently suited for servitude was not only a racial belief but one that was often framed in terms of Christian doctrine, suggesting that enslaved Africans could find spiritual salvation through their subordination. However, Christianity also provided a framework for resistance among enslaved Africans. The adaptation of Christianity by enslaved people in the Americas often focused on themes of liberation and divine justice, drawing from the Exodus narrative where God frees the Israelites from bondage (Raboteau, 2004). This reinterpretation of Christian scripture became a cornerstone of African American spiritual resistance, challenging the theological basis of racial supremacy and later influencing movements such as abolitionism and the Civil Rights Movement.

Contemporary Legacies and Challenges to Racial Supremacy within Christianity

The legacy of racial supremacy within Christianity continues to shape the relationship between race and religion today, a phenomenon typical among religions globally (Richard, Paul & Azuwike, 2024). Contemporary scholars and theologians, particularly within liberation theology, have sought to address the historical complicity of Christian institutions in racial oppression. James Cone, a key figure in Black Liberation Theology, argues that Christianity in America has historically served to maintain white supremacy by aligning with the social and political power structures that marginalized Black communities (Cone, 2011). Cone emphasizes the need for a reinterpretation of Christian theology that centers on the experience of the oppressed, challenging the historical narrative that Christianity inherently supports racial hierarchy. Additionally, postcolonial theologians have critiqued the way Christian missions contributed to the cultural and spiritual domination of Indigenous peoples. Scholars like Tinker (1993) argue for a decolonization of Christian theology that acknowledges and rectifies the historical harm done to Indigenous communities. Such work emphasizes the importance of reclaiming Indigenous spiritualities and traditions while also seeking ways to reconcile Christian faith with the affirmation of cultural diversity. Indeed, the relationship between Christianity and racial supremacy is marked by a tension between doctrines that have been used to justify racial inequality and those that have served as a basis for resistance against

it. From the use of biblical interpretations to support slavery and colonialism to contemporary efforts to decolonize theology, Christianity has played a significant role in shaping racial ideologies. Understanding this history is crucial for addressing the ongoing challenges of racism within Christian institutions and encouraging a more inclusive and equitable interpretation of Christian teachings.

Exegesis of Romans 10:12

The Historical Context and Socio-political Climate of the 1st Century Roman Empire

Born Saul in Tarsus, a prominent city in Cilicia, Paul was raised in a diaspora Jewish family, receiving a thorough education in Jewish law and tradition (Philippians 3:5-6). Simultaneously, as evidenced by his Roman citizenship (Acts 22:25-29), Paul was integrated into the broader Greco-Roman world (Dunn, 2009). Paul's background as a Pharisee (Acts 23:6) initially placed him in opposition to the nascent Christian movement. However, his dramatic conversion experience (Acts 9:1-19) led to a radical reorientation of his theological perspective. This transformation is crucial for understanding his approach to ethnicity and universalism in his epistles, particularly in Romans (Sanders, 1977). Paul's unique position as a bridge between Jewish and Gentile cultures provided him with a nuanced understanding of the tensions and dynamics between these groups. His missionary journeys throughout the

Mediterranean world further exposed him to diverse cultural contexts, informing his universalist theology (Horrell, 2000).

Meanwhile, the relationship between Jews and Gentiles in the 1st century Roman Empire was characterized by complex interactions and tensions. Jewish communities, while granted certain privileges by Roman authorities, often faced marginalization and periodic persecution (Goodman, 2007). In Rome itself, the Jewish population had experienced significant upheaval. The expulsion of Jews from Rome under Claudius in 49 CE (Suetonius, Claud. 25.4) had disrupted the Jewish-Christian community, likely influencing the composition of the Roman church to which Paul was writing (Lampe, 2003). The return of Jewish Christians to Rome following Claudius's death in 54 CE created a context of potential conflict between Jewish and Gentile believers, a situation Paul addresses in Romans (Jewett, 2007). The broader Greco-Roman world often viewed Jewish religious practices with a mixture of fascination and disdain. Jewish monotheism and refusal to participate in imperial cult practices sometimes led to accusations of atheism and misanthropy (Schäfer, 1997). These tensions form an essential backdrop to Paul's arguments for unity in Christ.

Roman Views on Ethnicity and Social Hierarchy

The Roman Empire of the 1st century AD was characterized by a complex system of social stratification based on various factors, including ethnicity, citizenship status, and socioeconomic class. While the empire was multiethnic, it was not egalitarian in its treatment of different ethnic groups (Woolf, 1998). Roman

citizenship, which Paul possessed, conferred significant legal and social privileges. However, even among citizens, there existed a hierarchy based on social class and ethnic origin. The Roman elite often viewed themselves as culturally superior to conquered peoples, including Greeks and Jews (Isaac, 2004). The concept of “*Romanitas*” or “Roman-ness” was not strictly tied to ethnicity but rather to the adoption of Roman cultural norms and values. This allowed for a degree of social mobility and integration for some non-Romans, particularly elites from conquered territories (Wallace-Hadrill, 2008).

However, this system also reinforced existing power structures and ethnic hierarchies. The Roman worldview often categorized people into “civilized” (primarily Romans and Greeks) and “barbarians” (everyone else), with Jews occupying an ambiguous position in this schema (Johnson, 2012). In this context, Paul’s statement in Romans 10:12 about there being “no distinction between Jew and Greek” represents a radical challenge to prevailing social norms. It suggests a new community transcending traditional ethnic and social boundaries, united by faith in Christ rather than by cultural or ethnic identity (Esler, 2003; Onukwuba et al.). This historical backdrop provides crucial context for understanding the revolutionary nature of Paul’s universalist claims in Romans. His vision of a community where ethnic distinctions are superseded by unity in Christ directly confronts the ethnic and social hierarchies deeply ingrained in 1st century Roman society.

Literary Context

The Letter to the Romans is widely recognized as Paul's *magnum opus*, presenting a comprehensive exposition of his theology. Scholars generally agree on the letter's overall structure, though nuances in interpretation exist (Moo, 1996). The epistle can be broadly divided into four main sections:

- a. Introduction (1:1-17)
- b. Doctrinal Exposition (1:18-11:36)
- c. Ethical Exhortation (12:1-15:13)
- d. Conclusion and Personal Remarks (15:14-16:27)

The present verse of interest, Rom 10:12, falls within the doctrinal exposition, specifically in the section addressing the relationship between Israel and the gospel (chapters 9-11). This placement is crucial for understanding its significance in Paul's overall argument (Dunn, 1988). The structure of Romans reflects a careful rhetorical strategy, with Paul building his case for the gospel's universality and its implications for Jewish-Gentile relations in the church. The placement of our focus verse within this structure underscores its importance in Paul's theological framework (Jewett, 2007). Romans 9-11 forms a distinct unit within the letter, addressing the complex issue of Israel's place in God's salvific plan given the gospel's apparent failure among many Jews. This section is crucial for understanding Paul's view on ethnicity and divine election (Wright, 2015). Chapter 9 begins with Paul's expression of anguish over Israel's unbelief, followed by a discussion of God's sovereign choice. Chapter 10, where v. 12 is located, focuses on Israel's

present situation and the availability of salvation to all who believe. Chapter 11 concludes with a discussion of Israel's future and God's ultimate plan for both Jews and Gentiles. Rom 10:12 is situated within Paul's argument about the universality of salvation. It anticipates his assertion that "Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved" (10:13) and his questions about the necessity of preaching for belief (10:14-15). This immediate context emphasizes the verse's role in Paul's universalist soteriology (Cranfield, 1979).

Textual Analysis

The transliterated Greek text of Romans 10:12, according to the critical editions (NA28/UBS5), reads as follows:

ou gar estin diastolē Ioudaiou te kai Hellēnos, ho gar autos kyrios pantōn, ploutōn eis pantas tous epikaloumenous auton

English Translation

For there is no distinction between Jew and Greek; the same Lord is Lord of all and bestows his riches upon all who call upon him. (Rom. 10:12 RSV)

Key Terms and Their Semantic Range

Diastolē (Distinction)

The term *diastolē* is crucial to understanding Paul's argument. In classical Greek, it primarily meant "expansion" or "dilation," often used in medical contexts. However, in *Koine* Greek, it developed the meaning of "distinction" or "difference" (Liddell, Scott, Jones, 1996). In the Septuagint, the term is used to translate Hebrew terms related to separation or distinction, often in ritual or legal contexts

(e.g., Leviticus 10:10). Paul's use here likely draws on this Jewish background while applying it to ethnic categories (Dunn, 1988). In the New Testament, this is the only occurrence of *diastolē* in Romans, though Paul uses it twice in 1 Corinthians (7:34, 14:7) with a similar sense of "difference." The rarity of the term in Paul's writings highlights its significance in this context (Silva, 2014).

Kyrios (Lord)

Kyrios is a term rich in theological significance. In Greco-Roman usage, it could denote an owner, master, or person of high status. In the Septuagint, it frequently translates the divine name YHWH, investing it with profound theological meaning for Greek-speaking Jews (Fitzmyer, 1993). In Paul's usage, *kyrios* is often applied to Jesus, identifying him with the God of Israel. Here, the phrase "the same Lord of all" (*ho gar autos kyrios pantōn*) emphasizes the universal sovereignty of God/Christ, challenging ethnic particularism (Hurtado, 2003).

Ploutōn (Rich)

Ploutōn is a present active participle from the verb *plouteo*, meaning "to be rich" or "to abound in." In the Greco-Roman world, wealth was often associated with divine favour and social status (Malina, 2001). Paul's use of this term in relation to God's generosity towards "all who call on him" subverts conventional notions of divine favouritism. It suggests an abundance of divine resources available without ethnic distinction, challenging ideas of racial or ethnic privilege in accessing divine blessings (Jewett, 2007).

Grammatical and Syntactical Clarifications

The verse begins with a strong negation *ou gar* (for there is not), employed to emphatically deny any distinction. The use of *te kai* (both...and) in *Ioudaiou te kai Hellēnos* (of Jew and of Greek) emphasizes the comprehensive nature of this non-distinction, encompassing the two major ethnic categories in Paul's worldview (Wallace, 1996). The second clause, introduced by *gar*, "for," provides the theological rationale for this lack of distinction. The emphatic *autos* "same," stresses the singularity of the Lord over all groups. The final participial phrase *ploutōn eis pantas tous epikaloumenous auton* (being rich to all who call upon him) further elaborates on the Lord's impartiality. The present tense of *ploutōn* suggests ongoing action, while *eis pantas*, "to all," reinforces the universal scope of divine generosity (Porter, 1992). This grammatical structure underscores Paul's argument for ethnic equality before God, systematically dismantling any basis for racial or ethnic supremacy within the believing community. In conclusion, this textual analysis reveals Paul's careful choice of terms and syntactical structure to emphasize the nullification of ethnic distinctions in light of God's universal lordship and generosity. This linguistic precision provides a solid foundation for interpreting Romans 10:12 as a powerful statement against racial supremacy in early Christian thought.

Exegetical Analysis

Paul's argument for universalism in Romans 10:12 represents a crucial moment in his exposition of the gospel's universality. This

universalism is not merely an abstract theological concept, but a concrete challenge to the ethnic particularism prevalent in both Jewish and Greco-Roman thought of the time (Sanders, 1983). Paul's argument unfolds in several steps, beginning with the establishment of the universal problem of sin (Rom 3:23). He then argues for justification by faith apart from works of the law (Rom 3:28) and redefines the people of God based on faith rather than ethnicity (Rom 4). This line of reasoning culminates in Romans 10:12, where Paul asserts the equality of all before God. This progression demonstrates that Paul's universalism is deeply rooted in his understanding of the gospel's nature and implications. By negating ethnic distinction in salvation, Paul effectively undermines any basis for racial or ethnic supremacy within the Christian community (Dunn, 1988).

Paul's declaration of God as "Lord of all" (*kyrios pantōn*) engages with and transforms both Jewish and Greco-Roman concepts of divine sovereignty. In Jewish thought, the idea of God as universal Lord was present (e.g., Psalm 24:1), but often in tension with Israel's special status as God's chosen people. Paul radically reinterprets this concept, maintaining God's universal lordship while extending its implications to include Gentiles on equal footing with Jews (Wright, 2013). In Greco-Roman thought, the concept of a universal deity was not unknown, particularly in Stoic philosophy. However, Paul's monotheistic claim and its ethical implications would have been distinctive and challenging (Ferguson, 2003). By asserting that this universal Lord is "rich to all who call on him," Paul subverts both

Jewish notions of exclusive covenant privileges and Greco-Roman ideas of divine favouritism based on ethnicity or cultic practices (Barclay, 2015). The divine impartiality expressed in Romans 10:12 has profound implications. Soteriologically, it means that salvation is equally accessible to all, regardless of ethnic background. Ecclesiologically, it suggests that the church should reflect this divine impartiality in its structure and practices. Ethically, believers are called to emulate divine impartiality in their treatment of others. Missiologically, the gospel's universal scope necessitates a mission to all peoples. This impartiality challenges any form of racial or ethnic supremacy, as it posits a fundamental equality before God that supersedes cultural, ethnic, or racial distinctions (Bassler, 1982).

Romans 10:12 is integrally connected to Paul's central thesis of justification by faith. It reinforces the idea that justification is not based on ethnic identity or law-keeping, but on faith in Christ. It extends the implications of justification by faith to the realm of ethnic relations within the church and underscores the sufficiency of faith as the sole criterion for inclusion in God's people, negating claims of ethnic privilege. Paul's argument here serves as a practical application of his doctrine of justification by faith, demonstrating that this theological concept has concrete implications for communal life and inter-ethnic relations (Beker, 1980). Furthermore, by linking divine impartiality with the act of "calling upon" the Lord (*epikaloumenous*), Paul emphasizes the responsive nature of faith. This faith-response, rather than ethnic identity, becomes the defining

characteristic of God's people (Hays, 1989; Kanu & Ezenweke 2010).

By and large, the exegetical analysis of Romans 10:12 reveals a carefully constructed argument against ethnic or racial supremacy within the Christian community. Paul's assertion of divine impartiality, grounded in the lordship of Christ and the doctrine of justification by faith, presents a radical challenge to ethnic prejudices and a foundation for a new, inclusive community transcending racial and ethnic boundaries. This demonstrates that Paul's theology, far from being abstract, has profound implications for social relations and community formation. It provides a powerful biblical basis for critiquing and dismantling notions of racial supremacy, both in the ancient context and in contemporary applications of the text.

Theological Implications

Paul's assertion of equality in Christ, as expressed in Romans 10:12, presents a profound theological concept that stands in stark contrast to the social realities of the first-century Roman Empire. This tension between the proclaimed spiritual equality and the existing societal hierarchies has several important theological implications. Horrell (2000) suggests that Paul's statement can be understood as proclaiming an eschatological reality breaking into the present, challenging existing social structures. This interpretation frames the equality in Christ as a future state that is already beginning to manifest, creating a tension with the current order. Barclay (2011)

argues that this equality in Christ implies a radical transformation of identity, where allegiance to Christ supersedes ethnic and social categories. This perspective emphasizes the profound shift in self-understanding that Paul's theology demands from believers. However, as Meeks (1983) points out, this theological equality posed practical challenges for early Christian communities attempting to live out this ideal within existing social hierarchies.

Romans 10:12 also presents a significant challenge to ethnocentric interpretations of salvation prevalent in both Jewish and Greco-Roman thought. Donaldson (2006) observes that Paul reinterprets the concept of divine election, extending it beyond ethnic Israel to include Gentiles. This radical reinterpretation of election theology challenges long-held assumptions about the exclusivity of God's favour. Wright (2013) characterizes Paul's argument as universalizing Jewish particularism without negating the historical significance of Israel in God's plan. This nuanced approach allows Paul to maintain continuity with Jewish tradition while radically expanding its scope. Esler (2003) notes that the verse implicitly critiques any notion of ethnic privilege in relation to divine favour or salvation. This critique extends beyond Jewish ethnocentrism to challenge any form of ethnic or cultural superiority in matters of faith and salvation. The assertion of God's universal lordship and impartial richness towards all carries far-reaching implications. Schnabel (2008) argues that it provides a theological foundation for the Christian mission to all nations, underpinning the early church's expansion beyond its Jewish roots. Banks (1994) emphasizes that it

calls for a unified church that transcends ethnic and cultural boundaries, challenging believers to form communities that reflect this spiritual reality.

Lastly, Hays (1996) points out that this theological principle implies ethical responsibilities for believers to treat all people with equal dignity and respect, emanating from their original purpose at creation with equal mandate to protect and secure creation regardless of race (Pilani, 2024). The equality proclaimed in Christ is not merely a spiritual abstraction but a principle that should manifest in concrete actions and attitudes towards others (Kanu, et al., 2024; Kanu 2012; Kanu & Haaga 2012). In conclusion, Romans 10:12 encapsulates a radical theological vision that challenged the social norms of its time and continues to have profound implications for Christian theology, ecclesiology, and ethics. Its assertion of equality in Christ provides a basis for critiquing ethnocentrism, redefining divine election, and promoting a universal understanding of God's grace that transcends cultural and ethnic boundaries.

Critique of Contemporary Racial Supremacy Ideologies in the light of Rom 10:12

Romans 10:12 is a scriptural text that provides a comprehensive framework for addressing racial supremacy ideologies and their implications for modern Christianity, because the theological foundation established in Romans 10:12 presents a decisive critique of racial supremacy ideologies. Jennings (2010) argues that the text fundamentally refutes any theological justification for racial

superiority by establishing the universal equality of all people before God. This theological stance is further strengthened by Carter's (2008) analysis, which emphasizes how the verse challenges race-based identities by establishing a primary identity in Christ that transcends ethnic categories. Cone (2011) extends this understanding to the socio-political realm, suggesting that the verse necessitates a thorough re-examination of social and political structures that perpetuate racial hierarchies. In terms of modern Christian ecclesiology and missiology, the implications are far-reaching. DeYoung et al. (2003) demonstrate how the verse supports the development of multicultural churches that authentically reflect the diversity inherent in the body of Christ. This ecclesiological perspective is complemented by Bosch's (1991) missiological insights, which advocate for mission strategies that honour cultural diversity while maintaining the universal scope of the gospel message. Volf (1996) builds on these concepts by showing how the verse provides a theological foundation for ecumenical efforts seeking unity across ethnic and denominational boundaries.

The text also directly confronts contemporary racial divisions within Christianity. Emerson and Smith (2000) use this passage to question the theological legitimacy of racially segregated worship practices that persist in many contexts. Moreover, the verse calls for proactive efforts toward racial reconciliation within Christian communities, not merely passive acceptance. Rah (2009) takes this further by arguing that the text implies the necessity of structural reforms within church organizations to authentically reflect and implement

ethnic equality. This comprehensive understanding of Romans 10:12 challenges contemporary Christians to move beyond superficial interpretations and engage with its profound implications for addressing racial supremacy and nurturing genuine unity in the body of Christ.

Conclusion

The analysis of Romans 10:12 in this study offers a profound theological critique of racial supremacy, demonstrating the enduring relevance of Paul's teachings for contemporary social and religious contexts. The paper has highlighted the radical nature of Paul's declaration that there is "no distinction between Jew and Greek" (Romans 10:12). Situated within the socio-political tensions of the 1st-century Roman Empire, Paul's vision challenges the entrenched ethnic hierarchies of his time, advocating for a community defined by faith rather than by cultural or racial divisions. This study further underscores how Paul's message of universal equality has implications beyond its ancient context, providing a robust framework for confronting modern ideologies of racial supremacy. The misuse of Christian scripture to justify racial hierarchies throughout history, especially during the eras of colonialism and slavery, reveals the need for a reinterpretation of biblical texts that emphasize equality and inclusivity. Romans 10:12 offers a theological foundation for this re-examination, asserting that the same divine grace is extended to all, irrespective of ethnic background.

Additionally, through a multidisciplinary approach, this paper has shown that the teachings of Paul can play a vital role in reshaping contemporary Christian thought and practice, encouraging communities to reject racial hierarchies and encourage as well as promote inclusivity. This vision calls for a reimagining of the church as a space where all people, regardless of race or culture, are seen as equally valuable before God. Moreover, the intersection of critical race theory, postcolonial theology, and biblical hermeneutics within this study emphasizes the importance of engaging both ancient texts and contemporary social issues in pursuit of justice. Ultimately, Romans 10:12 stands as a compelling reminder that Christian theology, when properly understood, offers powerful resources for challenging racial injustice and nurturing a more equitable and inclusive society. By affirming the equal worth of all individuals before God, Paul's message invites a continuous struggle against the remnants of racial supremacy, urging believers to embody the inclusive love and unity that the gospel proclaims. As the church confronts its historical complicity in racial oppression, it can also draw from its scriptural heritage to actively contribute to the dismantling of racial hierarchies and the creation of a more just world.

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Spiritual Life Matters

Lenten Season and the Spiritual Benefits to all Christians

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Abstract

The Christian Lenten season is a period of sober reflection. The church calls her members to introspect and journey inwards to evaluate our call to discipleship. The season is essentially a journey of inner conversion, designed to deepen a believer's relationship with God. Historically, it was a period when converts prepared for baptism and this practise still stands today. It is a time for all Christians to engage in serious discernment about their lives and

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follow specific spiritual disciplines. During this period, we consciously travel the desert experience with Christ our leader through the spiritual exercises of prayer, alms giving and fasting. Following our Lord and the call to discipleship is a road less travelled. Lent reminds us each year in the liturgical calendar that pleasure, luxury and honour are not what produce joy. The journey with Jesus leads to sacrifice, suffering and the cross. The Christian Lenten season is 40 days of reflection, repentance, and renewal which Christians deliberately observed before Easter, to prepare us for Christ's resurrection.

This article suggests using traditional Lenten practices or spiritual exercises of prayer, fasting, and alms-giving as a possibility for our daily living and also becoming open to the needs of the poor around us. By engaging in Lenten discipline, we can become more aware of our decisions, adjust our lives, pursue self-transformation centred on our Lord Jesus Christ alone and not be carried away by earthly attractions. We are called during this period to work towards overcoming temptations, practising charity and cultivating a deeper relationship with our creator that will last forever. Above all it is a time to slow down, pause and reflection on the God of our journey who loved life into us and created us in His image and likeness and invites us daily to love Him in return. God wants us to follow in His footsteps in faith, hope and love by cultivating a forgiving spirit, stop the killings, corruptions, trafficking in humans and work in sincerity of heart in the spirit of the beatitudes.

Introduction

The Catholic Church's liturgical year, which I have come to experience and appreciate as the playing field between God and His people, is a yearly journey of faith put together by her to bring us closer to God, who made us in His image and likeness. These circles, when fully and consciously participated by all people of God, lead to attaining holiness and cultivate in us a deeper love for our creator God. Just a few months ago we were in a joyful mood celebrating the birth of our Redeemer and now we are invited to pause for a while and reflect on the purpose of our Saviour's advent into the world and travel along with him side by side in the Lenten season like a child walking with the parent/s in both thick and thin moments.

As we know already, following our Lord and the call to discipleship is not pain-free, it's rather a road less travelled. Lent reminds us each year in the liturgical calendar that pleasure, luxury and honour are not what produces joy. The challenge of faithfulness will quite often mirror the heart and actions of Christ. The journey with Jesus leads to sacrifice, suffering and the cross. As Christians, our belief in the truth of the resurrection of Jesus makes us love Easter and the celebration that comes with it, but Lent grounds us in the reality of what it means to daily follow Jesus. Lent reminds us that life is not always easy or rosy, nor do we always get what we want. In this article, we shall consider the meaning of Lent, discuss the biblical foundation of the Lenten season, reflecting the teachings of the church fathers on this holy period, the benefit and significance of the

season will be embedded, and how we can partake in this spiritual exercise in our time bringing to mind the teachings of the Holy Father Pope Francis on the season of lent.

Meaning of Lent

Lent originated from the Greek *Tessarakosti* and *Quadragesima* in Latin meaning forty days. Many of the theology handbooks of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries confidently claimed that Lent was established by the apostles themselves or in the immediate post-apostolic period at the latest. They assumed this season of fasting was closely connected with preparation for Easter baptism a practice likewise considered to be of apostolic foundation (cf. Romans 6) and observed everywhere throughout the Church since its earliest days.²

The general norms of the liturgical year and calendar describe Lent as a preparation for the celebration of Easter. The Lenten liturgy disposes both catechumens and the faithful to celebrate the paschal mystery: catechumens, through the several stages of Christian initiation; the faithful, through reminders of their own baptism and through penitential practices.³

Lent is the season of repentance and renewal. It's a time the Universal/mother church invites us to slow down and create more

² (cf. Romans 6)

³ Second Vatican Council, Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy, *Sacrosanctum Concilium*, nos. 102-105

space for God in our lives. In doing so, we draw close to God, listen to His voice in the daily scriptures during Mass, personal readings, and God will also remain close to us in a very special way and make His home in us. James 4:8.

Pope Benedict XVI describes Lent as a privileged time of interior pilgrimage towards Him Who is the fount of mercy. It is a pilgrimage in which He Himself accompanies us through the desert of our poverty, sustaining us on our way towards the intense joy of Easter⁴. It is indeed a time to journey inward with Jesus and feel every bit of it out of love.

It is a season we Christians become more and more aware of our need for God to help us overcome sin and grant us the grace to come up with positive ways of transforming our lives and countries into how God who has blessed us with different natural and human resources will be delighted to see. During this season, we reflect on what Jesus did to heal and free us from sin as we prepare for Easter and the significance of living as the Alleluia people. Lent is not so much about how angry God is with us for our sins. It is about a God who intervenes on our behalf to rescue us from our sins.

Lent is not merely about extended reflections on our own mortality. It's a chance to open our lives and hearts to the pains of the world in imitation of our Lord, who looked with compassion and graciously on those with spiritual and material needs.

⁴https://www.vatican.va/content/benedict-xvi/en/messages/lent/documents/hf_ben-xvi_mes_20050929_lent-2006.html

As Christian Catholics, the holy mother church enjoins us to spend time on the three practices of Lent: prayer, fasting, and almsgiving. It is also a time to participate in the Sacrament of Penance and Reconciliation and not forget the corporal works of mercy.

Fasting and Abstinence

We fast to improve self-control in an act of solidarity with those who are less fortunate. It also reminds us that everything we have is a blessing from God. Throughout all of Lent, we could decide to make personal sacrifices in a spirit of penance. For example, in sadness for our sins, we might dine out less or stop watching TV shows that glorify immoral behaviour. On Fridays, Catholics age 14 and older abstain from meat. Why Fridays? Because it unites us to the day of our Lord's death. Why abstain from meat? Because during biblical times, meat was considered a food of rejoicing, since it was not always available. We abstain from eating meat (“the food of rejoicing”) in mourning for Jesus and the death he suffered for our sins.

On Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, we abstain from meat – *and* those who are 18 to 60 years of age also fast by limiting food to just one full meal or two small meals (except when health or the ability to work is seriously affected).

On this beginning day of Lent, prophet Joel called all people of God, both young and old, rich and poor, black and white or brown, to a holy fast and seek forgiveness from the God who is gracious and

compassionate. Fasting, then, is not about us earning God's forgiveness alone, but it is about reminding ourselves through the fasting of our radical dependence on God.

St. Augustine on fasting teaches that, "Fasting is practiced for a threefold purpose. Firstly, in order to bridle the lusts of the flesh... Secondly, we have recourse to fasting in order that the mind may arise more freely to the contemplation of heavenly things... Thirdly, in order to ask forgiveness for sins: wherefore it is written (Joel 2:12): 'Be converted to Me with all your heart, in fasting and in weeping and in mourning.' Fasting cleanses the soul, raises the mind, subjects one's flesh to the spirit, renders the heart contrite and humble, scatters the clouds of concupiscence, quenches the fire of lust, kindles the true light of chastity"⁵.

Fasting as a spiritual exercise purifies us both interiorly and exteriorly. It is not to be considered as a competition of holier than thou but a practice of total dependence on God, change of attitudes, embracing God who loves us first and broke the heavens open to pitch His tent among us. Fasting, above all, assists us avoid sin and helps us love more. This is the period to love more and avoid the judgement that sin brings to us.

It is good news that God judges sin, because sin is a social evil. It harms both individuals and societies. The sins of corruption, greed and lust lead to the exploitation of men, women, children, and the

⁵ <https://generositymonk.com/2023/02/24/augustine-of-hippo-threefold-purpose-of-fasting/>

vulnerable, unemployment, embezzlements of public funds, economic breakdown and increase in poverty ritual killings. The sin of racism, tribalism, and nepotism leads to the harm of discrimination, division, oppression, disputes amongst people and destruction of life and property in this country. The sins of arrogance and pride put us above our fellow humans, hence considering ourselves better than the other. The sin of idolatry gives our hearts over to something other than our Creator. The sins of gossip and slander create lies that destroy lives and communities. God, in His nature, is gracious, but if we find ourselves caught up in many of these sins that harm us and others, we are on the wrong side, and that is a dangerous place to be. Therefore, Lent reminds us of the effect of our sins and calls us to once again redirect our lives towards God by turning a new leaf.

During this period, we, therefore, are called to purposefully go without something that is part of our ordinary lives. This practice not only curbs physical pleasures like eating and drinking but can also be extended to other aspects of our habitual existence. For example, using unkind speech, judgmental or overly anxious thinking, overindulging in digital screen time, being jealous of the person, dishonest, sloth, envy, etc., it is essential to develop the attitude of fasting in our Christian life even outside the Lenten period. This is because fasting can: remove distractions, remind us of our trust in and need of God and others, readjust our behaviours and strengthen our hearts to model our life after the person of Jesus Christ and allow us to unite ourselves to the suffering Jesus, express

sorrow for our sins, and get us in touch with the needs/suffering of others who live without, not by their choosing. In the desert experience of fasting, we can encounter the good God in a special and new way.

Prayer

All that we do can be prayer. However, like any "vital and personal relationship"⁶ (CCC #2558), it's important to take time regularly, to turn our full attention to God (think quiet desert). We seek to encounter God: becoming aware of and learning to enjoy his presence, laying bare our hearts to him, and listening to his "still, small voice"⁷ especially through His Word in the Sacred Scripture. Lent is a time to start praying if you're not doing so, and if you are, to take it up in a renewed way as one of your existing moments of prayer, living it with special attention. It is also a time to intentionally learn and talk about faith with those close to us to raise our awareness, hear God's call to our own hearts through the words of others, and encourage each other on the journey.

St. Augustine of Hippo 354-430 admonishes us to pray as it is where we encounter the creator who first seeks after us. The wonder of prayer is revealed beside the well where we come seeking water: there, Christ comes to meet every human being. It is he who first seeks us and asks us for a drink. Jesus thirsts and his asking arises

⁶ *Catechism of the Catholic Church* no.2558.

⁷ 1 Kngs 19:12

from the depths of God's desire for us. Whether we realize it or not, prayer is the encounter of God's thirst with ours. God thirsts that we may thirst for him.⁸ St. John Damascene describes, "Prayer is the raising of one's mind and heart to God or the requesting of good things from God." Prayers as prayer is a surge of the heart; it is a simple look turned toward heaven, it is a cry of recognition and of love, embracing both trial and joy.⁹ In this, he encourages us to pray at all times and in every circumstance, be it good or bad, because God is in them all, and it is through prayer we pour out our hearts to God. It is through this medium we can bring the needs of our world, countries, families and personal to God.

During this period of lent, we are invited to grow closer to God. Because prayer improves our relationship with God, we pray more during Lent. The Catholic churches offer increased opportunities for prayer, but we should also increase our prayers at home and wherever we go by using the Popular Lenten devotions and spiritual exercises available, including attending Daily Mass and the practice of the word of God, praying the Rosary in total meditation on our Mother Mary and going extra length to imitate her virtues, and meditating on the Stations of the Cross.

However, the scripture discourages hypocritical prayers as that is unchristian, but pray quietly and secretly with humility and trust, as

⁸ St. Augustine, *De diversis quaestionibus octoginta tribus* 64,4:PL 40,56.

⁹ St. John Damascene, *Defide orth.* 3,24:PG 94,1089C

stated in the Gospel according to St Matthew¹⁰. One thing is to pray, and the other is to persist in praying even when there is no result because God's plan and time are not the same as ours. Pope Francis emphasizes persistence in prayer and the necessity of prayer as children of God during his catechesis on prayer that if we do not pray, we will not have the strength to go forward in life. Prayer is like the oxygen of life¹¹. Prayer draws down upon us the presence of the Holy Spirit who always leads us forward. This has become very important now and always, especially in our current age and time where the quick-fix era is making prayer more and more irrelevant. We are called to keep on praying until there is a change or response. Also praying constantly also gives us strength to keep on pushing on. In doing this, Christ also prays for us as our priest, prays in us as our Head, and prayed to by us as our God."¹² Our praying during this period should lead us to true metanoia or conversion of heart and forgiveness. Besides, by creating time to pray daily, we can nourish our body and spirit as well. A conscious effort is needed to discipline ourselves to pray more and follow it up with positive action. If not, our Lenten observance could result in a hypocritical life.

¹⁰ Matthew 6:1-6

¹¹https://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/audiences/2020/documents/papa-francesco_20201111_udienza-generale.html

John Gerard Hillier, "Meaning of prayer in Christ ministry event in profound ways", 22nd February 2023. <https://catholicspirit.com/news/meaning-of-prayer-in-christs-ministry-evident-in-profound-ways>

Almsgiving

Almsgiving is an act of charity. We put our faith into action by sacrificing time, talents, and financial resources even amid having less with the current skyrocketing price of goods and services in Nigeria. By giving priority to doing good deeds (for example, helping the less fortunate), we make self-denial a personal penance for our sins, and we grow in holiness. Jesus highlights the dangers of fasting and other ceremonies that surround repentance. Before we begin this season, we must remember who it is for. The potential for self-deception is high. Any season of fasting or charity can turn into a religious performance instead of a service offered to God. Our almsgiving must be done in selfless service to the God who first provided to us and not to show off. It must be in the spirit of love that will uplift the life of the less privileged, or those made poor due to the systems placed by the political figures of our countries.

In other words, discretion matters here in our act of giving. Part of the discretion we display during Lent is trusting that rewards from God may be unseen. Rewards from God are designed to make us into people whose lives reflect him in the world. So, yes, we mark our heads with ashes, however, public shows of piety are not in themselves evil. What makes it evil is our intentions and motivation. As a result, we must guard our motivations and do most of our spiritual work in private, because the privacy of those acts reveals our trust in God.

Prayer and fasting, done well, bear real fruit in our actions toward others or the way we treat those around us. Christ-like love, “indeed and in truth” (I John 3:18), begins with our family and extends to all we encounter in our day-to-day activities. Be it friends or our enemies if we have any. But Christ’s command to love goes even further: to our enemies and, in a preferential way, to anyone in need, to those we will not ordinarily wish to assist, for we are all children of God. Almsgiving is a specific kind of love, that of sharing our time, talent, and resources with the poor, not just out of our excess but in a way that costs us. We are invited to give like the widow in the scripture. Hence give until you feel the pinch. Search for the needy and do something to put a smile on their faces. What activity do I want to be part of this lent to assist the needy in my community?

Lent is a time to give and to examine where the Gospel has not yet changed our hearts and society regarding the marginalized and those suffering from the systemic poverty of our time.

The Lenten season beings from Ash Wednesday until the evening of Holy Thursday. The season lasts forty days without counting Sundays. The forty-day length of Lent is rooted in the biblical usage of the number forty. Forty is typically indicative of a time of testing, trial, penance, purification, and renewal. In the New Testament, forty days is the length of Jesus’ time of trial in the desert in preparation for his public ministry, proclaiming the Gospel.

Ash Wednesday

In the Bible, ashes are a sign of mourning and loss. When Xerxes issued a command to kill all the Jews in his kingdom, the Israelites responded in the following way: “In every province to which the edict and order of the king came, there was great mourning among the Jews, with fasting, weeping and wailing. Many lay in sackcloth and ashes”¹³. The link between mourning and ashes is well established in the Scriptures, especially the Old Testament.¹⁴

The liturgy makes a second connection as well, one that goes beyond the symbols of repentance found in biblical depictions of mourning. It takes us back to the origin of all our pain. Ash Wednesday evokes the punishment arising from the fall, when God says to Adam and Eve, “Dust you are and to dust you will return”¹⁵ In other words, the sadness of Lent is not a general sadness about the inevitability of death but an explicitly Christian diagnosis of the cause of death. We sin and die because humanity rebelled against God. There is nothing natural at all about death. It is an alien intrusion into the good world God created. It is an enemy to be defeated.

On Ash Wednesday we remember that we will die, but we do not accept it as the inevitable reality of the human experience. Even in our acknowledgement of death, there are clues of our revolt against it.

¹³ Esther 4:3

¹⁴ Cf Daniel 9:3, Jeremiah 6:25; Job 42:6; Matthew 11:21.

¹⁵ Genesis 3:19.

We sin and die because we are born in the aftermath of the rebellion of our first parents. Adam and Eve rebelled because they wanted to be like God and were led away by their desires (Genesis 3:5-6). They believed the serpent's falsehood¹⁶ and disobeyed God's command. The consequence of this rebellion spread out in multiple directions, including engendering a new distrust of each other (Genesis 3:7) and of God (Genesis 3:8-9). Through the imposition of ashes, Ash Wednesday reminds us that death and sin cannot be completely separated. This does not mean a particular form of death is punishment for specific sins, but sin and death are partners.

But if the ashes of Ash Wednesday point us toward the link between sin, death, and rebellion, they also contain something else. That is the Ash. The ashes are in the shape of the cross. That cross carries within it an entire story and the foundation of human hope. It is the story of loss and gain, of the incarnation of the truly good one, his glorious life and triumphant defeat of death. The ashes are not just a reminder of our great failure; they remind us of God's victory over sin and death through the life, death, and resurrection of his Son our Lord Jesus Christ.

In his Lenten message of 2024, the Holy Father Pope Francis suggested that during Lent, Christians pause and make space to incorporate silent adoration into their lives, as practised by Moses, Elijah, Mary and Jesus. We can reclaim that this year as well. To adore and thank God for the victory He has won for us through

¹⁶ Genesis 3:13

Christ's suffering and death. "Have we realized that we've lost the meaning of adoration? Let us return to adoration," he also added that, like St. Francis of Assisi, we are invited to "strip ourselves of worldly trappings and return to the heart, to what is essential," the pope said. "Let us acknowledge what we are: dust loved by God." This calls us to total self-examination or a thorough introspection of our lives for greater transformation and renewal.

During this season, the liturgical ambience changes to accommodate the season we have begun. The liturgical colour is purple, and the musical instruments are reduced to encourage us to create space for God in our hearts in silent and continuous reflection.

Why do we observe this holy season for forty days?

Scripturally speaking, "Forty" suggests such qualities as *repentance, newness, preparation, self-examination, transformation, task fulfilment, escape from bondage or slavery, nourishment and growth, and, finally, personal fulfilment*, such as with *redemption and salvation*, and ultimately, *a new generation and new life*.

As far as fasting is concerned, forty days as a period of fasting is also a common phenomenon in Scripture. We will endeavour to mention some of them. The flood lasts forty days and nights.¹⁷ The rains lasted for forty days and forty nights.¹⁸ When Jacob died, his

¹⁷ Genesis 7:4,

¹⁸ Genesis 7:12

embalmmment ceremony lasted forty days.¹⁹ As the Bible describes God's mercy on faithful people through the story of Noah's Ark, the timing of 40 days shows up again.²⁰ In Exodus, we read of how Moses encountered God in prayer for forty days and forty nights.²¹ The book of Deuteronomy mentions Moses fasted twice for forty days and nights on Mt. Sinai: once after receiving the Law and also on discovering the infidelity of the Israelites in fashioning the Golden Calf.²² Again, in 1 Kings, we read of how Elijah travelled for forty days and nights²³ without food after slaying the prophets of Baal and fleeing the wrath of Jezebel. The Ninevites fast for forty days to prevent the wrath of God (Jonah 3:4).

In the New Testament, we read of how prior to His public ministry, Jesus spent forty days in the desert wilderness fasting and praying²⁴ and there he was tempted by the devil²⁵ but Jesus, been God, overcame the devil. After His resurrection, Jesus made several appearances to his followers as proof to convince them about the truth of His resurrection and in a period of forty days,²⁶ he continued to admonish them about the kingdom of God.

¹⁹ Genesis 50:3

²⁰ Genesis 7:17 and 8:6.

²¹ Exodus 24:

²² Deuteronomy 9:9,18

²³ 1 Kings 19:7-8

²⁴ Matthew 4:2, Luke 4:2

²⁵ Mark 1:13

²⁶ Acts 1:3

In addition to these possible allusions to Egypt’s post-Theophany fast, there are several examples of other types of forty-day fasts during this period. In his *Canonical Epistle*, Peter, bishop of Alexandria in the early fourth century, legislates a fast of forty days for lapsed Christians to be readmitted from their term of excommunication (Canon 1). The same *Canons of Hippolytus* stipulates that catechumens who earn their living by “impure occupations”— for example, by wrestling, running, acting, hairdressing, and so on—must undergo a forty-day purification period before being baptized.

Another mid-fourth-century collection of church legislation, the *Canons of Athanasius*, prescribes forty days of fasting as penance for adulteresses and executioners who wish to be readmitted to the Eucharist.²⁷ Fasting for forty days, for whatever purpose or occasion, seems to have been a rather common phenomenon in the pre-Nicene and Nicene periods, especially in Egypt.

Therefore, the idea of a specific forty-day period of fasting leading up to Easter seems to have begun taking hold in the church at large in 330 AD. There does appear to be a very early tradition of fasting before the annual celebration of Jesus’ resurrection, but it was a *much* shorter fast and varied from one church to another.²⁸

St. Ambrose of Milan 397 AD, in his mystagogical catechesis, encouraged everyone to fast, not just by limiting it by abstaining

²⁷ <https://www.newadvent.org/cathen/05789c.htm> accessed 4th February 2025

²⁸ <https://carm.org/other-questions/what-is-lent/>

from food but also by refraining from evil.²⁹ He called on all catechumen, instructors, Godparents and even the priest to engage in fasting before the reception of the sacraments at Easter. In other words, He calls us to love more and be available to assist our suffering brothers and sisters. Of what benefit is our fast if we continue to hate and mistreat people, of what use is my prayer if I have not good works? It is precisely a wake-up call to a change of attitude and metanoia. I feel that we could also reclaim the call of the early church in this aspect.

Benefits of the Lenten season

When we embrace this season with love for our creator, we will receive great benefit from it as we will grow in our relationship with God. We will be more thankful instead of wallowing in ingratitude and complaining about everything. Our focus on God and living out our call to discipleship will deepen, and we will experience the spiritual nourishment that comes with being truly God's children.

Our attitudes towards prayer will intensify during this period as a result, harsh judgments will be gradually removed from us. Once this is achieved, we will worry less and depend on divine providence for all we need. If we open ourselves up like the Israelites in the desert and fully entrust ourselves to be led in new directions, the unimagined can emerge. As we are transformed into deeper

²⁹ Mark Water, 2000. *The New Encyclopedia of Christian Quotations*, Grand Rapids, MI Baer Books 200, p.358.

relationships with Divine Love, our eyes will be opened, and our hearts moved as we stand witness to the needs of God's people. The desert is not a destination but a place for travellers going somewhere.

The benefit of this season to us as Christians is that it fills us with the ability to embrace self-denial. People may wonder if there is a need for self-denial anymore these days when people barely have food to eat. Self-denial is not necessarily denying oneself from food and pleasure alone; we could work on ourselves to be more forgiving because we have also experienced Christ's utmost forgiveness.

During this period of lent, we could be people of hope and goodwill, work on our anger and be more patient with ourselves, people and objects around us, send positive energies to our world, and care for our environment by engaging in some practical things that can improve the ecology. It could just be proper disposal of wastes, aiming at planting more trees this year to correct deforestation and so on.

Besides the traditional practices done during this season, like prayer, fasting and almsgiving, plant to visit the sick in thanksgiving for the gift of health, give to the poor and orphans from the little you have, and visit the prison to give courage and hope to the prisoners. Be that one person who will put smiles on their faces by being available to listen in the spirit of synodality and walking side by side with love for God and His people.

Above all, the period can assist in increasing our self-control and total metanoia. Like Jesus, who went into the desert to fast and pray

and was filled with power and strength, we will be filled with the strength to overcome temptation, avoid the occasions of sin and embrace virtues if we deny ourselves. Our thoughts will constantly be examined so that we can make more room for God in our hearts, for we also live in an age in which there is an immense hunger for God. Yet what so often goes unrealized is the importance of combating this strong tendency we have toward enslavement by the senses; that is, the overemphasis placed upon feeding the many desires of our material body, our flesh and blood, is rarely seen for the danger that it is often to the disadvantage of our spiritual soul.

“Lord, with love and mercy you protect us from the dangers of the world. When I spend too much time looking into my smartphone, paying little attention to the beautiful faces of the people around me, I know I am in danger of forgetting who I am. When I text and tweet all sorts of messages to people I hardly know, making no time to have a meaningful conversation with a stranger or even a loved one, I know I am in danger of losing sight of God in others. When I indulge myself by buying things instantly and mindlessly, I am in danger of becoming indifferent to the needs of others. Lord, save me from my selfish ways and addictive attachment to the things of this world. Fill me with love, mercy and inner peace, that I may long to truly be present to those who cry for help. Amen.”³⁰

³⁰ Warren J. Savage, *Pope Francis: Living Lent with Mercy: Encouragement and Daily Prayers*

Conclusion

Lent is a period of reflection leading to the spiritual transformation in the life of all members of Christ's body, the Church. In this moment, we recall what Jesus did for us in order to redeem us back to God. When taken actively, it is a fruitful period of forty days of spiritual exercise. During this holy season of lent, we see that God is working powerfully in our current predicament to accomplish something new in our lives. At this time, God is transforming our hearts to accompany Him in several works of mercy, such as helping us overcome temptation, repent from sin and reconcile with God through the constant and proper use of the sacraments made available for us in the church, which strengthens our faith.

This holy period of spiritual pilgrimage and encounter with Jesus can aid us grow spiritually when we rely on God during times of temptations, challenges and trials for God is constantly at work in our lives transforming these moments into opportunities for our good. These forty days symbolizes special period God asks us to focus on moving closer daily to him and create room for Him in a very special way in our lives through the change of attitude, fasting, prayer and service to the less privileged in the society. Let us embrace in a special way the sacraments the holy mother church has made available for us to purify our hearts and souls this season. We have the baptism as the gate way to other sacraments, Eucharist to nourish us, confirmation to strengthen us and penance to obtain pardon and forgiveness from God and the rest at our disposal to approach and not take these avenues for granted. Let us remember

that we are the hands, feet, faces, body of Christ here on earth who are called to continue to radiate Him. He uses us to reach others in our choice of words which edifies, the smiles of encouragement and hope, the feet to reach out to the poor and needy around us, to walk together in the spirit of collaboration and mutual listening in journey together (Synodality) in love as God's people and recognizing God's power at work daily in our lives.

The Church's synodal form, which in these years we are rediscovering and cultivating, suggests that Lent is also *a time of communitarian decisions*, of decisions, small and large, that are counter-current. Decisions capable of altering the daily lives of individuals and entire neighbourhoods, such as the ways we acquire goods, care for creation and strive to include those who go unseen or are looked down upon.³¹ I wish to reiterate the words of our Holy Father Pope Francis in his 2024 Lenten message that calls us to exercise a communitarian decision-making process where everyone has a contribution to make for the improvement of our society, feel belong and harness our positive energies and potentials to transform both self and our world.

³¹

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