

# BROTHERHOOD VOCATION IN AFRICA



Br. Vitus Echesirim Osuji, Fms



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## **DEDICATION**

Felix Muwawa, a Malawian ex-Br.  
...an exemplary colleague in the Life whose exit from the  
fold inspired this work.

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## FOREWORD

The Church of God is well established on the African continent, and vocations to priesthood and consecrated life are still flourishing unlike in the other continents. However, vocation to the Religious Brotherhood has some challenges: premature exit, among the young African Religious Brothers, is rampant. Currently in most of the African world, people like to enjoy the works and services of the Religious Brothers but do not want any of their male family members to join the Religious Brothers. The reason is not that the life is not binding but that the Religious Brotherhood vocation is little recognized since the vocation does not correspond to the natural inclinations of the Africans' cultural mindset. The necessary question then could be, 'What does it mean to be a Religious Brother in Africa today?' 'Is there any joy or interest in being a Religious Brother today?' 'Does this situation of Africa require serious reconsideration of the Religious Brothers' status in the name of the Gospel?' In other words, 'Can the Religious Brother not do more in the Church and be better than what he is doing now?'

To understand fully the status of the Religious Brother in Africa, Br. Vitus, in this book, takes into account the history of the vocation to the Religious Brotherhood on the continent and the mentality or social life in the traditional Africa, which seems to militate against full recognition of the Religious Brother's vocation. He makes the point that Religious life is not a "doing" but a "being" vocation; what Brother does, does not authenticate him, but how he lives.

Meanwhile, the dynamics of religious life are more of the combination of secular education and the learning of the particular Institute Founder's charism and spirituality as approved by the Church. This involves personalized training or formation of the individual young men God sends to the particular institute. The delicate and personalized work requires the capacity for discernment, listening, proximity, and intense spirituality. All these attitudes help the candidates to Religious Brotherhood to mature humanly, spiritually, and charismatically. It is a delicate and demanding task. The author, in this book, painstakingly tries to explain the meaning and the challenges of being a Religious Brother in an African context to enable those in charge of training the candidates for

Religious Brother's life to make it not only culturally relevant but also gospel-centred.

To be a Brother in Africa is first to accept being a gift of the Holy Spirit to the Church and the world and then dispose oneself to be transformed by the grace of God to become a living witness of his merciful Love. It demands personal configuration with Christ since the goal is to effectively engage in and actualize the great and noble Divine Project of building the Kingdom of God, which Christ the Divine Master Himself started. In other words, to be a Brother in Africa is to assume the person of Christ and become another Christ in a way that makes meaning to the people of Africa. There is a particular similarity between Christ's earthly private life and the Religious Brother's lifestyle. Therefore, to be a Brother in Africa is to accept to be a manifestation of the presence of God who, in Christ, humbled Himself to take the form of a slave to reassure His children that He is a loving Father who understands and shares in their predicaments.

Br. Vitus' testimony in this book is primarily to create awareness of the necessity of the Religious Brother's vocation in the Church, and to clarify that the Religious Brother's lifestyle is not foreign to the African culture, therefore, can sustain the spiritual quest of the young African men who want to consecrate their lives to God unconditionally. He invites all and sundry to appreciate and promote vocation to the Religious Brotherhood.

To be a Brother in Africa is challenging but possible when the individual is personally and spiritually matured enough to resist the attraction of the modern world and the demands of the African culture. Neither academic qualification nor good will to serve the Lord, nor job excellence nor social recognition can sustain a person in the Religious Life; spirit of detachment and self-transcendent theocentric love only, can.

In this book, one discovers that Religious Brotherhood is a unique vocation and the uniqueness does not lie on its being a special vocation but on the exact resemblance of its lifestyle to the private earthly life Christ lived, which manifests in community life and the profession of the three evangelical vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience. In other words, the Religious Brother's life is the summary of the Christian love. Hence the emphasis on fraternity (at the intra- and inter-cultural levels)

and material detachment, in the training of the Religious Brothers.

The keynote of the preaching of Christ is love, which he manifested concretely by forming a community with his twelve apostles. The psalmist puts it; thus, "Yes, it is good; it is sweet for the brothers to live together and be united" (Ps 132: 1). Moreover, "Look how they love each other." Tertullian commenting on Acts 4: 32-35, says anyone who carries a Religious Brotherhood vocation must show that the calling of humanity to communion and unity is not only possible but also in action.

Perseverance in the Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa, in the one hand requires letting oneself to be carried away by the wind of the Holy Spirit and to have as one's vital joy only the one the same Holy Spirit gives. On the other hand, it involves the realization that work does not define the Religious Brother rather how he does the work defines him, which portrays Religious spirituality. Perseverance requires also carrying ones cross every day and following the Master being aware that "the best is coming only at the cost of great pains" and that "it is necessary to go to the end of one's sorrow to light hope like a fire".

**Fr. Eile Rodrigue EMETE, pme, Nairobi July 12, 2020**



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## 1. INTRODUCTION

Living a fulfilled Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa is challenging. The perseverance rate in the vocation is poor compared to other Christian vocations like Priesthood and Religious Sisterhood. Brothers from different nationalities, tribal backgrounds and different socio-economic levels quit after sometime in Religious Brotherhood vocation as well as those who have attained very high academic positions and had occupied enviable leadership positions. Experience shows that those who leave do not have the same temperament or the same personality characteristics and they do not belong to the same geographical area. The situations, conditions, and circumstances surrounding their abandoning the vocation vary tremendously: some were in misery, some in affluence, others in a rich spiritual environment, and others still in a very dry spiritual surrounding. What could be the reason the young African Religious Brothers quit the Religious Brotherhood vocation after they had taken vows to live the life efficaciously? Different people give different reasons for the phenomenon. This work attempts to point out some factors that may be the cause of the negative experience of premature vocational loss among young African Religious Brothers.

Africans usually do not give up easily in difficult situations. They are also generous and hospitable. They express joy and liveliness despite the existential hardships they encounter in daily life. They live as if well-adjusted to the life of sacrifice as many Christian Saints did in the past. Africans are deeply and visibly religious. Judging from outside, one may conclude that African culture is adaptable to Religious Life. However, the rate at which the young African Religious Brothers abandon the vocation suggests otherwise. It is therefore difficult to comprehend why African young men quit Religious Brotherhood vocation easily. This work is partially an effort to suggest some reasons that can contribute to the exodus of young men from Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa.

The objectives of the work are to stimulate thoughts, provoke reactions from stakeholders in Religious Brotherhood vocation, and challenge the African young men who have the interest to serve God as Religious Brothers to appreciate that Religious Brotherhood vocation belongs to them.

The work will serve as a revelation to the Christians who do not know the purpose and essence of Religious Brotherhood vocation so that they may realize and appreciate their obligation to promote, support and encourage the vocation in Africa. The work will immensely help the African Religious Brothers to appreciate and live their vocation with audacity and conviction, and be the mirror of Christian life that Religious Brotherhood life is supposed to be. The work will help them to not only realize the effect of culture in their vocation but also to understand that the cultural mind-set at work in their subconscious can hinder them from feeling fulfilled in the vocation. They will be able to differentiate between the effect of personal low self-concept and the actual non-recognition of Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa. The content of the pages will encourage them to stabilize their vocational identity in the African Church.

The work starts with a brief background of Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa and then narrates briefly its humble beginning and the perennial stigma it bears due to African mind-set. While touching the nature of the mind-set, it discusses how Religious Life seems natural and compatible to the Africans and their culture.

Africans believe in a higher being and offer worthy sacrifices to their deity. Traditional Africans were ready to offer human beings to get what they wanted from their deity. Nevertheless, it seems that fear instead of faith inspired and still inspires the sacrifice that Africans make to the deity. Consequently, the work tends to reason that the spirit of Religious Life contradicts Africa's central cultural values and that Africans are not ready to compromise their cultural values. Africans repudiate anything that threatens their cultural value system. The values of Religious Brotherhood vocation reflect and at the same time contradict the African cultural values. As such, the Africans see the vocation as ambiguous, foreign, and provocative.

Even though one may say with Christian mind-set that Religious Brotherhood vocation is the decisive test of the generosity of the African Christians, the work hits at the unspoken fact: Africa's material poverty and deep attachment to progeny and preservation of life constitute the central unconscious factors that make vocation to Religious Brotherhood unpopular in Africa. This view may not satisfy all the readers.

Nevertheless, if the reader starts to think seriously about vocation to Religious Brotherhood in Africa, the aim of the work will have been achieved.

At certain points in the work, the reader may wonder if the author is comparing Religious Brotherhood vocation to Priesthood, Sisterhood, and the other forms of Christian vocation. That is not the case. However, being a work meant to teach a very important lesson, it is necessary and helpful to go from the known to the unknown. People know the Priesthood and Sisterhood vocations substantially but Religious Brotherhood vocation is not well known. Therefore, the Priesthood and Sisterhood vocations are reference points to introduce the Religious Brotherhood vocation. The book is neither a research work, nor a history of Religious Life and Religious Brotherhood vocation. It is not the exploration of the theology of Religious Life or the ecclesial dimension of Religious Brotherhood vocation. Rather, it is a personal reflection based on lived experience, whose aim is to create awareness of the Religious Brotherhood vocation.

If African culture appears presented negatively in the work, it is not intentional. Africans have a rich culture of which they are proud. However, the fact remains that the traditional African religious practice, which was consistent with the orthodox traditional African religion's belief system, subsisted in a culture whose values, in the present Christianised society, do not synchronize with some of the Christian values. Traces of unchristian traditional African values, which militate against Religious Brotherhood vocation, exist still in the modern African culture. There is, therefore, an urgent need to enculturate the gospel message in the African culture today. Doing so will enhance the understanding of Religious Brotherhood vocation, which will in turn improve the process of gospel enculturation.

The phrase 'traditional Africa' is used interchangeably in the work to mean both the 'primitive' Africa and 'civilized' Africa of today because it seems the difference between the religious attitude of the 'primitive' Africans and the present day Africans, as far as relationship with the deity is concerned, is very thin. Africans have always been a very religious group of people but still are struggling to acculturate genuine Christian faith. The negative attitude of the contemporary Africans towards Religious Brotherhood vocation is not a secret and not intentional either. The work is not a critical analysis of the Africans' attitude towards Religious

Brotherhood vocation. It is a thought provoking project aimed at creating awareness of the Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa. The implicit effort of the work is to present the simplicity of Religious Brothers as the reflection of the spirituality of Jesus Christ. The language of the work may sound caustic in some places, but with a purpose. It is good the young Africans know from the start the cost of being a Christian so that they may appreciate the Cross of Christ, which is central to Religious Brotherhood vocation. Some issues raised in this work may be controversial. The author did not intend it so. It is only a pedagogical approach meant to arouse the interest of inquisitive minds so that they can investigate the issues and establish the facts about them scientifically. The author will be happy to welcome dialogues from the readers either in writing or in person.

Detailed bibliography is not evident in the work. This is because the work does not intend to embark on literature review related to African culture or Religious Life. As has been said before, the work is a spontaneous reflection, a sort of thinking aloud in the face of the worrisome infidelity and lack of fortitude that are common place in the Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa today. The reader does not need to go far into the past works to ascertain the authenticity of the facts and issues raised in this work. The work clarifies many things about Christian vocation. It will make an interesting reading. Happy reading.

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# 1 BACKGROUND OF RELIGIOUS BROTHER'S VOCATION IN AFRICA

## 1.1 *Religious Brothers in Africa and Struggle for Identity*

A Brother is a male Catholic faithful who responds to the Call of God to consecrate himself to God and dedicate his entire life to the service of God, practicing evangelical poverty, Christ-like obedience, and perfect chastity in the spirit of renewal of his baptismal vows with an adult's intention to live them in a more radical way. The life of Religious Brothers reflects the simple life Christ lived on earth. Vocation to Religious Brothers in Africa started in a humble way because the *ministerial work* of the Priests was more in demand than the *being-witness* of the Religious in those early days of the advent of Christianity in Africa. There was less notice of the Religious Brothers because of their simple lifestyle. They did not assume direct public leadership but were active in the fields, classrooms and among children whom they prepared for the sacraments. Some of them were craftsperson who devoted their services to the necessary temporal affairs of the Church as the first Deacons in the early Christian community did (Acts 6:1-7).

The European Priests who evangelized Africa came with helpers, some of whom were Reverend Brothers. They also recruited some Lay African helpers, mainly men, who took them around the local parishes and helped them as interpreters. Some of the Lay helpers lived with the Priests. People knew they were not Priests therefore did not call them Fathers. To address the helpers politely people gave them the title, brother. Brother and sister are common titles by which Christians address one another. However, there is a difference between brother and Reverend Brother. The latter is a title that indicates special consecration.

The Religious Brothers are Reverend Brothers. The title differentiates them from those called brother by virtue of their membership in the various pious societies like Legion of Mary or Sacred Heart of Jesus Society in the parish. Any lay male associated with a Priest was called 'brother,' whether he was a cleaner, gardener, messenger or a catechist; even Seminarians, minor and senior, were called brothers. That was how associating Religious Brothers with servants of Priests started. As such, the identity of Religious Brothers was blurred and the trend

continues. The Christians who have the special calling to serve God in a special way in the Church – the Priests, Sisters, and Brothers – are Reverend because God himself has honoured them. Reverend, (Rev. for short) means “honourable,” “revered,” “worthy of honour/respect,” or “deserving great respect” (of.English Dictionary). So, like the others, the Religious Brother is consecrated to God in a special way. He is sacred to God. He is set apart for the special service to God and people. He is revered not for his own sake but for the sake of God who honoured him by means of the special Call.

### ***1.2 Brotherhood is a Full-fledged Vocation***

The Religious Brotherhood is a full-fledged and approved vocation in the Church. Prior to the evangelization of Africa, there existed Religious Congregations solely of Brothers. For instance, the De La Salle Brothers Congregation was founded around 1700 in France. The Marist Brothers of the Schools was founded in 1817, also in France. These Brothers lived in communities and worked for their upkeep as Christ and his twelve apostles did. With time, the European Religious Brothers started to come to Africa through the invitation of the expatriate Priests. The expatriate Priests who were in Africa already knew of the existence of Religious Brothers and the worth and necessity of Religious Brotherhood vocation and mission in the Church and in the society, especially in the area of formal education and other temporal services religiously undertaken to facilitate the gospel ministry of the Priests.

When the Religious Brothers came to Africa, the Church had not yet enough Priests. The Bishops’ interest was to get as many Priests as possible to take up the immense pastoral work in the virgin Africa. Moreover, few young men had received formal education. The few literate ones who desired to serve God admired the figure of a ministerial Priest that enjoyed popularity among the adults of the society because of their leadership role as the shepherd of the flock of Christ and as the only spiritual directors then. As time went on, it became clear that the Priests could not substitute Religious Brothers because Religious Brotherhood vocation is a full-fledged vocation with a particular role in the Church.



To allow the Religious Brotherhood vocation alongside the Priestly vocation then, the indigenous founders of Religious Brothers Congregations decided to keep, as Religious Brothers, the aspirants who were advanced in age or very young but not interested in academics or not intellectually vibrant for academic work. Thus, the Religious Brotherhood vocation was seen as an incomplete vocation, which depended on the discretion of the Bishops. The pastoral situation by then justified the vocational arrangement but the intention was short of the Church's mind.

### ***1.3 Perennial Stigma of Religious Brotherhood Vocation in Africa***

As has been indicated before, in the early years of missionary activities in Africa, Priests were very few and the few were expatriates. As Christianity started to take root in Africa, young Africans desired to serve God in a special way by leaving their homes. They did not know the difference between Religious Brothers and Priests. Their interest was to serve God in a special way. The priests were the only spiritual directors who helped the youngsters in vocational discernment. To discern their vocation, the simple criterion was academic intelligence. Those who were intelligent enough to study in the seminary went for Priesthood and the less academically inclined or viable ones went for Religious Brotherhood. All the same, there were intelligent young men who had first school leaving certificate or teacher training certificates who became Religious Brothers, but not without recrimination. People branded them unintelligent because of the erroneous criterion of vocational discernment in those days. Some of them were convinced in the option they took and lived their Religious Brotherhood life with genuine satisfaction.

Not every diocesan Priest knew the essence of Religious Brotherhood vocation in the Church. They were not to blame for the ignorance because since Christ did not institute Religious Brotherhood vocation as an office, Religious Brotherhood was seen and is still seen today as a redundant vocation. Even though Christ did not institute Religious Brotherhood, he himself lived as a Religious Brother or rather he lived Religious Brothers' lifestyle of which the spirituality represents the hidden life of Christ. It was only later in the 3<sup>rd</sup> Century AD that the hunger to live a perfect life triggered some people to discover that in Christ's earthly life, Religious Life was evident. As such, some Christians

took to solitary life of poverty and chastity. It was only gradually that the like-minded spiritual hungry Christians, with the encouragement of the mother Church, started community life as a rich way to express *agape*, the basis of chastity for the Kingdom.

Since the Brothers did not preside over Eucharistic celebration or took active leadership role in public, and did not administer sacraments, people erroneously took it that Brothers were not intelligent. Unfortunately, the Religious Brothers, like the Deacons of the first Christian community, undertook work related to the temporal affairs of the Church. In that way, they appeared like servants to the Priests. The Deacons did not serve the priests no less than the Religious Brothers are Priests' servants. Since a Religious Brother is less visible in the sacramental celebrations, he is the minor and the priest the major. For the Africans, as for the Greeks, he who talks more in public is the master (Cf. Acts 14:12) because he who mobilizes the crowd is the leader. This is not the case in a Christian community where the greatest is the servant (Matt. 20:26). Africans have not accepted this reasoning because quantity remains the basis of choice and not quality.

They are not to blame because those who do menial job in the society are the less educated, the less privileged, and the materially poor. All, dishonourable. Not being academically intelligent is dishonourable so also being a servant; especially in a culture where the basis of value system is still quantity; and status remains the standard of identity.

In Africa, social popularity has always been the mark of authenticity and a sign of power. It is easy for Africans to conclude that Priests lord it over the Religious Brothers because of Africans' concept of authority. He who talks less is the less. No African would readily bear seeing his relation 'disgraced.' When it happens, Africans regret. Their regret is not because Religious Brotherhood vocation does not provide the holiness atmosphere that usually attracts people to a special service of God. Their regret is due to social pressure and cultural mind-set. Africans still, erroneously, see the Religious Brotherhood vocation as a stage in the process of becoming a Priest. For the Africans, Priesthood symbolically represents the fullness of a process and not a divine Call as such. Little wonder then some female religious and diocesan priests are surprised to see young aspirants to Religious Brotherhood vocation. Some, in their

great wonder and dismay ask, “Do people still go for this thing?” The stigma. The Religious Brotherhood vocation is not “this thing;” it is a divine Call, a complete vocation of its own, an independent state of life in the Church, which is at once biblical, theological and ecclesial in origin and essence.

## 2. THE NATURE OF RELIGIOUS BROTHERHOOD VOCATION

### 2.1 *Religious Brotherhood Vocation is Unique*

Religious Life, as a special vocation in the Church, starts when individual Christians embrace a style of life characterized by total separation from the world (Kanu, 2015). The primary intention of the Religious is to be devoted to prayer with the aim at achieving an unalloyed union with God. History has it that the desire to be holy impelled devout Christians to leave their homes and go into the desert just to pray. Such Christians would not want interaction with people but thanks to the wise intervention of the Church, they opened up to those who sought for their spiritual direction. The Church encourages the Religious to interact with and work among people because the true nature of the Church manifests in communion. Gradually, the Religious started to undertake certain apostolates among the people. However, their style of life or spirituality (the way of being), which is communitarian (community life), is more important to the Church than their apostolate. The primary concern of the Church is how the Religious people do the apostolate since they do the same type of work the ordinary Christians do (*Vita Consecrata*, 60).

Generally, what people do is more noticeable than how they live. A person who takes *living* as a personal life project runs the risk of being hidden. This risk is more pronounced in Africa than anywhere else in the world. Visible affluence is more important in Africa than the *spirit* behind the means to the affluence. In Religious Life, the *spirit* behind a person's achievement is more important than the visible achievement. To be a man in Africa is an achievement because he has and must have something to show for it. Proverbially, for the Igbos, the proof of a man is a 'prominent nose.' Thus they say, *Ahu dimkpa, ahu ogwodogwo imi ya*, which literally means, "When you see a man, you see his giant nose." The "giant nose" may be in the form of wives and children, vehicles and houses. To this extent, a Religious Brothers is not and cannot be a man in Africa. However, a Religious Brothers is man who lives out the theocentric spirit behind being a man, in the biological sense. He takes the bull by the horn to demonstrate, with his religious vows, what God expects of a man. Christ was the forerunner in this divine project. For this reason, Igbos

call him *Odogwu-na-agma* (a powerful warrior), which is a sign of a man. Thus, Christ's nose, proverbially, was prominent. If the Africans had known that he did not have anywhere to lay his head, the title could have eluded him.

The basis of the Religious Brothers' vocation is the Christian baptism, which is the sacrament of initiation into being men and women after the mind of God. The Religious Brothers' profession is the renewal of the baptismal vows with the intention to live it radically more intensely. The profession of the vows of evangelical counsels that Religious Brothers make is an act of dying to self and to the world; it is a witness, a mission, and it is as human sacrifice made to a deity. God recognizes anyone who does this as a man. A Religious Brother is like a scapegoat in the Jewish culture. Like Christ who emptied himself, a Religious Brother divests of himself the earthly good to accept the honour God invests on him. This does not make sense to the Africans. In the Church, the Religious does not belong to the hierarchy of the Church but to her holiness. In that capacity, Religious Brothers bear witness that is dignified before God and respected by the Church. Yet the vocation is enigmatic to both traditional and Christian Africans due to cultural mind-set.

The Religious Brotherhood vocation is unique and indispensable in the Church. Priesthood and female religious vocations cannot substitute it. Its uniqueness rests on the fact that Religious Brothers are the sacrament of the earthly life of Jesus Christ. A sacrament is a sign that points to a hidden reality. As Jesus was a man and unmarried, therefore looked insignificant among his people, so also a Religious Brother is a man and unmarried, therefore seem insignificant among the Africans of today. It is only in a culture where faith in God is out of love for Him and not out of quest for prosperity and selfish favour from God, that Religious Brotherhood vocation can make sense. Majority of the Africans, it seems, are not yet mature in faith; or is it in love? The Catholic Bishops of Eastern Nigeria noted this in their joint pastoral letter when they said, Christianity has made impact in our society. There has been real increase in numbers. Some desirable changes have been made in the personalities of many people due to Christianity but the extent of such changes must not be exaggerated.

There is abundant evidence to show the prevalence of superstitions, native customs and beliefs as well as materialism under a thin veneer of Christianity among many of our Christians (Catholic Bishops of Eastern Nigeria, 1985. *Put out into deep water: A Joint Pastoral Letter*, Onitsha, 11-12). Judging from the Bishops' evaluation, many people's faith in Africa is immature because they seem to lay more emphasis on life procreation and preservation than on voluntary life donation, which is the crux of Religious Brotherhood vocation.

The foundation of Religious Life is faith in the other world – supernatural. African culture tends to be about this world – natural. Therefore, the supernatural values of Religious Life are not in consonance with the natural values of African culture. Is it possible that the values of Religious Life are too supernatural to make any sense in the African culture? Does the value system of Africa oppose the value system of Christianity? Religious Life, or more generally, the Christian vocation, is trans-cultural, even trans-temporal: Christian vocation is not limited to any culture or time. The values of Religious Life are based on the God-centred ideals, which attract the faithful and condition them to convert to God. This conversion requires love. Love presupposes selflessness, which is the only condition for theocentric self-transcendence. Africans seem to incline more to egocentricity or at best philanthropy than to theocentric self-transcendent love because of cultural mind-set. Religious Life, especially the Religious Brotherhood vocation, does not thrive among people who do not understand the meaning of *agape* love.

## **2.2 Religious Brotherhood: a Hidden Being Vocation**

Religious Brothers seem hidden because theirs is a vocation of *being*. They are not Deacons whose role in the Church involves *doing*. The dire need to meet with the temporal affairs of the Church necessitated the office of Deacons in the early Christian community –the nascent Church. Following the apostolic trend some Founders of Religious Brothers' Congregation intended that Brothers offer help to the parish Priests. Consequently, some Brothers specialize in different skills: building, tailoring, cooking, painting, teaching and a host of others. They rendered the service in the interest of the Church in the spirit of the early Deacons. The spiritual work of preaching and prayer the Apostles

undertook (Acts 6:4) did appear more honourable than the sharing of food and other material goods the Deacons focused on. The Deacons were “respected men full of Spirit and wisdom” (Acts 6:3) but were not in the rank of the Apostles. Their services enhanced the work of God. They worked at the background while the Apostles worked in the forefront. ...But a Brother is not a Deacon.

The Deacon fulfils the mission of *doing* so also the Priest. Theirs is a mandated role. Religious Life is a different thing all together. It is not a vocation of *doing* but of *being*. To this extent, the Religious Brother’s vocation is different from the vocation of a Deacon. Though both serve, the emphasis of the service, for the Deacon is on *what* while for the Religious Brother the emphasis is on *how*.

The Church does not measure the theological and ecclesiastical significance of Religious Brother by what he *does* but by *how* Christ-like he lives and does the work. The implication is that a Religious Brother, who *does* nothing, in terms of physical action or practical apostolate, is still worthwhile and relevant to the Church. For this reason, the author visualizes Religious Life poetically as the ‘Flower of the Church,’ flower understood as “beauty;” beauty because Religious Life, especially Religious Brothers, is like a decoration, which brings out the beauty and the essence of the Church in the world.

Applying the analogy of flower to African cultural understanding of beauty may not make any sense to a traditional African. The traditional Africans do not plant trees for their flower or beauty but for their fruits. For them, the beauty of a tree lies on the quality and quantity of fruits it bears. The interest of an African is neither in the attractiveness of flowers nor in their colour. Traditional Africans quickly cut down a tree that produces only flowers and no fruits. If the Africans see a Religious Brother as a colourful tree, it is not yet attractive to them because the tree does not bear economic fruits. To say the least, to the Africans, the Religious Brothers are silent. Africans do not know that colour ‘shouts.’ It shouts in the ears of those who understand and know how it shouts.

The Church understands colour and knows how and why it shouts but has not devised yet the means of letting her members hear and understand how colour shouts. There is an evidence to support this claim.

The Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life (CICLSAL), in 2015, published a booklet with the title, *Identity and Mission of the Religious Brother in the Church*.

The introductory part of it reads,

*“The Religious Brother and Sister, by participating in the saving mystery of Christ and the Church, are permanent reminders for all Christian people of the importance of the total gift of self to God and a reminder that the mission of the Church, respecting the various vocations and ministries within it, is one and is shared by all. However, we recognise that the vocation of the Religious Brother and Sister is not always well understood and appreciated within the Church (para.1)”.*

This statement indicates that seemingly the booklet is the Church’s first bold step to create the awareness of Religious Brothers’ vocation. The booklet is the evidence that the Church knows the worth and relevance of the Religious Brothers in the Church. Providentially, the author started the present work in 2014 while the cited publication came out in 2015. It is providential then to learn that the ignorance about the “value and necessity” (*ibid*) of Religious Brotherhood vocation is not an African issue only. However, where it is an issue in the African context is the stigma attached to it due to cultural mind-set, which makes Africans see Religious Brotherhood as a vague vocation.

### **2.3 Religious Life is an Ambiguous Vocation**

Africans see Religious Life as an ambiguous vocation because Religious Life seems to fit finely into the religious understanding and tradition of the African people but at the same time delicately contradicts the most important value in the African culture, which is life generation and life preservation. Traditional Africans could ‘kill’ to have children or to get money to feed the children. This is similar to Religious Brothers’ self-donation in love to serve God in humanity. The parents of the Religious Brothers could have understood their children’s vocation as a fragrant offering pleasing to God, generously offered to draw his blessings upon everyone, but the people who rejoice with them do not seem to understand.



Africans celebrate Religious profession with glamour and pomp as if they know what they are doing, as if offering their child unconditionally generously. The joy the young Professed Religious Brothers radiate after consecration plausibly points to the fact that they understand what it means to be a Religious Brother in the African context. Is the lavish celebration worth it? Do people rejoice because the professed Brother is a scapegoat, the icon of perfect charity or an achiever who has drawn crowds? What gives the young professed Brother joy?

So far, Religious Brothers' vocation seems insignificant not only in Africa but also in the Church as well. A Brother is a male, and male children are highly valued in most of the African cultures. The value of a male child depends on high achievements expected of men in Africa. For those who practice patrilineal system of marriage, male children and the custodian of the family heritage. For the cultures that practice matrilineal system of marriage, the male children give their girl children issues that keep the family inheritance intact. The happiness of the relatives of a young professed African Religious Brothers reposes on the fact that to have professed is an achievement, at least many people gathered and merriment happened. Whether people understand the sacrifice inherent in the vocation or not is another issue. What is certain in African today is that people fail to understand what a Brother contributes to the Church, to his family, and to society. Yet he appears great, respectable, and dignified thanks to the special vocation: consecrated, set apart, chaste, poor, obedient, and belonging to God. Here lies the confusion about the Religious Brother's vocation in Africa.

### 3. RELIGIOUS BROTHERHOOD VOCATION ENCOUNTERS AFRICAN CULTURE

#### 3.1 *Religious Brotherhood Vocation in Africa*

When African indigenes began to found male Religious Congregations, their concept of Religious Brothers was almost the concept of lower clergy or domestic-servant. It was a misconception, a deviation from the original idea behind the origin of Religious Life in the Church. De-emphasis on work and emphasis on the *life* of the Religious Brothers make some Catholic clergy think that Religious Brotherhood vocation is a redundant vocation. Silence about the promotion of vocation to the Religious Brothers conveys this negative message very subtly and it infuses the mentality of the Africans. Parents are uncomfortable when their children want to be Religious Brothers. For them the idea of Religious Brother conveys a domestic-servant image.

Africans do not prize what is not glamorously popular and celebrated, dreaded and mysterious. In the traditional African religiosity, a priest belongs more to the spirits than to human beings. African Christians inherited the mentality, which has become the binocular through which they see the Christian priests. Consequently, Africans see anyone at 'special service' in the Church as a priest. This attribution seems indelible in the cognitive grain of the Africans.

If they realize that the person is not a priest and he is a man and stays around the priest, he is automatically taken as the priest's servant. This is in line with the same traditional mind-set: no one nears a priest except the other priests or their servants. It is a concrete way of thinking, based on cultural heritage; African traditional priests were not common people. Their companions were only the other traditional priests or initiated servants.

Seeing Religious Brothers as domestic-servants permeates the mentality of the people of Africa because of cultural mind-set. Due to the erroneous popular view that Religious Brothers are for the unintelligent young men, many young aspirants drop the aspiration. It is common to hear African adults discourage their parishioners or relations to become Religious Brothers. They do this without qualms, even though they do not have any obvious theological or ecclesiastical reason.

The fact is that they only voice out their unconscious status-bent mentality – a mentality that fixes the worth of a person on social popularity and wealth. African young men must be aware of this cultural mind-set to make proper vocational discernment. Recommending a young man for Religious Brothers vocation because he is not academically intelligent enough to study in the seminary is a slight on the Religious Brotherhood vocation. It is not a credit to the Church and to society.

The concept of a Brother being ‘useless’ goes with an unspoken assumption by the Africans that those who become Religious Brothers are lazy, disoriented, or disillusioned people who are not qualified to become Priests. The assumption is forceful and persistent even though many Religious Brothers have achieved the highest academic excellence possible and held public offices of no ordinary merit. However, such Religious Brothers remain simple, modest unassuming, and religious in consonance with the *spirit* of their divine Calling.

It is common to hear adult Africans pathetically sympathizing with such Brothers and repeatedly caution them, “Oh if you had become a Priest!” Such comments inadvertently create some cognitive dissonance in such Brothers who may rationalize their reason for remaining Brothers.

It is good that such Brothers start to understand that the discomfort they feel in their vocation is a sort of being in sympathy with the cultural mind-set and not because Religious Brotherhood vocation is dishonourable or unfulfilling. It is good that the young African men who might in future feel sincerely called to be Religious Brothers realize that the gospel values substantiate a Call and not the cultural standard. It is good that African children learn early enough the type of image adult Africans have of a Religious Brother so that it may not sound strange or embarrassing to them at the critical moment of their Christian vocational aspiration.

Africans tend to define Religious Brotherhood vocation relative to the Priesthood vocation by saying, “It is like priesthood” or “It is not priesthood.” It is not yet easy for the African Religious Brothers to say what the vocation is instead of saying what it is not. This may be because of the usual cultural mind-set. African Religious Brothers are the products of the African culture. It is not yet easy for them, it seems, to see their vocation as similar to scapegoat concept in the Jewish culture.

The scapegoat carries the sins of the people and gets lost instead of the people. This concept sounds like a curse and is an abomination in the African culture. None will want to be a scapegoat. No family will be willing to donate one either. Hence the proverb, *Onye iberibe di mma iji chuo aja ma o ga-esi n'ama onye aputa*: “A fool is good for a sacrifice but from whose kindred must they come?”

Many African Religious Brothers may not be comfortable to identify with the scapegoat. This is because of the prevalent mentality around them. Not until the African Religious Brothers start to see themselves as belonging to the holiness of the Church and not to its hierarchy, the actualization of their identity in the Church and in society will remain elusive. Having said this, the African Christian Church must disentangle herself from the African cultural mesh. Not until this is done, the Africans will continue to disparage the Religious Brotherhood vocation. The earlier the Church in Africa started seeing Religious Life as belonging to the holiness of the Church and not to the hierarchy, the more balanced the Africans' attitude towards Christian vocation would be and the higher perseverance rate in Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa would be.

Africans are a people of status. They need to be at a certain level in the society to feel belonging. It is not a negative ideology because to live is to grow and an upward shift in social status is a sign of social growth, which is praiseworthy. In the mind of the Africans, a Religious Brother is a Priest in the making, in the process of growing. This way of reasoning is in line with the African human developmental principle. However, the logic is wrong with reference to Religious Brotherhood vocation. The growth of a man in the African context is measured by the material wealth he generates. The material fortune he generates is measured by the standard of life of the people in his immediate household. Pursuit of personal aggrandizement in wealth generation is selfishness but it is becoming the order of the day in the African culture of today. Selfishness is opposed to the Religious Life value system.

Africans fail to understand this fact because Africa's value system is oriented towards nature. *Hidden* life of holiness does not appeal to Africans. The values of simplicity, modesty and humility do not appeal to Africans as such because of cultural mind-set.

Thus, Africans tend to see Religious Brothers who are faithful to their Religious Calling as timid, therefore unfulfilled. As such, promotion of Religious Brotherhood is rare and it seems not considered necessary at all. This is not out of malice but due to the same concrete way of thinking, which sees every man in a cassock as a priest. The silence about the promotion of Religious Brothers' vocation in Africa has reached the stage to see it as an unconscious rejection of what is not worthwhile. Religious Brothers' lifestyle is incompatible with the African *status-conscious* mentality. The Religious Brothers' lifestyle is a challenge to the African aristocratic mentality.

Living a hidden, humble, and modest life is a virtue but no African family wants such a virtue so glaringly. Jesus lived a hidden, humble, and modest life in Nazareth, his relatives saw him as the son of a carpenter (Matt. 14:55). The Jews did not believe that a Messiah would hail from Nazareth, so, they did not acknowledge Jesus Christ for what he was. Jesus' triumphant entry into Jerusalem was on a donkey's back. The lowly hailed him along the way as he passed. The wealthy of the Jewish society planned to kill him for making a caricature of the supposed dignity expected of the promised Messiah of God. Jesus Christ lived humbly to show people what was necessary in life. Religious Brothers' vocation is the recapitulation of that earthly life of Jesus Christ, but the African Christians do not yet notice it. The Religious Brotherhood vocation is not attractive to the Africans. Some serious questions are then necessary. Does Religious Brotherhood vocation fit African culture? Is Africa generous enough for the sacrifice inherent in the Religious Brotherhood vocation? Is there anything in the African culture that can help African Religious Brothers to appreciate that Religious Life belongs to Africa and that Religious Brotherhood is honourable? Africans must re-evaluate the type of honour that appeals to them. Such re-evaluation is urgent now than ever because of the reduced perseverance rate in the vocation to Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa.

### **3.2 African Religiosity, a Mirage of Religious Brotherhood Vocation**

Africans by nature are very religious people. In the traditional Africa, religion and culture were interwoven and to live was to worship. This was why every family head ensured to educate his family members to be just and upright in their private and public lives. The sense of the sacred regulated the lives of the people of Africa. Adults and children adhered to the cultural norms with the fear of the deity in mind. Every African family had something dedicated to the deity – an animal, a tree, or a human being. The head of every household was a Priest. Obi (2015) affirms this in his writing, “According to Mbiti, the traditional African is “notoriously religious” ... the entire life of the African is saturated with a sense of the divine. He is also of the belief that religion exercises the strongest influence upon the people’s thinking and living. In fact, he strongly affirms, “African people do not know how to exist without religion.”

Africans believed that the deity needed to be placated constantly through daily sacrifices and prayers. The head of the family fulfilled this role on behalf of his household. For the traditional Africans, to live was to worship and to worship was to fear the deity, and the fear of the deity was lived out by being straightforward in daily life. Africans deemed placating the deity as important because life was full of misfortunes and the misfortunes did not occur without reasons. Any misfortune for them was a result of the deity’s anger. The traditional Africans believed that the more intense the anger of God on them, the more intense the scourge that befell them would be. Therefore, the more intense the scourge that befell the Africans, the higher the sacrifice they offered to the gods. The extent to which Africans went in offering a quality sacrifice that would appease their god was limitless. No wonder then the traditional Africans used human beings for sacrifice. Cases of human sacrifice exist in the present-day Africa, as this report shows:

The practice of ritual killing and human sacrifice continues to take place in several African countries in contravention of the African Charter on Human and People’s Rights and other human rights instruments.

In this 21st century, human beings are still being hunted down, mutilated, murdered or sacrificed for ritual purposes across the region... because many people still believe that the use of charms and the performance of ritual sacrifice can fortify them spiritually, enhance their fortunes in business and during elections, or protect them from harm, disease, poverty, accident, death or destruction... There have been reports of ritual murder and human sacrifice in countries across the continent: in Nigeria, Uganda, Swaziland, Liberia, Tanzania, Namibia, and Zimbabwe (African Commission on Human and People's Rights, 2010).

The implication of ritual killing in Africa is that life saves life, life is valuable, life is precious, life can placate the anger of the deity, and life reconciles the deity with humanity. Africans see life as the highest offer that can pacify the deity. What does deity mean for the Africans? What motivates Africans to offer their deity a 'befitting' sacrifice? Is it possible for the Africans to understand becoming a Religious Brother as offering a human being to placate the anger of the deity? The traditional African did not always kill the human person offered to a deity. In some cases, the person was left alive but he had to live apart from the people. He is set apart, usually close to the shrine of the deity to take special care of it. Thus, the person was *consecrated* to the deity. The people saw him as *consecrated* to the deity and treated him with high regard; he remained untouchable because people feared to incur the wrought of the deity to whom the person was consecrated. The person could marry and have a family but would not marry from the native people, and could not mingle with the people, either. This differentiates his role and lifestyle from that of a Religious Brother or priest. Yet from a distance, a person may say African religious practice reflects Religious Life principle.

Based on the zeal and devotion with which Africans express faith in either traditional religion or Christian religion, one might easily conclude that Religious Life vocation is or should be natural to the Africans. Considering the hardship Africans endure in their state of poverty and their seeming adaptation to the wretched situation, one would imagine that no sacrifice would be too much for them to make. Considering the number of young men embracing Religious Life in Africa today, one would easily conclude that Religious Life vocation blends well with the African culture. Considering, on the other hand, the number of

young African men that quit the vocation after only a short period in the Life, one begins to doubt what value Africans really attach to Religious Life.

One may argue that the African Religious Brothers who stay in the vocation outnumber those who quit but the fact remains that abandoning an already undertaken good project does not reflect the characteristics of resilient Africans. Quitting Religious Life does not mean only discarding the religious habits and becoming secular, it means also living Religious Life without a sense of fulfilment and commitment, which is a sign that there is something in the African culture that works against the religious spirit proper to Religious Brotherhood vocation. Africans are poor. Are they poor in spirit? Africans are religious. Do they have faith in God? Is African religiosity real or mirage?

### ***3.3. Human Sacrifice in the Context of Faith***

Today sacrificing human life for whatever reason is a criminal act. It is also a primitive practice. Though primitive indeed, there are obvious lessons in the act and the intention of the act can modulate its criminality and primitiveness. Traditionally Africans believed strongly in their gods. Whatever they did was in consonance with their faith. Their problems always had religious connotations. They resorted to extreme religious measures to tackle the difficult problems. Whatever they did to protect themselves, as a community, was for them a charitable act, including shedding blood or sacrificing a human person, no matter how *self-centred the charitable act* may be.

The countries of ancient Middle East made human sacrifices. The Jews were not supposed to use human beings for sacrifice. In what seemed a contradiction, God demanded of Abraham the offering of his only son Isaac. Abraham did not know what he would gain from the offering but he obeyed and was willing to offer his only son Isaac as a burnt offering to God. According to the Christian Holy Bible, “Abraham took the wood for the burnt offering, loaded it on Isaac, and carried in his own hands the fire and the knife. Then the two of them set out together. Isaac spoke to his father Abraham. ‘Father?’... ‘Yes, my son... ‘Look,’... ‘Here are the fire and the wood, but where is the lamb for the burnt offering?’... ‘My son, God himself will provide the lamb for the burnt



offering” (Gen. 22:6-8). Abraham’s act of faith!

The traditional Africans were like the Jews as far as offering sacrifices to the deity was concerned. The Jews were religious people but unlike the traditional Africans, they built their faith on the living God whom the African Christians of today have come to know as the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ. God was everything for the Jews. God was always in interaction with them, however, they feared to behold him face to face due to deep reverence that was at once filial and dreadful. Nothing happened to them – good or bad – that did not come from God. They offered a lot of choicest sacrifice to placate God. They were ready to offer even their only son if God required it! They did it knowing God loved them.

Comparatively, the Jews made offerings to God with motives different from that of the traditional Africans. The traditional Africans did not offer sacrifices as an act of faith in their deity but out of what seemed neurotic fear of the deity. The difference between the motives for offering expensive sacrifices to the deity in the two different cultures has many implications for the Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa. The Jewish faith, like the Christian faith, based on love, even though the love was unconditional and unmerited in the Christian context but conditional in the Jewish context. Africans either offer God a sacrifice to thank him for the favours received or to ask for some favours. They do not spontaneously offer God a sacrifice because God is God. He must be a mighty provider or protector and must have provided or protected to merit the Africans’ sacrifice. Africans do not see the hand of God in desolation; God is God only in consolation. This explains why Africans attribute any misfortune to devil and any favour to God. If an African’s child is sick, he immediately seeks the cause. The traditional Africans consulted soothsayers in such situations. The modern African Christians consult “Christian prophets.” In both eras, utilitarian interest motivates relationship with God.

Africans may not easily imagine the possibility of unconditional love. This is why bribery has become a normal thing in most of the African countries. How can a people in this type of culture understand that a healthy and reasonable man can donate himself to God “just like that?” The mission of the Religious Brothers includes witnessing to the

unconditional love based on authentic faith in God. Unconditional love made Jesus become poor to make us “rich out of his poverty” (2Cor 8:9). African Religious Brothers are a proof to the Africans that theocentric love – *agape* – is possible in the African culture, even today.

So far, I have tried to show that Africans are religious people by nature, that traditional Africans in their religiosity were ready to offer human beings to their deity for maximum protection against the ills that befell them in their daily lives. I have referred to the scripture to show that the seeming primitive practice of offering human beings to a deity is in line with a great sacrifice God may demand of those who have strong faith in him. Abraham, our father in faith, willed to sacrifice his only son to God but God intervened saying “Do not raise your hand against the boy ... Do not harm him, for now I know you fear God. You have not refused me your own beloved son” (Gen. 22:12). Who knows if God can say the same to the African parents of today?

### **3.4 God Demands Extreme Sacrifice**

God did not allow Abraham to offer his son but he required a sacrifice all the same. God provided “a lamb” for the sacrifice as Abraham’s faith encouraged him to expect. Meanwhile Abraham did not question God or beg for a minor demand. [“Abraham] went over, took the ram, and sacrificed it as a burnt offering instead of his son. In gratitude to God, “Abraham called that place The LORD Will Provide” (Gen. 22:13-14). What lesson is there on how God intervened in the situation? God is the one who provides the victim for sacrifice. God himself offered his own only begotten Son. “He did not spare his own Son, but gave him up for the sake of all of us, then can we not expect that with him he will freely give us all his gifts?” (Rom. 8:32).

Do Africans really believe that God can ask of a man his son for a sacrifice? From all indications, judging from the Africans’ mentality, Religious Brothers are like sacrificial victims that God demands. It overwhelms Africans. That God sacrificed his only begotten Son to save humankind had been a nice story to the African faithful. Today the reality of the harsh truth dawns on them as they watch the Religious Brothers. Traditional Africans offered human persons but not from their own kin. What love! If today the Africans come to know that unconditional love is

possible, for the sake of the true God, they may start to offer. However, the dilemma remains; who will bell the cat! Whose child will be the first?

### ***3.5 Brotherhood Vocation is Offering Continued***

What is the relationship between human sacrifice and Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa? The key words so far are Religious Life, sacrifice, faith and fear of God or deity, devotion, obedience, love, and God's Providence. Traditionally Africans offer sacrifice to the deity. The Old Testament Jews offered God sacrifice. God continues to get sacrifice in the New Testament. All the sacrifices in all the cultures, both ancient and modern, involved offering human beings in one way or the other. For the Catholics, every Holy Mass is an offering of the Lamb of God, Jesus Christ. In the eyes of those who do not share the same faith with the Catholics, it is a symbolic gesture. For the Catholic instead, it is a reality –Jesus is offered.

In the Christian context, Religious Life is equal to offering a human person. It is an act of faith: faith on the part of the Church that admits the Religious Brother, faith on the part of the Religious that responds to God's invitation. If the Church in Africa has the faith to appreciate that God is worthy of an expensive sacrifice done out of sheer love of Him, Africans would, in faith, nurture and support vocations to Religious Brotherhood. Africans seem to fail to see the immediate benefit of the Religious Brothers because culturally Africans believe what they see and touch. Christians, through faith only, rest assured that the reward for a holy life is hereafter, therefore may not expect any material benefits from the hands of the Religious Brothers. However, the Africans, like the Jews, see earthly material prosperity as an indication of "holy life" since wealth is a blessing from God and poverty a curse. Vowing to be perpetually poor is a sheer madness to the people who culturally have this mentality. The Religious Brothers vow to be poor both in fact and in spirit. It is a great sacrifice made in view of a future reality not yet seen (Heb. 11:1). African religiosity is not futuristic. Traditional Africans do not pray to encounter God face to face, not in this world and not in the world to come because human beings and gods (spirit) do not have friendly relationship. Africans may not know that this mentality remains dynamic in their subconscious from generation to generation.

Religious Life call for devotion and fear of God, consistency and trust in the divine Providence. This attitude requires theocentric self-transcendent love. It seems that the African Christians, due to cultural mind-set, are yet to attain this level of faith.

The measurement of any genuine offering is the quality of the perseverance of the one who offers. Perseverance means “steady and continued action or belief, usually over a long period and especially despite difficulties or setbacks” (*Encarta Dictionary, Standard Edition, 2005*). Abraham persevered in his faith relationship with God. Christ persevered in his self-offering for human redemption. Africans, due to their belief system and concept of god, do not persevere in offering. Once a god fails to provide requests immediately according to the mind of the one requesting – either to kill the enemy or to give a male child – further offerings stop and the person starts to look for a more potent god. Today, pastors have replaced god. The faithful hunt them for miracles. Any pastor who does no miracles gets an empty Church. Little wonder then some of them resort to irreligious rituals to make themselves marketable. Is it faith? Is it love? Is there hope at all? How can a culture whose scale of preference starts and ends at survival needs support Religious Brotherhood vocation? How can the Religious Brothers in such a culture persevere effectively? Effective perseverance is a continuous self-offering – consistent fidelity to the religious vows of obedience, chastity and poverty – with sincere gratitude to God.

## 4 AFRICAN RELIGIOSITY

### 4.1 *African Faith*

Prior to the advent of Christianity, Africans believed in the spirit world populated by gods, the dead ancestors and the supreme God. For them, the spiritual beings made things happen but were not friends. The relationship between the traditional Africans and the gods was that of mutual respect: *Nwammuo ememule nwammadu ma nwammadu ememule nwammuo* (“*Let human beings not work against the spirit and let the spirit not work against human beings*”). They have this unwritten norm in mind when making expensive sacrifices to their deity. Therefore, it seems they sacrificed not in faith but in fear, not in love but in justice. Understanding the subjective motivation for the traditional Africans religious practices is important in understanding the fate of Religious vocation of the young Africans today.

Africans by nature do not cultivate where they would not reap. They ‘do not dig a hole that has no game inside it.’ When they give, they expect return. They live the golden rule to the letter. They do not lose in their act of charity and it must be reciprocal – equal share to each party. The principle falls short of Christian love. Africans give to the deity but expect abundant children and material prosperity to care for the children. They take it for granted that the gods understand, therefore, it is justice and not love. With this attitude, they do not trust God fully. This may explain why the African Christians of today need miracle to confirm that God is actually doing his part. It is a cultural mentality based on the culture’s core value – children. Africans are poor but rich in children therefore invest in children. Consequently, they believe more in life than in God. Any Christian vocation that compromises childbearing risks attrition. The Religious Brotherhood vocation is a victim; it does not generate children, it does not generate direct wealth to care for children.

### 4.2 *African Faith is Self-centred*

Traditionally Africans did not offer human beings just because the deity demanded it. They offered human beings because they valued human life and thought the deity would value and accept the life of one person and spare the life of the rest of the people.

One important fact about the human offering that traditional Africans made was that the Africans did not offer a person from their own ethnic group or even tribe, in most cases; they usually abducted people from other families, tribes or villages or clans, for sacrifice. The African Commission on Human and People's Rights observes this trend: "Several cases of kidnapping and disappearance of persons are traced to the vicious schemes and activities of ritualists. In most cases, those targeted for ritual sacrifice are vulnerable members of the population — the poor, women, children, the aged and people with disabilities" (November 2010).

Traditional Africans offered a person from their own kin only if the person or his family had a bad name and the people were seeking ways to eliminate him or his family members. Africans sacrificed a person they hated and not the son they loved. Any person the traditional Africans made up their minds to offer must have been an evil person. The person or his family must have a bad name that makes him an outcast. It is then and only then that the traditional Africans justified their decision to sacrifice a human being to a deity. This is the reason why most of the plots of land the traditional Africans gave to the early missionaries that evangelized Africa were evil forests. They did not give the lands out of love of God but because the land was useless to them. The same mentality can explain why the traditional Africans did not allow their legitimate sons to get formal education; they instead offered their slaves or disobedient children to the expatriate missionaries to educate to keep the foreigners and their God at an arm's length.

There were few exemptions in this issue. Some traditional Africans embraced genuine faith and gave God the best of what they had. Of course, the other Africans who did not share the same faith frowned at the generosity because it was foreign to the African culture. The modern Africans share the mentality of withholding the best from God. Not all the African Priests and Religious in the past got express blessing from their Christian parents and relations to embrace the vocation. This trend continues but in a subtle way. Now being a priest, in particular, connotes high social status, many parents no longer cry 'losing' their son. They smother the cry with the rationalization that economic breakthrough accompanies ordination. If genuinely good Christian parents do not mind the material gain, their neighbours would flatter them into

minding it. ‘Nothing should go for nothing. That is the mind-set. Religious Brothers spirituality teaches something can go for nothing. Christ did it.

### ***4.3 Fear Inspires African Religiosity***

“Neurotic” fear and not by filial fear seems to drive the offering of traditional Africans. Neurotic fear arises from the sense of insecurity and distrust. Filial fear bases on love. The lyrics of most of the charismatic Christian songs of the African singers confirm the lack of sense of filial love in the Africans’ religiosity. Africans approach their deity out of overpowering sense of insecurity and not out of affection to enjoy the deity’s abiding presence. Consequently, the traditional Africans’ and in their turn, the modern Africans’ offering is conditional. The Africans seem to offer sacrifices to the deity to challenge him. It seems that in making the sacrifice the Africans are saying to their deity, “we are doing our part, you must do your part.” If the deity fails to do his part, Africans demand compensation or they resort to magic to force their deity to either respond or resign. This means that unlike Abraham, traditional Africans did not offer human beings to the deity because of faith rooted in love. If Africans have recognized Religious Brothers as worthy sacrifices, are they satisfied with the return they receive from it? Who knows if Religious Brotherhood vocation does not reactivate in the mind of the African Christians the archaic idea of a dumb god – a god that does not respond, does not react, a god who is appeased only with human sacrifice?

### ***4.4 Africans Believe in Life***

It seems that the Africans’ believe in life is stronger than their faith in God because from the look of things, life is a proof that there is God. The faith of Africans seems not to have reached the point where compromising the value of procreation and preservation of life is possible. Africans’ sense of self hinges on procreation and preservation of life. Obi (2015) makes a point related to this fact where he writes, “Africans have a sacred reverence for life, for it is believed to be the greatest of God’s gifts to humans. To protect and nurture their lives, all human beings are inserted within a given community and it is within this community that one works out one’s destiny and every aspect of an individual’s life” (p. 123).

The destiny of an African man is more of begetting children, especially sons that will replace him than eternal life in heaven. Each man must procreate for it is a debt to the community. Procreation must do with marriage and begetting children; preservation of life must do with providing material things needed to nurture the children. Not marrying is equal to planning the extinction of the community. Advising or encouraging able-bodied young men to remain unmarried, is ‘madness’ that is not easy to manage. The African religiosity has not reached the level at which forfeiting the two cultural values is a worthy sacrifice to the deity.

The human offering the traditional Africans were ready to make to their deity was for the deity to make children abundant in the land and to make wealth flourish or to avert anything that would threaten the two desires. A Religious Brother is incapable of contributing tangibly to these two tangible areas of African traditional cultural value. Africans do not believe in a deity who is not there for the people, a deity who does not respond to the immediate and tangible needs of the people. The deity that makes the children of the Africans childless and poor is not a deity that has the good of the people at heart. Traditional Africans have a way of frustrate such deity. Following the cultural mind-set, today’s Africans might hesitate to offer God their children free. Hence the unpopularity of Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa.

#### ***4.5 The Nature of African Mind-set***

Africans believe in the maxim, “Charity begins at home” literally. From the look of things, the modern Africans might have updated the maxim to read, ‘Charity begins and ends at home.’ The effect of this mentality is behind turning politics into warfare among the African politicians. In the same vein, to nominate a village king is a tug of war. This attitude is creeping gradually into the Church. It is common to hear that some Christians lobby and campaign for leadership positions in the Church motivated either by son-of-the-soil syndrome, with the unconscious intention to protect “our own,” or obvious selfish interest in illicit material gain. This also reflects cultural mind-set, the sort that limits benefit opportunities to the kith and kin of the person in authority. This does not mean that Africans are dishonest but their nature of self-centredness can take a dishonest twist, which is ironically understandable in the culture,



then, termed being wise. Religious Life witnesses against this type of attitude.

Attachment to power, in most cases among men, is another mind-set that makes Africans take humility for timidity and obedience for cowardice. Submissive men are rare in Africa. This is why, in their men-dominated social system, they do not take advice from women even when common sense justifies the advice. Religious Brothers, even the African ones, are by virtue of their vocation submissive. The selfless and unassuming lifestyle of the Religious Brothers may be ‘inconceivable’ to the majority of Africans. In the African culture, each person wants to be the number one; nobody wants to be under the other person. Being number one means also dominating others or being in a better position to receive any benefit before others. A simple servant image (Isaiah 53:1-3) is not appealing to the Africans but Africans value service and simplicity. Yet each one seems to have a central need for autonomy.

Africans see Religious Brothers as servants and despise the vocation for that, yet they appreciate the Religious Brothers’ services. Africans fail to value the Religious Brothers’ simplicity and humility because of cultural mind-set. The mind-set is partially a sign of pride or insecurity, and to a degree, an indication of egoism. The Igbo proverbs that substantiate this idea are, “Mine is mine; ours is ours,” (*Nkem bu nkem; nke anyi bu nke anyi*) and “One protects where one lives” (*Ebe onye bi ka O na-awachi*). Religious Brothers by virtue of their vocation live a simple life and have hearts without boundaries. They do great things in a gentle way. They contribute to the development of people without minding the race or tribe. They are enterprising but do not labour for sordid gain. They are selfless Christians. By their lifestyle, they teach that charity must not necessarily begin at home. Religious Brothers can contribute to the welfare of their families, but not by right or as an individual. In their effort to help the neediest in the society, they do not act alone and they do not put their families first. They live ‘perfect charity,’ which manifests in self-denial for Christ’s sake.

They live under a Superior who approves of what they want to do. They live in community, act as a community and have one heart and one mind. Though individuated human beings, they do not allow individualism to rule their life. It is not the case with the Africans. An African man is

supposed to be his own mouthpiece. Not to be is weakness. For this reason, Africans do not find it easy to relinquish power. It is a cultural mind-set. The Religious Brothers' lifestyle witnesses against such mentality. A Religious Brother depends on a Superior who authorizes what he does. He does not help because he has seen the need to help. He helps with Christian charity and not by sentiment. He does not do his own will. He imitates Christ who did not come to do his own will but the will of him who sent him (Jn. 5:30). The Religious Brother acts in consonance with the will of his Superior who represents Christ for him. Traditionally Africans frown at this type of life of subordination. However, this simple life of the Religious Brothers endears them to people. Africans like Religious Brothers but do not want their lifestyle as a permanent state of life for their own children. Those who dare to become Religious Brothers suffer pang of conscience for being different in a culture that nurtures them. Religious Brothers have to emancipate themselves from the shackles of cultural mind-set. Thus, facilitate the gospel enculturation in Africa.

## 5 RELIGIOUS BROTHERHOOD VOCATION IN PERSPECTIVE

### 5.1 *What Religious Brotherhood Vocation Means*

A Religious Brother is a male Catholic faithful who responds to the Call of God to consecrate himself to God and dedicate his entire life to the service of God, practicing evangelical poverty, Christ-like obedience, and perfect chastity in the spirit of renewal of his baptismal vows with an adult's intention to live them in a more radical way. The words worthy of emphasizing from the definition of a Religious Brother are Baptized Christian, Response to a Call, Consecrated to God, and Eager to serve. The others are Obedience, Chastity, and Poverty. The implication of the highlighted words is a Religious Brother is a “new man” (Eph. 4:24). The newness hinges on baptism, which he now decides to live radically.

#### 5.1.1 **A Religious Brother is One who lives Baptismal Vows Radically**

A Brother is a baptized Christian because he has faith in God. At a point in his life, he felt a strong inner urge that God was calling him. He responded radically in love because he had hope, therefore was eager to serve God in humanity in an unconditional love. To live out the unconditional love, he publicly professed before the Church the three evangelical vows of obedience, chastity and poverty, freely and voluntarily. The reason for pronouncing the vows publicly is not only to show he is convinced in what he is doing but also to tell the faithful that he has taken a radical step to live out fully his baptismal promises.

All Christians have the obligation to lead a life, which reflects their baptismal vows when they declared their faith in God and accepted that Virgin Mary gave birth to God who suffered and died on the cross. At baptism, all Christians promised to accept always the teachings of the Church and to avoid the snares of Satan with the hope of not remaining rotten in the earth since the sacrament of reconciliation regularly purifies and prepares them to rise again from the dead, like Jesus Christ, and live everlasting life in heaven. Not all the Christians live what they promised in baptism. They may have some reasons to fall short of the commitment. A Brother by his vocation says that he has no reason to fall short of the demands of the gospel.

A Brother confirms by religious vows that he is an adult in the Christian faith; he is now a Christian adult not confined to the cultural ethos. Religious profession has far-reaching implications that transcend cultural boundary. To free oneself from the cultural bonds, as an African, is not a minor radicalism.

### **5.1.2 Religious Brother is a Perfect Follower of Christ**

By taking the religious vows, the Brother reminds his fellow Christians that Christ still requires fidelity to the baptismal vows. A Brother does not become holier or better than the rest of the Christians but public profession of the evangelical counsels stands him out as a prophet among his fellow Christians. Like Isaiah, the Brother knows he is a sinful man living among sinners but he tries harder than the rest of the faithful to sanctify himself; in so doing, he helps the other Christians to achieve sanctification. The vows, being painful as they are for an African, are like the burning charcoal with which God's Angel touched the lips of Isaiah (Is. 6:5-8). It enables the Religious Brother to follow Christ with an undivided mind.

Profession of the vows makes a Brother a renewed man because the vow is a sort of being born again the second time. Now, with a mature faith, the Brother tells God, "Here am I, send me" (Isaiah 6:8). To his fellow Christians he says, using the words of Joshua, "But if serving Yahweh seems a bad thing to you, today you must make up your minds whom you do mean to serve, whether the gods whom your ancestors served beyond the River, or the gods of the Amorites in whose country you are now living. For my family and I, we shall serve Yahweh" (Jos. 24:15). Christ accepts the vows, tells the Brother, "Follow me; let the dead bury their own dead" (Matt. 8:22). Africans find it difficult to fathom the statement. It is deeply painful.

Christ's injunction "Follow me" is for all the Christians. Leaving the dead to bury their own dead is the cost of discipleship, which every Christian is supposed to pay. The *loss* involved in the *cost* is the witness that a Religious Brother bears among his African counterparts. Jesus told a rich young man who wanted to be perfect to not only sell all he had but also to give the money to the poor and come and follow him (Luke 18:22). The inference is he should not reserve the proceeds from the sales

in the bank for later days. Following Christ calls for detachment. Religious Brothers testify to the possibility of detaching oneself from the cultural embeddedness to follow Christ empty handed, in terms of material possession or cultural social status. This type of total self-donation to God is attractive to the African young men but it is not yet easy for them because of cultural mind-set.

The striking consequence of the religious vows is their direct contradiction of the African core cultural values. Africans abhor all that the religious vows imply. A Brother does not marry, he does not acquire wealth for himself, and he has no power – power in the sense of being over independent, that is, political power. This is the price a Brother pays for accepting to follow Jesus Christ as a Religious. The payment is free and voluntary but God asks for it. Do the African young men know this before applying for admission to the religious vows? They may know or they may not know. The fact is that the lukewarm attitude of most Religious Brothers, and their eventual quitting the *Life*, are indications that the African culture is not yet accommodative enough to let the divine Call blossom through the African young men in the Religious Brotherhood vocation. Hence the need to continue re-evangelizing Africa. African Christians should start to learn how to renounce certain values cherished in this world, for the sake of Jesus Christ.

### **5.1.3 Religious Brotherhood Vocation is a Mission**

Religious profession, in itself, is not one of the seven sacraments of the Church, which Christ instituted. The Religious Brotherhood vocation does not belong to the hierarchy of the Church because it is not an office. Hierarchy refers to ranks or positions in office. Some young Africans refuse the Religious Brotherhood vocation because they reason, in their ignorance, that the Brothers miss two sacraments, namely, Matrimony and Orders. For them the more the number of sacraments you receive, the more authentic a Christian you are. This reasoning fits well African mentality where quantity matters more than quality. This erroneous way of reasoning may go unnoticed in a culture where accumulation of material wealth is the basis of self-worth. The mission of the Religious Brothers, which they carry out not by words but by the example of their lives, includes changing the mentality. Religious Life is a

*way of being*, a state of Holiness, therefore belongs to the holiness of the Church. The holiness of the Religious Brothers is the measure of the efficacy of the Religious Brotherhood vocation. Therefore, living quality Christian life is among the missions of the Religious Brothers. If all Christians could live according to their baptismal vows, there would be no need of Religious Brotherhood vocation in the Church. Religious Life is a state of teaching without words, pointing without being stationary, and prophesying without shouting. By their very presence, the Religious act as a reminder of the gospel values, and a reflector of Jesus Christ. Thus, the more the African Christians support and encourage the vocation of the Religious Brothers, the clearer they show they have started to follow Jesus Christ unconditionally.

The Religious Brother in his gentleness reveals the maternal face of God; in his modest and humane approach to life, he calls attention to the Marial Church. The Church approves vocation of the Religious Brothers because it reflects exactly the life Christ lived on earth. Christ took flesh to show human beings how to live like children of God. Christ was poor, he had nowhere to lay his head (Matt. 8:20). He was a chaste celibate and encouraged his apostles, even those who had wives before, to be “eunuchs” for the kingdom of heaven, without force when he said, “The one who can accept this should accept it.” (Matt. 19:12). On his part, St Paul wished that all Christians remained chaste (1Cor. 7:7). Christ lived a hidden life in Nazareth with Joseph and Mary before starting his public ministry. He lived a community life with his apostles, characterized by praying and sharing the word of God together.

Christ was obedient because he came not to do his will but the will of the Father who sent him (John 4:34; 8:28). By virtue of the vow of obedience, a Brother submits his will to his legitimate superior. Thus, a Brother teaches by his very life and existence. The Church sets the Religious Brothers to teach all the Christians not by a show of intellectual superiority but by witnessing to the authentic life of the religion called Christianity. This is the Religious Brother’s vocation and mission: to be a mirror that reflects the life of Christ to the Christians and non-Christians. A Religious Brother’s mission is to *be* a witness to and a servant of the kingdom of God.

The three evangelical counsels, chastity, obedience, and poverty, the Religious Brothers profess indicate the quality of life all Christians should live. Jesus Christ lived the same way. To be a Christian is to live out all the teachings of Jesus Christ. Once a person professes faith in God and receives baptism, the person takes it upon himself or herself to be another Christ. The Religious Brotherhood vocation is a response to God's invitation to live out the grace of baptism intensely so that the world may see Christ in the Religious Brother and return to God. It will interest the Africans to know that the exactness of the life of the Religious Brothers to the earthly life of Jesus Christ reposes on the fact that a Religious Brother is a man as Jesus Christ was a man. Furthermore, Jesus Christ lived in a male-dominated culture like the African culture, and children and wealth are of paramount importance in both of the cultures. Jesus was unpopular among his people because of his lowly lifestyle. His contemporaries took him for an unwise and unlettered village carpenter because he did not study under the well-known masters of his time. Today in Africa, the popular concept people have of Religious Brothers is unlettered artisans who do not study theology. They have not come to know that the worth of a Religious Brother is in the quality of his Christian life and not in what he does or what he studied. His very vocation is a complete mission.

#### **5.1.4 Brotherhood Vocation is a Supra-sacrament**

As sacrament is a visible symbol of an invisible reality, which is grace, so also Religious Brother's vocation is a visible symbol of an invisible reality, which is the earthly life that Jesus Christ lived. This has a deep implication for the Religious Brothers' vocation. For example, the "rich spirituality" suggested by Religious Brotherhood vocation does not stop at sociobiological connotation of the term "brother." The first identity of the early Christians was 'brother.' It differentiated them from their non-Christian counterparts and did not refer to consanguinity. The "rich spirituality" of the Religious Brothers is also not in the "service" (job or work) the Religious Brothers render in the Church. The uniqueness and indispensability of the Religious Brothers' vocation in the Church is not because of the vows they take either; every Christian is supposed to live out the evangelical counsels, bear witness to the kingdom, and serve humanity selflessly. There is more to the Religious Brothers vocation.

The title “*Brother*” is the name traditionally given to the male lay religious in the Church since the beginning of consecrated life. The title does not belong to the Religious Brothers exclusively, of course, but it represents a significant way of being in the ecclesial community in which he is the prophetic memory of Jesus-Brother, who told his followers, “And you are all brothers” (Mt 23:8). The essence of Religious Brotherhood vocation is its being a lifestyle, a way of *being*, which exactly reflects the life that Jesus Christ lived on earth. Jesus, “Who, being in the form of God, did not count equality with God something to be grasped.

But he emptied himself, taking the form of a slave, becoming as human beings are; and being in every way like a human being, he was humbler yet, even to accepting death, death on a cross” (Philip 2:6-8). This picture of Christ fits the image the Africans have of the Religious Brothers. It is because of this image that the vocation to Religious Brothers is unpopular and unwanted by the Africans. Just as Christ was unpopular among his contemporaries, so also are the Religious Brothers today. That can also be a mission. As Christ they represent was a child of contradiction, it serves the Religious Brothers to be vocationers of contradiction.

Christ was unpopular because he was like a mirror reflecting God the Father. Religious Brothers are unpopular because they are like a mirror reflecting Jesus Christ. A mirror has no reason to be popular since it reflects only the image placed before it. If the image is not there, the mirror is useless. The Jews did not have the true image of God therefore could not see God reflected by Jesus Christ. For that reason, according to them, Jesus Christ was useless. No wonder Jesus called them “blind fools” (Matt. 23:17). The traditional Africans do not have a true image of Jesus Christ; therefore, they do not see Christ reflected by the Religious Brothers; to that extent, for them, the Religious Brothers are ‘useless.’ It is too rash to say African Christians are “blind” (Matt. 15:14) and “fools” (Luke 12:20). Posing a question may be more in order instead. The question is, ‘Do the religious Brothers live a quality Christian life that touches the African mind?’ Imagine how people struggle for power in the Church and in the secular society! Imagine how corruption and money mongering pervade the Church and the secular society! Imagine the extent to which people have reached in sexual decadence in the Church and in the secular society! The mission of the Religious Brothers is to witness against all this.



Yet Africans fail to appreciate the vocation of the Religious Brothers. The Religious Brothers seem to be yielding very fast to the African cultural influence, forgetting their essential mission in the Church and the world – the mission of *being* a visible sign of the man Jesus Christ. Are they a clear mirror enough?

A Religious Brother is supposed to be the reflector of the person of Jesus Christ; to that extent, a Religious Brother is a supra-sacrament. The life of a Religious Brother is supposed to lead people to Christ, which means a Religious Brother is a means of salvation by the holy life he should live, therefore a ‘sacrament,’ which is a means Jesus Christ established for the sanctification and salvation of people. The profession of religious vows is not a sacrament as ordination of Priests or matrimony is a sacrament. The person of a Religious Brother is the sacrament – sacrament understood as an outward sign of inward grace.

The person of a Religious Brother is “the Christ who lives in [him]” (Gal. 2:20). A Religious Brother is the sign of the human Jesus Christ who lived on earth. In the Church and for the Church, the Religious Brother should be as the bronze serpent put on a pole in the desert (Num. 21:8, 9). Anybody who looks at a Religious Brother should remember Jesus Christ and start to live like a Christian. It is here that the “rich spirituality” intrinsic in the Religious Brothers’ vocation reposes. How much do the Religious Brothers remember the mandate!

Christ lived a perpetual chaste life. Christ was poor; he did not pretend to be poor. Christ was obedient. The being-like-Christ, which the Religious Brothers’ life portrays, is as serious as the Religious Brothers will remain chaste celibates, if by chance the Church allows Priests to marry, as had been the case certain time in the past.

Religious Brothers have made themselves unmarriageable for the Kingdom of God. Consequently, by their very life, they contradict everything the world, in general, and Africans, in particular, cherish most: wealth, power, and women. Their mere presence prophetically points to the type of life obtainable in heaven where there is no discrimination, no wealth, no power, and no women. The concept of heaven, where childlessness and poverty are values, is not easy for the Africans to understand. Traditional Africans take whoever glories in such values as insane. The Religious Brothers dare it. It is not a small feat, but their

buckler is Christ. Hence, with St Paul they say always “I know a man in Christ who fourteen years ago, was caught up to the third heaven. I will boast about a man like that, but I will not boast about myself, except about my weaknesses” (2Cor. 2, 5). Africans want to see the boasting. This is a challenge.

Africans do not and cannot boast of their weakness. The African Religious Brothers who are true to their vocation have learnt to boast of their weakness. Christ-like in everything, they will always here the question, “Brother who are you?” Immersed in and being the product of a culture that sees “lowliness” as a curse, the Religious Brother will also ask himself from time to time, ‘Who am I?’ It requires a convinced Christian to say from the heart, “My soul proclaims the greatness of the Lord and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior; because he has looked upon the humiliation of his servant. Yes, from now onwards all generations will call me blessed, for the Almighty has done great things for me. Holy is his name ...” (Luke. 1:46-49). A Religious Brother is not what he is because of sheer volition. He is the image of Christ’s earthly life as far as his vocation as a Religious is concerned. This is a challenge. The African young men have a great task to divest themselves of the cultural mind-set, the ‘law’ of status, to be able to say on entering the gates of Religious Brotherhood vocation,

“I have been crucified with Christ and I no longer live, but Christ lives in me. The life I live in the body, I live by faith in the Son of God, who loved me and gave himself for me. I do not set aside the grace of God, for if righteousness could be gained through the law, Christ died for nothing!” (Gal. 2:20-21). The Religious Brother is the evidence that Christ died for something. He should reflect Him and be proud in doing so; effective perseverance in the vocation is its proof.

## **5.2 *What Religious Brotherhood Vocation is not***

Many people attempt to explain the Religious Brothers' vocation in their own way. The ambiguity of the vocation, the silence of the Church about it, and the people's familiarity with the Catholic Priesthood vocation due to its affinity to the traditional cultural concept of priests, shroud the identity of the Religious Brothers. Individuals then, have no option than to explain the vocation from what they see about it. More often than not, they say what the vocation is not.

### **5.2.1 Religious Brotherhood Vocation is not a Redundant Vocation**

The term Religious encompasses the Religious Brothers and Religious Sisters – the male and female religious, respectively. However, the female religious tends to monopolize the concept, not by means of conscious competition but by means of unconscious cultural mind-set. It is common in ecclesiastical literature to find the term 'virgin' used only for the 'nuns' and the nuns are both active and contemplative cloistered Religious females. However, people know the active female religious commonly as Sisters while their cloistered, non-active, counterparts enjoy the privilege of the title Nuns. In the past, the majority of Priests were monks and as such Religious Priests. These days there are active Religious Priests and Diocesan Priests. All of them share the title Father. When people in Africa, even the clergy, at times, refer to Priests and Religious in liturgical or social gatherings, they usually mean the ordained Priests and the female Religious. It is not easy to mention the Religious Brothers by name, even though they might be included presumably since they are in cassock like the priests.

This attitude is not limited to the Africans; it seems applicable to the other continents as the following observation affirms, "In truth, most ordinary Catholics in the pews have only a vague awareness that religious brothers even exist as an option. When Catholics talk about vocations, they'll generally do so in terms of "priests and nuns," leaving brothers (and deacons, by the way) more or less out of the picture" (Allen, 2015). It is not an oversight on their part but an instinctive attitude rooted in the unconscious as over generalization. All men in soutane are priests. The laity are inclined to the same culture-based categorization. They persistently think of and refer to the Religious Brothers as Priests despite

repeated explanations.

It is common to hear people question the rationale of Religious Brotherhood vocation in the Church. They incline to think it is an accidental vocation or a redundant vocation, which the Church can do without because in their usual mind-set they evaluate the worth of a man based on what he does. For them, since Religious Brothers do the same thing the Religious Sisters and Lay people do, what justifies the vocation? Thus, they jibe, why do they not become priests? They do not need to become priest because the Church needs Religious Brothers. Since Religious Life is not a *doing* but a *being* vocation, Religious Brothers' vocation is essentially different from Religious Sisters' vocation. More will be said on this point but suffice it to say Religious Brothers are Religious as men while Religious Sisters are Religious as women. The two are different from Christological and cultural points of view. The difference needs emphasis so that Africans may appreciate the great sacrifice the Religious Brothers make to be *sign* of the historical Jesus Christ.

### **5.2.2 Religious Brotherhood is not Unattained Priesthood**

The Religious Brothers do not compete with the Priests and vice versa. The Religious Brotherhood vocation is not an alternative to Priesthood either. Priesthood is a ministerial vocation. It is an office. Religious Life is a *being* vocation. It is a lifestyle. The Priest fulfils his vocational obligations by evangelization and administration or celebration of the sacraments. The Religious fulfils his vocational obligations by *being* faithful to the evangelical counsels and community life. On the other hand, the Religious Brotherhood vocation is not the male counterpart of Sisterhood vocation. Africans may easily understand Sisterhood vocation as the female counterpart of Priesthood because where you have a man you will have a woman. Therefore, Africans more readily tolerate the Sisterhood vocation than Religious Brotherhood vocation. Religious Brothers live out an aspect of Christ's life that does not reflect obviously in the diocesan Priests, or even in the Religious Priests.

Religious Priesthood is a way of taking up ministerial work without neglecting the essential Christ-mirror aspect of *being* a consecrated or vowed celibate. Being Religious as a Priest adds certain quality to the

Priesthood, a quality symbolized by the profession of the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience. The religious vows modulate the individualistic, authoritative, and quasi-independent life of the diocesan Priests. Religious Priests, by the virtue of the religious vows they take, live under the obedience of their Superiors. Therefore, they are not as 'free' as the diocesan Priests to act at will in all situations. The religious vows make the Religious Priests like Religious Brothers and bring out the fullness of the earthly life of Jesus Christ – hidden and public, exemplar and a minister.

Africans tolerate Religious Priests because the title is similar to what they are familiar with; it synchronizes with the conventional priest they know; priests are powerful, their own master, respected in society, and somehow 'rich.' As they start to realize the implication of being a vowed Religious Priest, Africans begin to pray earnestly not to get one among their kindred. Traditionally Nigerians knew the Religious Priests did not belong to their biological families and that they rarely slept in their homes. They cried for such disengagement. The father of the author lamented when he heard he was going to be a Religious Brother because he understood it as a Holy Ghost priest.

The Religious priests share similarity with the Religious Brothers because of the religious vows, and with the diocesan priests because of the sacrament of Holy Orders. However, they seem to identify more with the diocesan priests than with the Religious Brothers because of inherited cultural influence, the social status mind-set. If they do not mind the status, the people flatter them into minding it. Thus, social pressure distracts them from fidelity to the religious vows and community life. Religious Brothers do well to remind them of this fact.

Community life, which is the core of Religious Life, makes a person look ordinary because in the community, consensus supersedes individualism, and sensitivity to the needs of the community members modulates and at times damps individual initiative, which could have put the person on the limelight had he had his ways. Culturally, Africans do not like to appear ordinary. Community life wounds pride and lowers superiority complex; even though Africans seem to be communal oriented in their daily lives, none of them in their right senses would want to beg for food even when they are dying of hunger. Hence, the adage, *Ihe nwoke*

*nyere nwoke ibe ya bu ngaa jidere m*, which means if your fellow man donates something to you, it is just for you to hold for a while because by the cultural unwritten norm, you must ‘repay it’ if not the community labels you a parasite.

In Religious Life, community life nullifies superiority complex, and exults dependency, therefore, is not attractive to the Africans. Yet, community life was an essential aspect of Christ’s daily life and is a significant mark of the Church’s life. Religious Brothers bear unalloyed witness to life in communion where no one claims superiority over another.

Pope John Paul II (1994), testified to this fact when he said:

*“By living in a special way this aspect of Christian and consecrated life, Religious Brothers are an effective reminder to Religious Priests themselves of the fundamental dimension of Brotherhood in Christ, to be lived among themselves and with every man and woman, and they proclaim to all the Lord's words: ‘And you are all brothers’ [Mt 23:8]” (Vita Consecrata, 60)”.*

Religious Brothers are Brothers for the sake of the Church. They evangelise the world by their community life lived as consecrated men. Therefore, they are indispensable in the Church.

### **5.2.3 Religious Brothers are not the same as Religious Sisters**

Religious Brothers do not complement Religious Sisters and Religious Sisters cannot replace the Religious Brothers. The two vocations, though similar in essence, are different from Christological and cultural points of view. The essence of the two vocations is living Christ-like lifestyle. That is the spiritual and theological implication of not only the Religious Life but also of being a baptized Christian. From the Christological point of view, Religious Brothers are men and Christ was a man, while the Religious Sisters are women. Though St. Paul says in Christ Jesus there is no male or female (Gal. 3:38) in the spiritual realm, Religious Brothers’ vocation makes the understanding of the human Jesus clearer and easier, especially to Africans who ‘value’ male children ‘more than’ female children – of course in some cultures. Therefore, looking at the two vocations from cultural point of view, the Africans would understand two things. Firstly, that ‘a big man’ can humble himself, and

secondly, that God can demand an expensive sacrifice from the one he loves to achieve his aim for humankind.

The African faith or love has not reached the extent of integrating the spiritual and human aspects of Religious vocation. They tend to limit their appreciation of Christian vocation on the human level only; all their philosophy centres on life. In the same way, their value and belief system centre on life – the visible world. Nnagha (2010) alludes to this fact where he says, “The African worldview is a “magnetic field” where various vital forces are in operation. The world of the Deity (Supreme Being), the Ancestors/spirits and man are interwoven. There is a co-penetration and intercourse between these spheres of existence. The African’s approach to the sacred is unalloyed. There is no difference between the religion and the worldview...” (pp. 37-38). The “unalloyed” approach to the sacred, which characterises African religiosity is another way of saying they approach the sacred concretely. That is to say, things are the way they appear. In terms of faith development, it is at the second stage –the “mythic-literal faith,” according to Fowler (1981). It is because of this that even African Christians fail to understand the meaning of Religious Brotherhood vocation. They do not see how it relates to what happens in a sane human society. As long as Religious Brothers do not generate life, wade power and amass wealth, their vocation does not worth it. Inadvertently, that is the implication of women-priest concept, which they devised to give meaning to a confusing phenomenon.

The African Christians’ view of Christian vocation is limited to what is visible, tangible, and popular. In Africa, women are not socially or politically ‘popular.’ Africans, in an attempt to reconcile their confusion about the Religious Brotherhood vocation, equate Religious Brothers to Religious Sisters. Such equation, based only on the spiritual level, does not convey any Christological or ‘sacramental’ significance of Religious Brotherhood vocation. Religious vocation is a Call to live out the exact life that Jesus Christ lived on earth. From the anthropological point of view, Jesus Christ who came in flesh as a historical person was a man. A Religious Brother is a man; therefore, he fits better as the *representation* of Jesus Christ’s earthly life than a Religious Sister. Jesus grew up in a male-dominated culture. The argument here is not to present such a culture as model, but to demonstrate that the style of life Jesus Christ

lived was below what the men of his culture expected and the same applies to the Religious Brothers in Africa today. If the Religious Brothers can dare the cultural pressure to remain men and consecrated Religious, as Jesus dared his contemporaries, theirs is a unique vocation.

The old Simeon said Jesus would be a sign of contradiction (Luke 2:34), and he was. He was a king but did not establish any kingdom rather he lived like a slave. He was a Messiah but died as a prisoner. He claimed to be the Son of God but people saw in him a son of a carpenter. He was holy but mingled, identified, and ate with sinners. He was a bona fide citizen but he died outside the gate like an outcast. He seemed a nonentity but proved to be a scapegoat (usually a male) that carried the sins of his people. Jesus experienced all this as a man. Religious Brothers' life reflects these aspects of the life of the historical Jesus Christ more than the life of the Religious Sisters does. The Religious Brothers live a sort of hidden life in a culture where self-advertisement is the order of the day for men. Based on all this, it is easier to have a glimpse of what the historical Jesus Christ suffered in the Jewish culture looking at the life of the Religious Brothers than the life of the Religious Sisters. If a woman were to be used as an example of Jesus Christ's earthly life, Africans would likely say, "No wonder. It was a woman; no man can be so lowly and weak."

Africans, in a way of joke, refer to Religious Brothers as women Priests because of the Religious Brothers' lamb-like gentility; they do not preside over public worship! This gentility irritates Africans, but unconsciously. This could be why some African Religious Brothers who belong to Religious Priest Congregations feel, or are made to feel inferior, unfulfilled and angry, at times. Gentility is not weakness. Being a man but not presiding where other men are presiding is not dishonourable, especially when it is a choice based on divine invitation. For the Africans who do not consider the theological implication of Jesus' self-emptying and his mingling with the commoners in His time, gentility is weakness, identifying with the lowly is absurd, and suffering for the sake of others is foolishness. A Religious Brother seems a sign of contradiction to the Africans. This is proper because he is the *sign* of the man Jesus Christ in a way the Religious Sisters and Religious priests are not.



Every Christian, man and woman, can represent the suffering servant of God that Jesus Christ was; the comparison made here is just to clarify the confusion of those who evaluate Christian vocation on cultural standard. Doing like that shrouds Religious Brothers' vocation.

#### **5.2.4 Brotherhood Vocation is not a Sign of Weakness**

Young people incline to think Religious Brothers are weak in all aspects of life because they are not as assertive as the priests are in public gatherings or liturgical celebrations. Jesus' style of life was gentle and it had a theological implication.

God prepared a body for him, predestined for sacrifice (Heb. 10:5). Jesus obeyed his Father and went to the "slaughterhouse like a speechless lamb" (Is. 53:7). It was in suffering that God's Son would redeem the children of God. His humility then was what he wanted all Christians to imitate. Most Christians are not able to do that. The Religious, men and women, vow to do it as their own contribution to promote and strengthen Christian faith. They do it in the spirit of martyrdom. The Religious Sisters, due to cultural mind-set, find it difficult to see Religious Brothers' vocation as worthwhile. For example, at the 18<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the author's Religious profession, a Religious Sister who was being sympathetic questioned why he did not become a priest and urged him it would be better he became. Many Religious Brothers' aspirants have relinquished the aspiration yielding to Religious Sisters' discouragement. This is a sign that either they do not understand the essence of their vocation or they are too susceptible to cultural mind-set or stereotype. It may also be that the African female Religious define their vocation more socially than theologically.

Therefore, they identify more with the popular and dignified Priesthood vocation than with the Religious Brotherhood vocation. The culture might have conditioned them to see their vocation as the counterpart of priesthood based on literal comparison: a Sister is the opposite of a Father. Without them paying a keen attention, Priesthood vocation may be giving them identity and sense of self-worth in society, thanks to the cultural mindset. The attitude may not be conscious. This work might help them to rethink their social self-image, as a group, relative to their theological self-image. The social-image the Africans have of the

Religious Brothers is, ‘not men;’ that is, they are not complete because they are powerless and childless. The Religious Sisters may be uncomfortable with the image. If they are, the reaction is unconscious; it surges from the archaic superiority complex that pervades the fabric of African mentality.

All the Africans share in the repressed inferiority complex. Some Religious Brothers themselves may entertain discomfort to identify themselves as Religious Brothers. Such Religious Brothers should realise that the religious vows has transformed them into a new creature in Jesus Christ; therefore, they should learn to project their religious identity instead of remaining attached to culturally conditioned social identity.

Religious identity refers to how they define themselves as members of an Institute of Consecrated life, in which they have become “new men.” Social identity is how they define themselves as the members of their traditional cultures, which leaves them attached to the “old yoke” of cultural mind-set. If their strength will shine out then, they should hold onto their religious identity and feel content with being ‘new men’ in Christ. Then, the African women and the female Religious Sisters in particular will start to discover in the Religious Brotherhood vocation an impetus to accept their non-aggressive traits and their seeming supportive role in the Church and society. The Religious Brothers themselves will also start to accept their seeming supportive style of life as a way of manifesting the motherly and feminine attributes of Jesus Christ. Thus, they will realise that being a Religious Brother is not a sign of weakness. Religious Brothers tend to exert too much energy explaining that they are not Priests instead of clearly saying what they are. Of course, mouth does not express a *being* vocation but behaviour does. From their fruits, their identity will shine. They need to be confident in their daily life to disprove the weakness labelling. The long silence of the Church concerning the identity and mission of the Religious Brothers in the Church contributes to categorising the vocation as a weak one. The Church herself knows the Religious Brothers are not weakling.

### 5.2.5 Religious Brothers are not Lost People

The positive reception the young men who quit their Religious Brotherhood vocation get parallels the reception the “prodigal son” received on returning from his extravagant trip. There is a seeming nonchalant attitude towards the easy exit of the Religious Brothers from the vocation in Africa. The Church does not question why. The relatives of the deserter do not ask for explanation. Rather, the quitted young man experiences soft landing in various forms: automatic employment, in some countries, and immediate marriage, in the others. In some cases, it is in the form of easy absorption into the seminary or another Religious Congregation.

It is common to see those whose former Congregation employs, gives a sensitive role in the Congregation’s establishment, and pays handsome salary. The young man feels satisfied with the lay status, and might sing in his heart, “I was once blind but now I see,” since he enjoys the apostolate of the Religious Brothers, shares in their meals and prayers, at times, yet, has his family, wife and children, lives independently, and acquires what he likes. Employing an ex-Brother is a charitable gesture to the adults, but confusion to the young people and a slur on the Religious Brothers vocation. It is not easy to see it so. One young man described an extraordinary joy his mother radiated when he packed home from his Congregation. “I felt I was lost to her but now found. I was encouraged.

I felt peace within me,” He said. Losing one’s vocation should not be a thing to rejoice about, by neither the vocationers nor his relatives. However, salient question to ask is, ‘Was there vocation at all?’ This question is important because one does not lose what one does not have. Experience shows that some candidates who missed diocesan seminary admission but feel they have what it takes to be a Priest may enrol in a Religious Brothers Congregation, on a trial basis, and make it a base from where to scout for Religious Priests Congregations. If he fails at long run, he nests with the Religious Brothers but ever feeling a lost child.

### **5.2.6 Religious Brotherhood is not a Surrogate Vocation**

Africa's belief and value systems encourage Priesthood vocation more than Religious Brotherhood vocation. Many young African men who aspire to Christian vocation other than marriage usually have Priesthood as their first choice. If by chance or evaluation they fail to secure admission into the seminary, they tend to resort to Religious Brotherhood vocation. Experience has shown that most of such aspirants take the Religious Brothers community as a centre of relief to absorb the shock of their disappointment. Meanwhile, they scan for any opportunity to join Religious Priests' Congregation or Diocesan Priests. It may happen that they linger and profess in the Religious Brothers' Congregation but with a hidden agenda. In that way, they make the Religious Brotherhood appear as a surrogate vocation from which one can disengage at any time. The quitting of such unwilling people becomes a reference point to justify the erroneous claim that Religious Brotherhood vocation is not worthwhile.

As young African Religious vocation aspirants start to understand that Religious Brotherhood vocation is a complete vocation in itself, they will stop the trial-and-error attitude towards entrance into Religious Brothers' Congregation, because it is not a transient vocation. Experience has also shown that candidates who are incapable of adapting in Religious vocation apply, voluntarily or on the direction of another person, with the mind that only common sense or personal interest is enough to be a Religious Brother. There is more to the vocation than wishing to go to heaven, to remain an artisan, or to escape from life hardship. Disinterest in academic studies is not a healthy criterion for admission into the Religious Brothers congregation, not even disinterest or dislike of priestly vocation or marriage. Knowledge is power; it comes through studies. Study is a fundamental human right, however, it can be a cross to some people, but to follow Christ, carrying one's cross cheerfully daily is imperative. Love and service go together and involve putting up with other human beings – parishioners, in the case of a priest, and children and wife in the case of married life. Without such abilities, the candidate may take the Religious Brotherhood as a surrogate vocation and fail to get fulfilment with time.

The Religious Brotherhood vocation is a gift from the Holy Spirit. Those who have the vocation receive the call and live it with undivided heart. Therefore, determining the motivation of any Religious Brothers' aspirant before admission is important to ensure perseverance that will enhance the identity of Religious Brothers in Africa. The willingness of the aspirant to be a Religious Brother is not always enough to offer admission. The Religious Brotherhood is not a simple vocation, especially in Africa where cultural pressure is high. It requires mature personality, which guarantees high self-esteem and stable self-identity, without excluding strong faith in God. All this, coupled with genuine Religious Brotherhood vocation, enables one to withstand the distraction of cultural pressure.

### **5.2.7 Religious Brotherhood is not a Career**

Religious Life is a vocation but not in the sense of an occupation or life career by which means one earns daily living. It is not a business. There is no material gain attached to it. It is not a means to augment one's social status or improve one's living standard. Religious Life is a Call to serve under the directorship of a canonical Superior to whom the Religious Brother owes obedience because the Superior represents Christ for him. Christ is the model of an obedient servant who lived up to his divine Calling. It is inconceivable to the Africans that a grown up man does not earn money, have his own bank account, and does not contribute substantially to the livelihood of his biological family.

A young African man becomes a man with an unrecorded debt waiting for him to pay in allegiance to the cultural demand to respect the maxim, 'If you are trained, help to train others.' The training he got as a child was a gift given him to keep for a while and return in due time. This perennial debt influences African young men in diverse ways. Firstly, it makes them confuse Religious Life with careerism. Secondly, it makes them go through formation with anxiety, which prevents them from internalizing the values of Religious Brotherhood vocation. Thirdly, it is a source of constant temptation, which culminates in infidelity, unaccountability, secrecy, falsehood and theft.

Any African man must be a careerist if he wants to fulfil either or both the cultural central values namely, procreation and preservation of life. A Religious Brother risks permanent guilt should he try to be poor in fact and in spirit according to the dictates of his state of life. Many Africans, including the Religious Brothers themselves, think obedience to the spirit of poverty is a pretence. Some indulge in a full business enterprise to make ends meet. A Religious Brother is not a businessperson. Any Religious Brother, who judges issues from the cultural point of view, may find it difficult to persevere effectively in the Life.

Christ demonstrated that careerism is not the way of the Cross. He emptied himself (Phil. 2:6-11) and told the rich young man aspiring for holiness to do away with his business and donate his money to the poor (Matt. 19:21). The African cultural environment does not permit self-emptying. African culture haunts any man who submits to misery. An Igbo adage says, 'If you suffer, you must eat.' The eating must be in this world, in accordance with the African cultural mind-set.

For an African, charity must begin at home; love must be reciprocal in a tangible sense to make meaning. An African young man will find it difficult not to engage in a career to pay back what his parents spent in bringing him up. This is the "law" of the culture, the norm. It is not possible for an African Religious Brother. However, the parents of African Religious Brothers may accept offering them to God unconditionally but the relatives will not accept it; the culture will not accommodate it. The young man who fails to reciprocate tangibly the expenses made to bring him up, suffers the pang of conscience; if a Religious Brother, he experiences cognitive dissonance in addition, then, either behaves like Ananias and Saphira, who kept a bit of what they had decided to donate entirely (Acts, 5:1-11), or he quits.

The implication is that African culture needs deep education in the Christian culture. If the culture is not re-evangelized, only religious formation might not be enough to sustain a young African Religious Brother in the vocation because of social influence. The young African Religious Brothers should beware of this because according to the principle of social influence, the majority culture tends to overwhelm the minority culture, especially when the latter is not convinced in what it

believes. This is so because people, by nature, tend to be consistent with the social group (Goldstein, 2004). The African culture is the majority while the Religious Life culture is the minority.

To be concerned about one's family is moral. To put hands on the plough and look back, with an ulterior motive, is immoral. The apostles of Jesus Christ worried about their families when they said, "We have left everything to follow you! What then will there be for us?" (Matt. 19:27). The same apostles said when they had discovered the true Jesus, "Lord, to whom we shall go? You have the words of eternal life. We believe and know that you are the Holy One of God" (Jn. 6: 68-69). 'Career goes, when Cross comes,' because the gain in following Christ radically is suffering, which is another name for love. This is the conviction of the martyrs. Convinced young African men are capable of this feat but need the support of a Christianised culture, because "our society strongly challenges our vocation in many aspects, [example] the crazy rush to acquire and accumulate possessions" (Onyejekwe, 2015).

### **5.2.8 Religious Brotherhood is not a Midway between the Clergy and the Laity**

An ordinary African does not categorise Religious Brothers under Laity; they are Priests. ...But it is wrong. Not until the publication of the *Vita Consecrata* in 1994, Religious Brothers, in accordance with the Church's categorising system, identified the Religious Brothers state as Lay. Despite Pope John Paul II's declaration that the Religious Brothers are not lay, the identity still trails with the vocation. It is so because the Catholic Church, in a way, is as structure-conscious as the African culture. Where a person belongs is important in the two cultures. The order in the Church is the Pope, the Cardinals, the Archbishops, the Bishops, the Monsignors, the Deacons, and the rest that include acolyte, lector, etc., and then the Seminarians, senior and junior. Fixing the Religious Brothers and Religious Sisters in this order is odd, confusing, and organisationally complicated.

Thus, Pope John Paul II said,

*“According to the terminology currently in use, Institutes which, by reason of their founders' design or by legitimate tradition, have a character and purpose which do not entail the exercise of Holy Orders are called "Lay Institutes". Nonetheless the Synod pointed out that this terminology does not adequately express the particular nature of the vocation of the members of these Religious Institutes... (Vita Consecrata, 60)”*.

Then, a seeming way out is the broad category, clergy and laity. The ordained ministers belong to the clergy category. The rest of the faithful, including the Religious Brothers, fall under the laity. The implication is that since the Religious Brothers are not ordained, they belong here. It is worrisome but not for the Religious Sisters who, with modulation of cultural mind-set, appear as the counterpart of the Priests in society and in the Church. Furthermore, the female Religious seem to monopolise the title Religious, even today. Thus, the Religious Brothers vocation remains ambiguous. The situation makes Religious Brothers uneasy, not because they are status-conscious but because they are Africans. Position and status are important for the Africans. This cultural heritage resists change because it synchronises well with the narcissistic lifestyle of the modern society.

The 1994 general synod on consecrated life attempted to clarify the misconception of vocation to Religious Brothers. Pope John Paul II recognized that the tradition in the Church had been to see Religious Life as *“neither lay nor clerical.”* However, in an attempt to emphasise that Religious Life is a “complete” vocation in itself, he used the term *“lay congregation”* of men and women but in parenthesis (*Vita Consecrata*, 60). The implication is the Church still defines Religious Brothers vocation relative to the clerical state. This blurs the identity of the Religious Brothers. The lack of clarity is a huge distraction to the African young men who aspire to become Religious Brothers. The distraction prevents them from internalising the values of Religious Life. They then come out as unintegrated Religious who are not able to withstand the perennial scourge of cultural mind-set. Thus, their sense of self-worth as consecrated Religious lies unsteady on the cultural balance whose scale of weight is social status. Consequently, categorising the Religious Brothers



between the Priests and Lay faithful is a private arrangement to achieve cognitive equilibrium.... But it confuses the young people and misrepresents the Religious Brotherhood vocation.

### **5.3 The Church Recognizes Brotherhood Vocation**

The synod Fathers of the second Vatican Council know that designating lay state to Religious Brothers was confusing. Then, they changed the terminology, which Pope John Paul II elaborated in the following terms, which was partially referenced in section 5.2.8.

According to the terminology currently in use, Institutes, which, because of their founders' design or by legitimate tradition, have a character and purpose, which do not entail the exercise of Holy Orders, are called "Lay Institutes". Nonetheless, the Synod pointed out that this terminology does not adequately express the nature of the vocation of the members of these Religious Institutes. In fact, although they perform many works in common with the lay faithful, these men do so insofar as they are consecrated, and thereby express the spirit of total self-giving to Christ and the Church, in accordance with their specific charism. For this reason, the Synod Fathers to avoid ambiguity and confusion with the secular state of the lay faithful, proposed the term *Religious Institutes of Brothers*. This proposal is significant, especially when we consider that the term "brother" suggests a rich spirituality (*Vita Consecrata*, 60).

With this declaration, the place of the Religious Brothers in the universal Church is a bit clear. Yet defining them relative to the Priests, for example, 'they are like Priests,' muddles conceptualizing the vocation precisely. However, Religious Brothers are like Priests because they are men and they do not marry. Right. Nevertheless, African mentality does not easily accommodate this type of similarity. For the traditional Africans, as an Igbo proverb goes, "What is like yam is not yam." Thus, Religious Brothers continue to remain enigmatic. Nonetheless, one thing is certain: The Church approves the Institutes of the Religious Brothers and entrusts them missionary tasks in accordance with each Institute's charism. The Church knows the Religious Brothers commit themselves to the various human situations intrinsically as consecrated people. The Church is aware that beyond the specific tasks the Religious Brothers carry out, they bear witness to the evangelical counsels as a duty and live

a community life, which represents the Church, the universal sacrament of salvation.

By publishing in 2015 the little book under the title *Identity and mission of the Religious Brothers in the Church*, the Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated Life and Societies of Apostolic Life confirms that the Church knows the Religious Brothers and their worth in the Church and for the Church. Though the Church, until then, had not taken a bold step to popularise Religious Brotherhood vocation, she acknowledged the negligence and said clearly, “This document is also directed to the laity, religious priests, diocesan priests, bishops and all those who want to know about, appreciate and promote the vocation of the Religious Brother in the Church.” In saying this, the Church has said politely that all Christians are responsible for the promotion of the Religious Brothers’ vocation. However, she created a loophole by leaving the promotion of the vocation to only “those who want.” All of us are the Church. We cannot deny we know the Religious Brothers. The problem is we do not want to promote the vocation. For this failure, cultural mind-set is not to blame.

## **6. RELIGIOUS BROTHERHOOD BEYOND CULTURAL BOUNDARY**

### ***6.1 Religious Brotherhood Vocation Transcends all Cultures***

The Religious Brotherhood, as a way of life, transcends all human culture. Since the vocation's aim is to follow strictly in the footsteps of Jesus Christ, it is adaptable in any culture. The early Christian community answered the "followers of the Way" (Acts 9:2). Though the Jews criticized and persecuted them for being culturally different, they gave them the identity because they saw and testified that the Christians lived exceptionally well, in love. The good life matched very well how Christ lived. Then, the Jews 'rebranded' them "Christians" (Acts 11:26), yet continued to persecute them.

Africans do not reject Religious Brothers because of what they do but what they do not. The Religious Brothers do not marry and children are important for the Africans. They do not acquire material wealth for personal security but having wealth is necessary for social prestige and to keep own children alive in Africa. The Religious Brothers do not do their own will but the will of their Superior while a man is supposed to be self-willed, self-reliant, aggressive, and assertive to defend and cater for his family, in Africa.

Africans value good behaviour and good education, and the Religious Brothers are the agents. Africans value sharing of what one has with the others. The Religious Brothers do it, reserving nothing for themselves. Africans value obedience and humility, and Religious Brothers live them out. Africans value virginity and chastity, with reservation, and the Religious Brothers do the same but have no reservation in vowing chastity. The Religious Brothers are not selfish. For this reason, they can remain chaste, poor, and obedient without grudges. The attitude seems incompatible with the African value system. Since Religious Life is a model of good living, the Africans will do well to accept Religious Brothers and see in it a model of civilised and Christianized culture. The Religious Brothers can champion the education towards this end.

## **6.2 Religious Brotherhood Vocation Thrives in a Mature Culture**

Culture is the way of life of a people in a particular geographical area. In effect, it is the product of human mind because circumstances necessitate culture. Culture seems to endure because a people's circumstances tend to remain unchanged; consequently, their thinking pattern and behaviour remain the same. For example, Africa received Christianity while in material poverty but very wealthy in children.

The missionaries evangelized the people in their material poverty amidst abundant children. The African Christians' living condition, in one way or the other, will condition how they practice Christianity. For example, as children are of prime importance to the Africans, fear of not having children would make intending husband and wife test their individual fertility despite virginity before marriage, which is the motto of the Mary League and a very important value in the Church. Taking a second wife is another temptation that most African men fall into when they do not get from one wife the number of children or the sex the culture has taught them to have.

What then is a mature culture? A mature culture is one where the new generation of the people of a particular culture do not stick to tradition in the face of dehumanizing conditions. Christianity brought with it liberation of conscience and other social systems that enhance human well-being. Christianity contributed and continues to contribute to the modern civilisation, from which Europe, for one, has benefited a lot. Mature culture operates on the principle of universal moral standards and common sense, which obeys the law of nature and is in accordance with the Christian principles. Love, for instance, is a universal value, which has positive effects on human life across the globe. If marriage bases on love, childlessness cannot ruffle couple's love and union. Childlessness is fundamentally an abomination in Africa. Not having a male or female child, according to the culture's preference, is tantamount to evil and doom, and it is lamentable. A culture that operates like this is not mature because fear of derision or losing ancestral heritage is the root of the agitation. In the final analysis, selfishness or self-centredness may be the major reason the Africans stick to tradition. The Religious Brothers refuse to be selfish for the sake of Jesus Christ.

The work of Maslow (1954, 1970) can throw light on what mature and immature cultures look like. Maslow theorised about two categories of needs, higher (growth) and lower (survival) needs, which are in a hierarchical order, naturally. One satisfies the lower needs first before thinking of the higher needs. For example, after satisfying the physiological needs like air, food, safety, one will start to think of love, self-esteem, and finally self-actualisation. According to Maslow's theory, air and food, which are for survival, must be assured before one starts to think of safety. After feeling secured, love will start to make sense, and if you do not satisfy love (including belongingness), you do not worry about self-esteem (status or recognition). It is after satisfying all this that selfless action based on unconditional love will prompt your daily behaviour.

The theory makes sense at a glance. Considering the life condition of the Africans and the other developing continents, the theory is very true. However, some exceptional people, by either grace or chance, show unconditional love without worrying about satisfying their hunger. This is a rare happening but the saints and martyrs did it. Jesus did it. The Religious Brothers vocation is a continuous reminder of the scriptural passage where Jesus told the Satan, "Scripture says, "Human beings live not on bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God"" (Mat. 4:4; Deut. 8:3). Africans need children to extend their lives, they are hungry, and they need shelter; it is not yet easy for them to look for holiness, which belongs to the higher need. The African Religious Brothers aspire to holiness, which, theoretically and theologically, is the epitome of self-actualization. Are they actualizing? Entering and exiting Religious Brotherhood vocation witnesses against any affirmative answer. However, St Anthony of Egypt, the hermit, was an Africa, so also the martyrs of Uganda. Therefore, the Africans are capable of unconditional love, but it has not permeated the African culture. When it does, perseverance in Religious Brothers vocation will improve.

The Jewish culture was too conscious of security, a survival need. It was not mature if not its people could have not crucified the Lord of life, the truth incarnate. Virgin Mary and Joseph were mature.

They did not consider the lower needs, precisely the physiological need, sex, and the subsequent need for self-esteem but based on the higher need, faith, they withstood the cultural norm and nurtured Jesus Christ. Jesus in his turn was not culture bound. He transcended its standard following in the footsteps of his earthly parents.

In responding to his vocation, the Scriptures had Jesus say, “Sacrifice and offering you did not desire, but a body you prepared for me; with burnt offerings and sin offerings you were not pleased” (Heb. 10:5-6). “Then I said, ‘Here I am, I am coming.’ In the scroll of the book it is written of me, my delight is to do your will; your law, my God, is deep in my heart” (Ps 40:7, 8). Jesus was obedient. Obedience is a higher need; it is not easy for a hungry person, who also does not have a shelter.

This is the challenge the African Religious Brothers face. They take the religious vows of chastity, poverty, and obedience, but the culture seems to militate against their faithfulness to the vows. The individual African families have a lot to do then to nurture the spirit of sacrifice in their children. They need solid foundation to be worthy of the divine Call. If the families are not mature, the seed of divine Call will fall on an immature ground and the consequence may be entering and leaving Religious vocation or inconsistency in it.

### ***6.3 Brotherhood Vocation is for Mature Minds***

The preceding section dwelt on how a mature culture can favour Religious Brotherhood vocation and how an immature culture can stifle the vocation. All this notwithstanding, a young man with mature mind can succeed as a Religious Brother in any culture. Maslow (1954) gives a succinct description of a mature person; the summary of his ideas is as follows. A mature mind consists of stable self-identity, and the ability for self-transcendence. There is mature mind in mature people. Mature people are ever ready for generous and unconditional self-giving, and they have healthy confidence in receiving from others. They have a high or adequate self-esteem and they are content with what they have. They do not appraise what is good with the standard of what is beneficial to themselves only. They have self-insight and therefore know what is good for them despite different opinions of other people. They are healthily independent and are capable of and available for mutual dependence. All

this idea from a secular psychologist fits Christian view of a holy person, which implies that what is good is good for everybody, everywhere, and every time.

A mature person says *fiat* in all circumstances just like the Virgin Mary. Mature people who find themselves in a Gethsemane situation can say with Jesus, “My Father ... if it is possible, let this cup pass me by. Nevertheless, let it be as you, not I, would have it” (Matt. 26:39). Africa does not seem to have reached the level of cognitive and faith development to let God be God. If Africa were a person, the possible conclusion would be she still lacks the qualities of a mature person. She still struggles with survival needs and this continues to determine her cognitive process, value organisation, and behaviour. The African culture structures the mind of the young Africans, influences their pattern of thinking, and shapes their behaviour. Most of the young African vocationers grew in deprivation, therefore lack internal frame of reference for generous self-donation because one cannot give what one does not have. Those who grew in affluence learned that they must safeguard for their progeny before looking outside. Hence, the need to evangelise the culture first before preaching vocation to the youngsters. It requires strong faith, integrated and stable personality, to act like the biblical old widow who gave little, but all she had to live on. Jesus Christ said of her, “I tell you the truth, this poor widow has put more into the treasury than all the others. They all gave out of their wealth; but she, out of her poverty, put in everything – all she had to live on” (Mark 12:43-44). The developed continents who are aware of the vocation boom in Africa can say of Africa, what Jesus said of the old widow. The woman, in relation to Maslow’s concept, transcended all the survival needs and acted at the level of the highest needs, which include appreciation and unconditional love – abstract values. The widow was poor in wealth but rich in faith. Africa seems yet poor in wealth, in faith, and in love, which may imply also, poor in personality maturity. It seems African religiosity needs rejuvenation. The Religious Brothers’ vocation may serve as a useful reference point for the faith renewal re-evangelization.

Naturally, the young African men may be good, in the sense of being effective instruments in the hand of God, since they are the image and likeness of God. However, a person's nature may be good but nurturing can deviate or distort the natural course of healthy development. The quality of nurturing depends partly on the biological family and partly on the society. The society, which is the dominant culture, influences the family, which in turn trains its members to comply with the prevailing culture. The Africans are communal oriented and no one wants to be different from the other members of the cultural group. If Christians adhere to the cultural ethos to the detriment of the Christian philosophy, cognitive dissonance may set in leading to inconsistency in Religious vocation. As nothing in Religious Brotherhood vocation seems attractive to the taste of the Africans, since the spirituality springs from the hidden life of Jesus Christ, a young man with distorted mind can still search for God but with extrinsic motivation, therefore may not be consistent in the Religious Brotherhood vocation, which has chastity, poverty, and obedience as its core values.

In Africa today, there is emphasis on material prosperity and the fruit of the womb motivated by self-centredness that does not allow God to be God. Africans are truly religious, but they seem to listen to the word of God and hear only what satisfies their expectations, which in majority border around financial breakthrough, marriage and bearing children, in accordance with the cultural mind-set. These insistent quests seem to have conditioned the motivation of most of the African young Priests; now majority of them are becoming exorcists, prayer warriors, revival ministers, and extraordinary prophets. In a way, they are replacing, for the people, the ancient fetish priests, soothsayers and fortune-tellers. As such, the vocationally fertile field that is Africa is full of green vegetation that eventually is turning out to be weeds (Matt. 13:27). These religious excesses go unnoticed because of shared cultural expectations, which immortalize the unchristian cultural practices that resist Religious Brothers' lifestyle in Africa. If not for immature mind, the Religious Brothers' vocation could have been a corrective measure that can steady the African Christians' feet on the gospel track. Hence, the importance of appreciating and imbibing the courage of Jesus Christ who knowing who he was, from where he came, and to where he was going, refused to



compromise his vocation, which was to teach people how to go to heaven, despite the opposition of his Jewish culture.

#### **6.4 *Brotherhood Vocation, Loved but not Wanted***

The word Brother conveys a welcoming aura. John Paul II alluded to this aspect of the Religious Brothers' spirituality as the core of their vocation in the Church. In every age and situation, the Religious Brothers' way of life permeates the fabrics of the cultural milieu the Brothers find themselves. People express how much they love Brothers and confidently find it easy to approach them for personal and family problems. Experience has shown that the Bishops and Priests are at home with the Religious Brothers thanks to their self-effacing demeanour. However, instigated unconsciously by the cultural mind-set, some Religious Brothers misunderstand the clergy as domineering and demanding. It happens sometimes that the clergy attempt to impose their might on the Religious thanks still to the cultural mind-set. However, they appreciate the Religious Brothers' attitude towards apostolate, their industriousness and malleable character. The Religious Sisters also admire the Religious Brothers' lifestyle because they see in them the simplicity, which is uncommon among African men. They therefore identify with Religious Brothers from that angle, despite the fact that occasionally, they become unconsciously too surprised why healthy and energetic men could consciously choose to remain Religious Brothers. When this happens, cultural mind-set is behind it, and it is responsible for the lack of interest Africans show towards the vocation.

The Religious Brothers who understand their vocation exhibit obvious self-confidence. People who meet the Religious Brothers appreciate their family spirit, which is the principle of Christian living as was reflected in the early Christian community. All the believers were one in heart and mind. No one claimed that any of his possessions was his own, but they shared everything they had. With great power, the apostles continued to testify to the resurrection of the Lord Jesus, and much grace was upon them all. There were no needy persons among them. For from time to time those who owned lands or houses sold them, brought the money from the sales and put it at the apostles' feet, and it was distributed to anyone as he had need (Acts 4:32-35). This notwithstanding, the African parents whose children become Religious Brothers are usually in dilemma.

The inherited cultural mind-set does not allow them to match their great zeal in serving God with the great sacrifice God demands of them; that is to say, to go against the cultural expectation.

Even though the Africans like the Religious Brothers as they like Jesus Christ, they do not want the Religious Brotherhood lifestyle and obligations permanently for their children. The same is their attitude towards Jesus Christ. They like him but do not want to identify strictly with him. They find joy in the crucified Christ but do not want to hang with him on the Cross. They would readily beg him to “leave their neighbourhood” (Mk. 5:17) as the people of Gerasene begged Jesus whom they accused of wasting their herd of pigs.

Religious Brothers are a financial loss to a people who capitalise on material wealth and abundant children as reason for existence. Africans do not befriend the gods and spirits but need them. Africans befriend the Religious Brothers but do not need them; they do not like their lifestyle, which they see as abnormal. The Religious Brothers lifestyle is what it takes to imitate Jesus Christ. Jesus became poor so that his members may become rich (2Cor. 8:9). The self-sacrifice endeared him to the poor and rich alike. The unconditional love the Religious Brothers have for people attracts people’s attention to them. As Africans start to value unconditional love for what it is, they will start to appreciate the self-sacrifice of the Religious Brothers, and in doing so, discover the Christ they pretend to love. As the Religious Brothers authentically reflect Jesus Christ, they will discover the value of their vocation and then start to persevere in it with self-confidence and audacity.

### ***6.5 Religious Brother, a Challenge to African Christians***

Africans are not only famous for their religiosity but also their hospitality. These qualities, at a glance, seem to parallel the Christian spirituality and mimic Religious Brothers’ lifestyle. A close look at the motive now reveals that Africans’ religiosity and hospitality base on the principle of reciprocity – you do for me, I do for you; the measure with which you measure for me, I will use for you. This is the principle of Golden Rule. The Jews had the mentality.

St. Paul alludes to this when writing to the Corinthian Christians concerning generosity. “If the enthusiasm is there, the basis on which it is acceptable is what someone has, not what someone does not have. It is not that you ought to relieve other people's needs and leave yourselves in hardship; but there should be a fair balance – your surplus at present may fill their deficit, and another time their surplus may fill your deficit. So, there may be a fair balance; as scripture says: No one who had collected more had too much, no one who collected less had too little” (2 Cor. 8:11-15). This way of reasoning interests the Africans more than the idea of the widow’s mite. With the widow’s mite mentality, neither a return nor “a fair balance” is expected. You give because you want to give and not because you have or ought to give. This is an act of Christian charity, an unconditional love. This is what the vocation of the Religious Brothers is supposed to be. Their self-giving is like the widow’s mite. This is a big challenge to the African Christians.

Looked at from another angle, St. Paul’s instruction may offend the Africans all the same because they do not operate on the principle of equality. They are community-conscious but shun equality. Traditionally, an African would want to be bigger, better, richer, braver than another person. For them it is not an unhealthy competition but a way of life, which is part of the cultural mind-set. It is not immorality, judging from the cultural point of view, but an institutionalized competition, unconsciously meant for psychological well-being. The virtues of the African Christians are but the mirage of Religious Brothers’ spirituality, possibly because with the practice of extended family system, Africans do not easily conceptualise unconditional love as a possibility. The Religious Brotherhood vocation is likely, then, the decisive test of the so-called African generosity and hospitality. The present African Religious Brothers need to be aware of the challenges before them to avoid falling victim to social influence.

## 7 CONCLUSION

The foundation of Religious Brotherhood vocation is the spirituality that reflects the earthly life of Our Lord Jesus Christ, especially his hidden life. The core of the vocation are the evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, which in effect are contrary to the core cherished values in the African culture, namely, progeny, wealth, and power. It seems that the African's sense of self-worth, as a people, rests on the three core values. Consequently, African Christians find it difficult to accommodate the Religious Brotherhood vocation, of which frequent entering and leaving the vocation is an obvious evidence. Africans like the Religious Brothers' lifestyle but do not want their children to assume it as a permanent vocation because it is a breach of the perennial unwritten cultural covenant: 'once trained, help to train others.' The Religious Brothers do not possess anything on their own; therefore, they do not have the right to help their kin and kith as substantially as the culture demands. This is a challenge not only to the African Religious Brothers but also to the entire African populace. The cultural mind-set seems to influence the Africans unconsciously to the extent that they systematically fail to recognise with enthusiasm the Religious Brotherhood vocation.

The Church, through the publication of a little booklet under the title "*The identity and mission of the Religious Brothers in the Church*", acknowledges that the Religious Brotherhood vocation is unpopular globally. Even the Africans whose life of prayer and generosity, joy even in suffering, poverty, and their valuing of virginity before marriage, which reflects the Religious Brothers' lifestyle, find it difficult to understand and accept the vocation of the Religious Brothers. Though the inclination is to blame the African cultural mind-set for the unpopularity of the vocation of the Religious Brothers in Africa, personality maturity of the individual Religious Brothers seems to be the main factor that influences the vocation. When the personality is mature, a Religious Brother would not hesitate to part with the traditional practices that hinder authentic and radical Christian living.

The central message of this work is to call attention to the Religious Brotherhood vocation so that the universal Church can gloriously rediscover it; then, the African Church enculturates it, the African clergy and female Religious promote it, and the young African men embrace it with confidence and persevere in it effectively. The African culture has rich religious elements and practices that can help in the enculturation and acculturation of Religious Brotherhood vocation once the Church stimulates interest in the vocation. The Africans like Religious Brothers but do not want their children to choose it as a permanent vocation because of the fear of going against the African traditional ethos. That is, a man must have his own children if not he is a riffraff. This mentality should have changed with the dawn of Christianity in Africa but it has not. There is need then, for re-evangelization to enlighten the Africans' faith, activate their love, and strengthen their hope to be faithful to their baptismal vows, to which the Religious Brothers bear witness. The Religious Brotherhood vocation is the renewal of the baptismal vows, which is a radical step taken with an adult mind, better conviction, and great determination, to be a Christian as Christ intends his followers to be, despite the tepidity of most Christians today. Being an authentic Christian involves sacrifice of which self-emptying is the essential part. The self-emptying manifests in unconditional love, which the African Christians have not attained despite their seeming high religiosity and hospitality.

Some of the elements in the African value and belief systems, which are cultural heritage that resist alteration, are not favourable for complete accommodation of the Religious Brotherhood vocation in Africa. Africa seems to stick to tradition because she has not outgrown the needs satisfaction stage where survival needs are paramount. Among the survival needs are security from hunger and extinction, which requires material wealth and abundant children. Focus on the basic needs seems to have kept the Africans from reaching the self-transcendent theocentric love, which the concept of widow's mite is a clear example. The Religious Brothers vow to live in accordance with the widow's mite but suffer pang of conscience for being different from their cultural members and betraying the confidence the cultural group reposes on men. The African Religious Brothers seem to depend heavily on the opinion others have

about their vocation. They sometimes worry about the gentle behaviour vowing chastity, poverty and obedience ‘imposes’ on their personal pride because they lack the maturity to pay the cost of discipleship, which involves carrying one’s cross following Jesus and “[allowing] the dead to bury their dead” (Matt. 8:22). The African Religious Brothers depend more on their social identity than religious identity; therefore find it difficult to disentangle themselves from the cultural mesh, consequently remain religiously immature.

Mature people feel content with what they have; they can give generously unconditionally; they do not depend on the opinion of others as they pursue the good inherent in religious vocation. The African Religious Brothers seem not to know what they have; therefore, they do not have the inner frame of reference to feel content of it. They end up feeling inferior and lukewarm in their vocation attracting the sympathy of those who think Religious Brotherhood vocation is unattained priesthood. In this situation, they succumb to social pressure from the traditional culture, the dominant culture, and feel lost in the culture of Religious Life, which is the minority culture, because, it seems, they do not believe strongly in what they have vowed. The consequence is entering and leaving the vocation because mature faith, clear hope, and sincere love are lacking in both the culture and individual Religious Brothers.

The implication is the Church should make effort to re-educate the culture in the true Christian spirituality. This is important because the seed of religious vocation germinates in the proper cultural milieu even when from above comes the divine Call. Religious Life vocation does not fall completely from heaven. The members of the culture must be mature in faith, hope and love to support the young African Religious Brotherhood aspirants because the content of the religious formation alone cannot sustain them effectively in the vocation. Therefore, the cultural natural agents need to be abreast with Christian culture because nurture can enhance or distort nature depending on the maturity of the nurturing adults. The adults whose development stops at the need fulfilment stage will find it difficult to nurture young ones for self-transcendent aspiration. Selfish people, from psychological point of view, are immature. Such immature people may appear healthy in their cultural environment but not all cultures are mature from Christian moral and faith points of view. Culture

can limit an adult's effective freedom, even when the adult seems to have essential freedom. Effective freedom is the capacity to choose between the good and the apparent good; it is different from essential freedom, which is the capacity to choose between good and bad, right and wrong. Effective freedom is superior in quality to essential freedom. Choice based on essential freedom may satisfy the demands of a particular culture but go against the Christian vocation, which greatly requires effective freedom. Lack of effective freedom is essentially a sign of psychological problem. Considering this when discerning the vocation of the young African aspirants cannot be over emphasised.

These days, families are in disarray, society disorientated, and adults after wealth, fame, power and pleasure; all this makes nurturing the young to have authentic Christian vocation difficult. Individuals currently find it difficult to find meaning in God's design. Carrying the cross, in the name of Christ, is among God's designs for humanity but Africans who have seen suffering all their lives mistake cross for a curse. Inadvertently, the social discomfort subtly influences the image of the Religious Brothers in Africa negatively. In the traditional Africans' view, the Religious Brothers hate their life by choosing to imitate Jesus Christ strictly. Thus, they fail to understand the Christological significance of the Religious Brothers' vocation.

It may not be an over statement to say that only the lifestyle of the Religious Brothers reflects exactly the 'hidden' earthly life of Jesus Christ. Jesus Christ was poor, chaste, obedient, and a man, yet humble, in a male-dominated culture, therefore, unpopular among his people. The Religious Brothers appear like this to the Africans. Jesus continues to tell all the Christians today through the Religious Brothers, "No one who prefers father or mother to me is worthy of me. No one who prefers son or daughter to me is worthy of me. Anyone who does not take his cross and follow in my footsteps is not worthy of me. Anyone who finds his life will lose it; anyone who loses his life for my sake will find it" (Matt. 10:37-39). Jesus emptied himself for humankind to have life in abundance. The Religious Brothers, like a mirror, reflect Jesus Christ to the Africans today. This is what is uniquely specific about the Religious Brothers' vocation.

Stressing what are specific to the Religious Brothers' vocation in the Church is the goal of this work. The aim is to help the young African men to understand the Religious Brotherhood vocation. Talking specifically about the Religious Brothers without sounding as if talking about the Christian life in general is not an easy task; it may not be possible either since Religious Life is the renewal of the baptismal vows and for that reason, a form of pure Christian life. The Religious Brothers live this life uniquely as a vocation to recapitulate the hidden earthly life of the historical man, Jesus Christ. They do this with the perpetual profession of the three evangelical counsels of chastity, poverty, and obedience, which, unlike the other Christians, are a perpetual obligation for them. In a unique way, the Religious Brothers' life reflects exactly how Jesus lived, especially his attitude towards love and service. The identity of the Religious Brothers base on this fact as the following statement elucidates.

To deepen our understanding of the identity of the Brother, we will allow ourselves to be enlightened as we contemplate one of the most evocative icons of the four Gospels: Jesus washing the feet of his disciples.... In the consciousness of the Church, it is in the light of this icon of the washing of the feet that the other icon, in which Jesus shares out his Body and his Blood, finds its full meaning. That is to say, the commandment of brotherly love gives us the key to understanding the meaning of the Eucharist in the Church. This is reflected in the liturgy of Holy Thursday" (CICLSAL, 2015, no. 12).

By their religious profession, the Religious Brothers bear the identity "Brother," which is deeper in meaning and significance than the slogan 'brother' used for the male Christians in general in a Christian forum. That being the case then, the statement of CICLSAL emphasizes the unique role of the Religious Brothers in the Church, which remains yet unclear to many people, especially the Africans whose cultural mindset hinders them from acknowledging the Religious Brotherhood vocation. As the Church has boldly created the awareness of the identity and mission of the Religious Brothers in the Church and recommends all and sundry to promote the vocation, the African Churches should take it



seriously and respond urgently since she still has higher vocation rate than any other Churches globally. Let the parents and catechists, at the grassroots stimulate the young African boys to be generous with their lives, to develop the spirit of the early Christian community and give themselves cheerfully and generously to the service of God without reservation. Parents should do this by being consistent in their marriage. To do so, they have a lot to learn from the life of the Religious Brothers too.

The Religious Brotherhood vocation is an act of strong faith like the one Abraham, our father in faith, demonstrated. The less Religious Brotherhood vocation there is in Africa, the more Africans demonstrate that fundamentally they are not generous. If Christians lack in generosity, the essence of being other *Christs* is defeated. African Religious Brothers remind African Christians to be kind and self-giving. Africans are daring in hope. Once the African young men see the theological sense in becoming a Religious Brother, they will appreciate the vocation and the role the Religious Brothers play in the Church and in the world and start to persevere meaningfully in the vocation. Nevertheless, if egoistic status interest pervades the entire African social system, the young will be vocationally confused and then unconsciously feel guilty to deviate from the cultural moral belief. It is hoped that the African young men may embrace Religious Brotherhood vocation to reflect Jesus Christ to the African Christians as “...children of God without blemish in the midst of a crooked and perverse generation, among whom [they should] shine like lights in the world” (Phil. 2:15). The Religious Brothers’ lifestyle hinges on humble service in love. Jesus demonstrated such lifestyle at the Last Supper. He confirmed it in words saying “...anyone who wants to become great among you must be your servant, and anyone who wants to be first among you must be your slave, just as the Son of man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matt. 20:25-28).

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Vitus Osuji is a Marist Brother of the Nigerian Province. He was born and bred in his native Igbo nation in the South East of Nigeria. He did his tertiary studies in Nigeria (Institute of Management and Technology, Enugu), Kenya (Marist International Center, then affiliated to the Pontifical Urbaniana University, Rome, Italy; Catholic Institute of Eastern Africa, Nairobi) and Italy (Pontifical Gregorian University, Rome). He holds Nigerian Certificate of Education (NCE), in technical education, Bachelor's degree in Religious sciences, and Master's degree in Clinical Psychology – with special inclination to Christian vocation and formation. He has worked in the area of Religious Formation for a long time. He has encountered and worked with numerous vocationers from almost all the continents, for personality assessment, discernment of vocation, and psychotherapy. Presently he works at the Marist Brothers Postulate in Nigeria.



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