

Perspectives on Consecrated Life in Africa

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Introduction

In 1926, Pope Pius XI encouraged missionaries of Religious and Secular Institutes to welcome religious vocations in missionary countries as a gift of God:

“Since it is necessary in order to organize the Church in these regions, as We have already remarked, that you make use of the very elements out of which under Divine Providence they have been composed, you ought as a consequence to consider the founding of religious Congregations of men and women made up of natives to be one of the principal duties of your holy office. Is it not meant that these newly born followers of Christ be able to follow a life of evangelical perfection if they feel themselves called to take the vows of religion? With reference to this point, the missionaries and nuns who labor in your dioceses should not permit themselves to become prejudiced out of sheer love each for his own religious Congregation, a love which in itself is undoubtedly sound and legitimate. They should learn to view this matter broadly and to act accordingly. Therefore, if there are natives who desire to join one or other of the older Congregations, it assuredly would not be right to dissuade them or to prevent their joining, provided, of course, they give signs of being able to acquire the spirit of these

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Congregations and of establishing in their own countries houses of the Order which shall not be unworthy of the Congregation of which they are members.”²

This appeal has been well heard and received in Africa, since religious life is presently experiencing a growth, albeit a modest one. In fact according to the statistics of 2007, there was an increase of 157 non clerical men religious, 305 religious who are priests, and 1306 women religious. We note the same increase at the level of candidates in formation for religious life.

There are more than 360 religious in major seminaries and 733 in minor seminaries.³

As witness to the growth of the Church in Africa in the third phase of its evangelization, Pope John Paul II explains:

“all this is a gift of God, for no human effort alone could have performed this work in the course of such a relatively short period of time.”⁴

We can say, perhaps, that the reception of this marvelous gift is favoured by certain values in which the Africans continue to believe. But knowing that the Church in Europe knew in the past this kind of growth and today suffers a crisis of vocations, this can't help but pose certain questions for us. In fact, even if it is true that a religious sense and a sense of the spiritual world, a sense of the role of the family and respect for life, the sense of solidarity and of community life are integral to African cultural values, yet, in our day, this seems to be true only in the country areas, or those areas not yet touched by the modern culture of materialism and individualism. In the cities of Africa, the places strongly marked by this modern culture, everything is as if this urbanization, wrongly and without justification seen as a sign of progress

2 Pius XI, Encyclical Letter *Rerum Ecclesiae* (February 28, 1926), # 27.

3 http://www.africamission-mafr.org/statistiques_de_l'eglise_2007.doc, Agence Fides 6 octobre 2007 special journée des missions, les statistiques de l'Eglise catholique.

4 Post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation: *Ecclesia in Africa*, on the Church in Africa and its evangelizing mission towards the year 2000, # 34.

and modernity,⁵ goes hand in hand with the trivialization of the cultural values of the African peoples, or, quite simply, of human values.

Is there not reason to fear that we are coming to a total leveling in favour of individualism, materialism and religious indifference which can only prove to be obstacles to the growth of the religious life as a gift of God? Why this crisis of religious life in a Europe which is *very wealthy*, and this rise of religious life in an Africa, which is *very poor*? Why the lack of vocations in that part of the world where, consciously and with full will, as it were, births are being limited to three, two, even one child, or worse still, where there is the tendency to legitimize homosexual marriages? And why the abundance in that part of the world where there is still the belief that the child is a gift not only for the parents, but also for the family and entire society, including the Church? In summary, what perspectives can we have of the religious life in Africa? These questions are a challenge to the specific identity and to the rooting of religious life in Africa.

1. The Specific Identity of Religious Life

The sacrament of baptism produces three effects, i.e. the union of the Christian with Christ, his insertion in the Church and his active participation in the Church's mission. These involve certain demands for the baptized in their common vocation to holiness or to the practice of love of God, as his children, and love of neighbour, as brothers and sisters to each other. The specific identity of the religious life, as a full living of this common vocation, consists then in living, in an intense and radical way, this baptismal call in a dimension which is both personal and mystical, ecclesial and apostolic.

5 Urbanization, which is growing, for instance in Burkina Faso, is not sustained by a corresponding economic growth which generates wealth and primary and secondary employment. As a result, on an informal level, there is the tendency, in the cities of Burkina Faso, to put into effect a strategy of survival by means of very low wages to make up for the lack of food etc. It is clear that in the city of Ouagadougou, which is rapidly expanding, the infrastructures and the very essential services are lacking: housing, schools, medical facilities, urban transportation, sanitation, water, electricity, etc. This social situation is the cause of prostitution, delinquency, drug addiction, criminality and abortion, etc.

1.1. The Person and Mystical Dimension.

Religious pursue holiness by engaging in living a new type of life in a community which has its only *raison-d'être* in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, and, as a consequence, renounces founding one's own family, the direct pursuit of wealth, and the exercise of political power.⁶

A personal relationship with the persons of the Trinity is totally primary and fundamental for the religious life. For it is in such a relation that the love for neighbour manifests itself in its full truth. In this sense, one is a religious first to love God with a radical love which can only press one towards a total devotion for others. Is it not, above all, the love for his Father which gives sense to the missionary life of Jesus of Nazareth (1 Cor 15:24)? In the light of the life of Christ, the religious life can only be seen as being authentically and essentially a *mystique*, in the sense of a special seeking and intimate relationship with God. Without this *mystique*, we can very well pronounce the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience without grasping their deepest meaning. And without it, then, we can be religious without the corresponding religious awareness. The religious life, that is to say Christian life in its essence, is a *mystique* because it is a real union of person to Person, and intimately bound to the mystery of the Redeeming Christ (cf. Rom 16:25; Col 1:25-27; 3:1-4).

With religious consecrated life, it is God, who acts out of his own free initiative and chooses someone. He calls him and sets him apart in a particular and stable relationship with Himself, in view of his loving plan for humanity. In response to this call, the religious strives to live by Him, to whom he belongs from now on, by following and imitating Jesus in a radical way, in the daily living of poverty, chastity and obedience. The radical following of Jesus, chaste, poor and obedient, brings into play especially the practice of the three evangelical counsels. For in this *sequela Christi*, it is question of knowing him, of teaching him and of living him through the radical living out of chastity, poverty and obedience.

⁶ Vatican Council II, The Dogmatic Constitution, *Lumen Gentium* (November 21, 1964), # 31:41

As a consequence, in the religious life as a form of the *sequela Christi*, there will be a certain call to exclusivity in the gift of self. It will entail a certain *all or nothing* dialectic, called for by a radical love (cf Mt 13:44-45; 19:27), expressed in the real life experience of living celibate chastity, poverty and obedience. Christ, and nothing else, is the *raison d'être* of the three religious vows and, consequently, of the way in which they should be practiced. It is he who calls to follow him in witness to Love and he who himself gives the example (Mt 8:20; 12:48-50; Jn 6:38). By way of this radical following, it is therefore a matter of preferring Christ over all worldly goods, over conjugal love and one's own offspring in the flesh, and over one's own individual liberty. In this way the religious witnesses to the 'one thing necessary,' to Love and to the Lord.⁷ In summary, in religious life, it is question of living like Christ, with him and for him, and thus in the quest and service of the Reign of God at the heart of every human being.

Religious life, as a particular form of the *sequela Christi*, has always been centred in the radicalization of poverty, chastity and obedience with the desire to imitate Christ, chaste, poor and obedient and, in so doing, of living like him in view of the Kingdom alone. Called to follow and radically imitate Christ, the religious should strive for a greater uniformity to life in Christ.

This implies not only an interior adherence to the person of Christ but, equally, a total commitment to him. In this vocation of consecrated life it is a matter of continuing the same project of salvation as did Jesus in human history. One does this by taking on the attitudes and the behaviours which were characteristic of him, which in some some way, are summed up in terms of poverty, chastity and obedience. In virtue of their special vocation, Religious propose, in a specific and new way, the living example of Christ to other members of the faithful and to the world. This vocation has its source in the Church which consists in making Christ present in the course of the human journey throughout history.

1.2 An Ecclesial and Apostolic Dimension

In its fundamental mystery, the Church is a community of fraternal charity,

⁷ Cf. Aubry, Joseph, *Teologia della vita religiosa alla luce del Vaticano II*. Torino: Elledici, 1980, p. 41.

which brings unity to fruition. Certainly this unity is already accomplished by Christ (cf. Gal 3:27-28). But it needs to be brought to completion each day by the practice of the fundamental law of love given by Christ himself (Cf Jn 15:12; 17:21). It is love which remains the very essence of the Church as the universal sacrament of salvation. The ecclesial dimension of religious life is rooted in this essential human vocation to form a universal community of sisters and brothers, which reflects the community of the Trinity, of which the Church is the model as the People gathered together in the name of Christ.⁸

As expression of the Church, the religious community assumes and brings to fruition its ecclesial vocation, by practicing the mystery of fraternal charity in the state of consecrated life. With religious profession, which inaugurates his entry into the family, the religious commits himself principally to live in a radical manner the three evangelical counsels of poverty, chastity and obedience. He promises to do so according to the spirit of the religious family, which receives him as living sign of the vocation of the Church.

Gathered in community, religious point out to all the baptized and to all people their vocation to form a community of brotherly and sisterly charity, by showing them how to use earthly goods, the deep meaning of love and of freedom. Every religious community thus appears as a permanent sacrament of the Church, i.e. as a visible sign of its present and future mystery, and as an efficacious sign, in the measure that the community itself actually lives out this mystery with effectiveness. The world needs living centres of charity, humble communities where the love of the Trinity takes flesh with a greater fulness and so becomes recognizable. The religious community with its vowed membership, which strives to practice this charity, is one of these living centres needed in our world.⁹ Christ's union with a religious is so intimate that, as a consequence, the religious cannot but seek to reflect in his person the light of Christ and cause his features to shine forth: i.e. holiness, charity and grace.¹⁰ In fact, the religious lives out his consecration, only if he or she remains bound to Christ and is identified with him.

8 Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, # 1, 4, 9, 48.

9 Cf. De Carvalho, Azevedo Marcello, *Les religieux, vocation et mission. Une perspective actuelle et exigeante*. Paris: Edition du Centurion, 1985, pp. 138-143.

10 *Lumen Gentium*, # 44, 46.

Religious, members of the Church, under the impulse of the Holy Spirit and in a special and new style of life, cannot but be witnesses that Christ is the Incarnate Son of God, who died, rose and lives forever. They are signs to those around them, for the Church and for the whole world, because they speak to the realities of faith. They force people to see more clearly not only certain aspects of the mystery of Christ, who inspires them, but also certain aspects of the Church in which they draw their very breath. In fact, unity and communion are given concrete expression in the authentic fellowship of charity, which they live out: one mind and one heart. Thus they show forth the Church as a community of brothers and sisters, whose fundamental and unique law is mutual love and as spouse, united forever to Christ and living wholly with him, through him and for him.¹¹ The religious vows himself to Christ with a preferential love even to the point of sacrificing certain authentic human values. In doing this he puts in question, in a prophetic manner, the normal structures of the world, such as spousal and parental love, the possession of goods and independent decision making, as finite realities. It is not at all a matter of downplaying these values, in and through which lay persons of faith are called to holiness. Rather, on the part of the religious, it is more a matter of accentuating their radical incapacity to completely fulfill the longing of the human heart and to affirm the transitory aspect of these values in relation to life eternal.

2. For an Inculturation of Religious Life in Africa

Keeping its essential dimensions in mind, and in the face of its current challenges, how are we to conceive the rooting and the growth of religious life and particularly of the Redemptorists in Africa? Aren't we talking the necessity of rethinking the religious life as God's gift, as well as sharpening our awareness of our identity as Redemptorist missionaries?

2.1 Rethinking Religious Life as Gift of God.

The religious life has often been presented as renunciation, understood

¹¹ Cf. *Lumen Gentium*, # 44; *Vatican Council II, Decree on the Appropriate Renewal of Religious Life, Perfectae Caritatis* (October 28, 1965), # 12; *Vatican Council II, Decree on the Ministry and Life of Priests, Presbyterorum Ordinis* (December 7, 1965), # 16;25.

in the sense of an ascetic zeal in view of rectifying the individual tendencies compromised by sin. So the person, who wants to exercise dominion over the goods of the earth with serenity and use them in an ordered way, for his own subsistence and that of others, chooses religious poverty. The person, who wants to develop his affectivity and experience the fulness of love, chooses chastity in consecrated celibacy. And the person, who wants to come to the full realization of himself by way of the authentic exercise of his freedom, chooses religious obedience. Out of such a presentation it follows, that the purpose of consecrated life is none other than the fulness of the human values, and that the condition or the means of achieving it is none other than the radical following of Christ by the practice of the evangelical counsels. Now if such is indeed the purpose of the evangelical counsels and of the religious life, do we not run the risk of relativizing the means used to achieve it? Why use *these* means and not *others* to attain, acquire and develop the human values with integrity in the use of goods, of creative freedom and joyous love?

Religious life cannot be presented, simply and in the first place, as a renunciation. Certainly, it entails radical renunciations and supposes a continual asceticism. But it is, above all and especially, a vocation, thence a gift of God to identify oneself with Christ, to be like him, with him and for him. Far from being a personal project, religious life is to be seen as a state of life whose goal is none other than the following of Christ even to the sacrifice of oneself. Thinking of religious life as a gift of God, and being aware of it as such, can only send religious to the mystery of Christ and to love for him as the supreme value, which integrates and embraces the authentically human values.

“The Evangelical counsels are chosen not to attain the fulness of the human values, but to empty oneself as did Christ, and thus to allow love to express itself and reveal itself in a new way. But this is possible only due to the miracle of love itself. This is a love which communicates itself and gives one the capacity of doing the same, in arousing a response of which we are radically incapable. It is for this reason that

the counsels are gift."¹²

The sole reason for renunciation in religious life is to identify oneself with Christ, by radically following him in the practice of the evangelical counsels, which are, above all and especially, a gift made to the Church and received in the Church. Coming from the Father who, by the power of the Holy Spirit, directly and radically introduces the believer into intimacy with him by placing him in the footsteps of his Son, the religious life is, pure and simple, a gift which flows out of the triune God. It is not, first of all, the believer who makes a gift of himself to God in pronouncing and living the religious vows, but rather God who makes to him a gift of Christ who is poor, chaste and obedient and renders him, at the same time, capable of surrendering himself to this gift and abandoning all. Rethinking the religious life as gift, received from God, allows the highlighting of the vows, not almost exclusively as one's human initiative, but rather as the initiative of God, who makes the gift and who brings it to fruition in the human person by means of consecration.¹³

If the fundamental reason is the *sequela Christi* and nothing else, then motivation for the vows should not be sought on the anthropological plane, and still less in cultures. This is often the temptation, under the pretext of rendering them more reasonable and humanly attractive, even at the risk of emptying them of their meaning. The only defining motivation which can give meaning to the religious vows, is *the love of Christ*. And to understand them, it is necessary to plunge into the mystery of this love which is essentially *a stripping of self* and so a gift of self (Phil 2:6-8), rather than trusting in the logic of reason and of culture. Someone who is aware of having received all, his very being and his life, as gift, understands that fidelity to the truth of his own being and becoming implies a continual acceptance of himself as gift, which surrenders totally to God and generously gives oneself to others.

The religious vow is the response to the particular gift and call of Christ

¹² Pigna, Arnaldo. *Repartir du Christ. La spiritualité des vœux*. Burtin: Éditions des Béatitudes, 2001, p. 33.

¹³ Cf. John Paul II, *The Consecrated Life. Vita Consecrata. Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation*. Washington, D.C.: United States Catholic Conference, March 25, 1996, # 18-19.

for a total and sacrificial commitment, a total and exclusive dedication. To answer 'yes' to this particular call of Christ, is, at the same time, to answer 'no' to all the rest.¹⁴ To give one's whole being, means to make a gift of the fundamental drives and life forces which constitute the human being. It entails sacrificing one's desires for the personal possession of goods, for married life and for personal achievement.¹⁵ It is in this sense that we can speak of a gift of self, expressed through the religious vows as an offering of the tangible values for which human beings are made and by means of which they become, so to speak. Each religious vow is an offering of love. *Poverty* is charity which refuses to hoard for oneself and which opens oneself to others in giving them what one possesses. *Chastity* is charity which refuses to seek one's own pleasure in oneself and in others and puts oneself whole heartedly at the disposition of others in such fashion that everyone can have recourse to him/her without becoming his/her prisoner. *Obedience* is charity which refuses to impose itself or its own controlling power and puts all its energies and creativity at the service of the kingdom of God in oneself and in others.

In summary in the religious life, it is a matter of refusing to love egoistically and of accepting a new way of seeing and of acting vis-a-vis goods, others and self. It is question of moving from possessiveness to gift, from control to acceptance, from realizing one's own personal project to accomplishing God's will. So what is at stake is the sacrificing of authentic values and human riches which have to do with a person's deepest self, and which are part of God's overall plan for human beings. In such a sacrifice, the religious, in a radical way, plunges into the self-emptying of Christ. For to follow Christ in the most radical way, supposes a spiritual participation in his kenosis, in the mystery of his immolation and in his whole life of love. It is only possible to the person who has experienced a very personal encounter with Christ, so much so that his/her whole life is nothing else than life in Christ, with Christ and for Christ.¹⁶

14 Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, # 17-18.

15 Cf. Pigna, A., *Repertir du Christ...*, p. 37.

16 Cf. Häring, Bernard, *Acting on the Word*. New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux, 1968, pp., 1970, pp. 167-168.

2.2 Necessity of a Redemptorist Missionary Awareness

According to the Redemptorist Constitutions, the end of the Congregation is to:

“to continue Christ, the Saviour,¹⁷ by preaching the Word of God to the poor, as he declared of himself: ‘He sent me to preach the Good News to the poor, as he declared of himself.’ He sent me to preach the Good News to the poor” (Const. 1). It is a development which supposes, on the part of each member, a Redemptorist missionary awareness, namely of the *Vita Apostolica* “in which, for Redemptorists, their life for God and their missionary work are one” (Const. 1).¹⁸

To attain this end on the African continent, it will be necessary that the Redemptorist family develop there both in numbers and in quality. It is a development which supposes, on the part of each member, a Redemptorist missionary awareness, namely that the *Vita Apostolica* “in which, for Redemptorists, their life for God and their missionary work are one” (Const. 1).

Called to continue Christ the Saviour, following him and imitating him in his missionary action, the African Redemptorist must develop a deepening awareness of this by fixing his gaze on Christ himself, in whom person and mission are one. The Son of God is, in fact, entirely in his mission, who offers himself in his incarnation, his death and his resurrection, and thence as divine Love for humanity. Sent by the Father to humanity, Christ has accomplished his mission in his relation to the Father from all eternity and in his relation in time to human beings. To continue Christ the Saviour supposes therefore this twofold relation. The Redemptorist will not simply be a messenger. By an intrinsic connection, he will be a witness of the one, whom it is his mission to continue by proclaiming the Gospel to the poor.

17 “continuer le Christ Sauveur”: this is the French translation of the official Latin text: “Salvatoris Iesu Christi prosequi exemplum...” which in English is translated more literally: “to follow the example of Jesus Christ, the Redeemer...”

18 More literally the official English translation: “which comprises at one and the same time a life specially dedicated to God and a life of missionary work.”

By such a witnessing, the Redemptorist manifests that he is nothing that he has not first received, and consequently that he is most truly himself, only in giving what has been given to him. In other words, he is truly himself, only in giving himself totally to his mission of continuing Christ the Saviour in favour of the poor, insofar as it is possible and according to the spirit of St. Alphonsus.

Since this mission does not come from himself, the Redemptorist can only accomplish it, by continually listening to the one who sends him, and letting himself be carried along towards the goal of this sending in the footsteps and in imitation of Christ, poor, chaste and obedient. That is to say, that the Redemptorist continues the mission of Christ by the living of poverty, chastity and obedience. But in a continent where the sense of poverty is reduced to its economic dimension, where family and offspring are deeply rooted cultural values, and where authority and obedience are more and more being put in question, how can we make the religious vows of poverty, chastity and obedience meaningful?

In Burkina Faso, for example, poverty generally means a lack of the financial means to provide for one's needs. In this sense, the poor person is one who is indigent and consequently finds himself or herself condemned to beg to provide for his or her own personal needs and those of the family. On the other hand, the rich person is the one who had money and consequently can provide for personal needs and those of the family and of others, if he or she is not egocentric. Logically for someone who has never had much to do with religious, to make a vow of poverty is to want to live in a condition of economic destitution. For someone who observes the economic condition of religious, not knowing the true sense of the vow of poverty, there is a contradiction between the profession of this vow and the lived situation of religious, who are certainly not lacking the financial means to nourish, care for themselves, look after their educational needs and even give to others. And for the religious themselves, who know that their vow of poverty is not a synonym for a vow of destitution or of extreme poverty, the tendency might be to reduce this vow exclusively and uniquely to its dimension of sharing or of economic solidarity with others. In this case the very essence of the mission and identity of religious would be the worse for it, because the vow of poverty would have been twisted from its proper meaning.

It follows that to give meaning to the vow of poverty in the context of Burkina Faso, and indeed in all of Africa, is a challenge for Redemptorists. Certainly it would be important to explain to those around us the true sense of poverty which we promise to live. This poverty is not exclusively a synonym of the lack of economic means, not is it exclusively a synonym of sharing or of economic solidarity. Rather it is first, and in a special way, a synonym of an ontological and relational dependence on God and on others. But it remains true that this explanation can only be understood if, in our personal and community practice, we content ourselves to live only with the necessities of life and, especially, if we are ready to work to provide for our own economic needs and to help those in need, like the majority of citizens of Burkina Faso. It will thus be a matter of showing that, in contrast to a consumerism and a attitude which is too economic, that we are rich, not by the quantity of material and economic goods that we possess, but by the quality of the things that we can do without. Also it will be a matter of showing to those around us that life is built up by a personal and community commitment.

Poverty, in this sense, far from being destitution or humiliation, expresses the fullness and the liberation of the human being, who always remains poor in one way or another before God and before others. From this point of view, it is a virtue for those who recognize and accept themselves as such. For out of this recognition and acceptance there flows the awareness of one's being and existence as a gift received and to be passed on to others. And as Pope John Paul II tells us, before being a functional value in terms of witness and service, poverty, understood as a Gospel value and a fundamental Christian virtue, is a value in itself because it refers us back to the first of the beatitudes in the imitation of Christ.¹⁹

In a country like Burkina Faso the dream, which has not yet been influenced by the individualistic and materialistic mentality, is to assure one's family lineage through marriage and offspring. In such a culture, celibacy appears abnormal and a scandal. In such a culture, giving meaning to the vow of chastity in consecrated celibacy is a challenge for every consecrated person.

19. Cf. *Vita Consecrata*, # 90.

To do that, it seems to me necessary to begin by translating correctly the expression *vow of chastity in consecrated celibacy* into our local languages. Even if the expression, as such, is kept intact and the professed person knows what it means, this is hardly the case for the one who is listening to him, especially when he has witnessed a few cases of infidelity.

The challenge of making meaningful the vow of chastity in celibacy will only be made possible by our exclusive fidelity to this vow. By this we mean exclusive fidelity, not in the sense of a belittling of marriage and of sexual relations, but in the sense of an unconditional and absolute respect for the depths of the mystery of sexuality. For the acceptance of living in virginity or in consecrated celibacy cannot be justified, in the first place, by the renunciation of marriage. Nevertheless it has, as a consequence, the exclusion of this kind of union with another person, because it is question of a spousal choice which is expressed in the total gift of self to God, in the footsteps of, and in imitation of Christ. So it is not a matter of living without interpersonal bonds, of living in individualism or in isolation. Rather it has to do with directing our capacity for intensely relating in the service of God and of our brothers and sisters.

If being a Redemptorist is giving ourselves without reserve to Christ for his redemptive mission, the constant challenge for us will be to ask, on a daily basis, for the grace of being faithful to our vow of chastity. Chastity in consecrated celibacy, as a capacity of loving and of spiritual energy, not only contains within it a protection against the dangers of egoism and aggressiveness, but it also has the power to promote in us a sexual and affective maturation. This maturation goes in the direction of transforming carnal love into spiritual love, which involves loving the person rather than objectifying the body. So the vow of chastity does not at all hold human bodiliness in contempt. In the context of religious life, it consists in living one's sexuality in such a way that it sacrifices the genital expression of sexuality and affectivity. It does so in favour of deepening the relational dynamics that are foundational to human sexuality and of mobilizing, in a general and exclusive way, one's human affectivity in the service of the love of God and others. At stake is a total renunciation of oneself to be entirely given, open and available to the other.

In Africa, the subjectivist definition of liberty, as the power to do whatever I want, or the state of being able to do what I want, is anchored in the contemporary so-called modern mentality. This definition remains incomprehensible and unacceptable to a mentality which is unaffected by individualism. Logically it leads to conceiving of obedience as submission or lack of personal autonomy. In the face of this, how render meaningful the vow of obedience to religious marked by the modern mentality, without at the same time sinking into a collectivism which denies the rights of individuals and personal liberty? Strictly speaking, to be free means to be oneself the principle – the starting point, the first cause – of one's thought and one's action. But in the face of this definition, which applies also to religious, the question is that of knowing if the human person can be free in the full sense of the term. Is human liberty not an illusion? An illusion for anyone limited to the sphere of physical, psychological and social determinations!

But it is truly real for the one who conceives it as a gift, consisting essentially and simultaneously in the positive power of self-determination, and in the negative power of indetermination, that is, as the source of action of a person who is not himself or herself the originator of one's own being. Created in the image and likeness of God, the human being discovers his or her own being as gift, to be oneself and by oneself. Out of this awareness is born the sense of being obliged to have dominion over the world and to direct it from within, as well as to have dominion over one's own passions and to direct them in the direction of the good. Obedience to this obligation can only be a personal and free act. It is possible only to the one who is capable of assuming his or her share of responsibility in a community and of accepting its values and rules of behaviour. Obedience in this sense is nothing other than the attitude of a person who, far from renouncing his/her own will and personality, wants absolutely the authentic good which will truly fulfill him/her.

In the context of religious life, obedience is rooted not only in the fact that the religious is a creature, but still more in the fact that s/he is called to participate in the intimate life of God and to strive for uniformity with the will of God. In saying 'yes' to one's vocation, the religious exercises the

primary, supreme and fundamental act of liberty and of obedience, and so imitates Jesus, obedient to the will of his Father in all and for all. This response supposes not only a renunciation of personal choices, but equally an intelligent and responsible obedience to one's superiors and the constitutions of the religious family of which one is a member. Such an obedience entails, at one and the same time, doing what one should do and doing it without constraints.

To do this, the religious has to decide firmly to do the will of God. It demands that one consider the superior as an aid offered by God and enter into a frank and trusting dialogue with him/her. It supposes a spirit of understanding, of forgiveness and of fraternal correction in regard to the superior who can also make mistakes. And finally it demands that one be able in faith to see the face of Christ in the superior as in each and every confrere. It remains, however, that these dispositions, required for an intelligent and active obedience, are possible only if the authority of the superior is at the same time fraternal, paternal and royal, and is also exercised in a way that seeks harmony in the generous gift of self to the community and to each of the confreres.

Conclusion

So that the specific identity of the religious life be appreciated in Africa in all its dimensions, personal, mystical, ecclesial and apostolic, that it be radical and credible, it is necessary to re-think it in terms of gift of God and to become conscious of our proper mission as religious of a particular family. In a country like Burkina where Redemptorist religious life is at its beginnings, this conception and realization should be fostered in the initial formation of our candidates. If the call to religious life and the response to this call are to be thought of as gift of God for a specific mission in the Church and in the world, it seems to me, that the formation to help the future religious in this conception and realization, should itself be understood as a gift in the sense, not only of instruction, but especially as education.

By instruction here I understand everything that can give to our young people in formation the possibility of being Redemptorists with a view to the goal

of a true knowledge of the religious life in general and of the Redemptorist charism in particular. But if Redemptorist formation is limited to instruction alone, it risks forming C.Ss.R 'specialists' without arriving at the essence or being of the Redemptorist, which is possible only by education. Instruction addresses itself exclusively to reason with a view to forming it, by the acquisition of learnings and the free exercise of judgment. In contrast to that, education addresses itself to the whole person – to reason, sensibility, affectivity, sexuality, moral sense, community and social sense etc. with a view to helping the person develop and come to fulfilment by having his whole behaviour shaped by the values. Education comprises every effort to overcome in our young people in formation a way of being that is contrary to the Redemptorist vocation, to render them open to the truth of what it is to be a religious.

In this perspective of the educative dimension of formation, one must assume that the young person, whose vocation certainly cannot be put in doubt a priori, remains in one way or another, bound to the order of the world which he believes, explicitly or implicitly, to be his world. Consequently, the assumption is that the young person, while having a Redemptorist vocation and the real capacity to live its demands, does experience certain encumbrances or obstacles which he can only break through with the help of a formator who must take the initiative with a certain firmness.²⁰

This initiative is necessary because, in his current situation, the young person in formation most often does not have a sense of any lack from the point of view of his personal development. The sense of something missing which he experiences often tends to be in the order of knowledge. And for that, a young person, on his own initiative, could well ask *to be instructed* in this or that area without ever asking *to be educated*. Certainly, sometimes when it comes to instruction, it is necessary to take account of the needs and expectations of the young people in formation, and require for this that they make these

20. This help, which is to be understood by way of education, can sometimes be perceived as a kind of *interference* by the young person, who in his current situation of formation, harbours the twofold characteristic of autonomy and of extreme dependence. *On the one hand*, he is self-sufficient. But *on the other hand*, he can only arrive at the truth of his religious vocation with the help of another person.

needs and expectation known. But from the young person's perspective, when it comes to education, nothing can be imposed as a condition and nothing can be demanded of him, not even that he have recourse to his formator to express his need for education, the conditions of which are, unlike those of instruction, entirely in the hands of the formator.

In our houses of formation, it is not only a matter of taking account of instruction which can be the thing most easily provided. But it is education that must be taken seriously, which is the thing most difficult to achieve. Education is the most difficult process, certainly the most important, because it embraces all the human dimensions in view of helping the young person in his journey towards a religious life freely assumed and authentic. This entails the struggle especially of overcoming the tendency of possessiveness in relation to material goods, of the attraction to married life and of the pursuit of one's own projects, conceived of individualistically. In summary, in our houses of initial formation to Redemptorist religious life, it is question of leading our young people from what is ingrained in them as second nature towards a true liberty. And for this reason, it is necessary to form them, not just by way of instruction, but especially by educating them.

In the pursuing the educative dimension of formation, which consists in helping the young people to respond with their whole being to their religious vocation, the best method can only be that of witnessing to the consecrated life on the part of the formators themselves. To encounter Christ, who calls them to follow and imitate him in a radical way, our young people need witnesses, who have already been born of this encounter with Christ, in the footsteps of St. Alphonsus and of our forebears in this state of missionary religious life. Because this witnessing comes out of a vocation which is received as gift, it derives its strength only from the voice of God and of the Congregation, where the formator and the persons in formation, as witnesses, exist in a reciprocal relationship with one another. To be a religious is nothing other than receiving from others this witnessing to Christ, and in turn becoming witnesses to him in one's own right. Experiencing the witness of their formators, the young people are impelled to commit themselves to this same witnessing on their part. Certainly this is done in strength and

in weakness, in joy and sorrow, but always out of what they have seen and heard. In this way they will come to understand that they reach fulfilment, in their state as consecrated persons, only in giving themselves in this same witnessing to Christ.

