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**COMMUNITY LIFE: A PREREQUISITE FOR LIVING AN AUTHENTIC
RELIGIOUS LIFE IN THE CONGREGATION OF THE SISTERS OF THE
IMMACULATE HEART OF MARY (*Bene-Mariya Sisters*) IN BURUNDI.**

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**Long Essay Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirement for Diploma in
Spirituality**

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DEDICATION

This research work is dedicated to my beloved: parents, brothers and sisters from whom I have experienced genuine love that has made me the person I am today and to my religious family of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* for their love, support and encouragement through which I have grown in my human values and virtues.

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May the good Lord bless you all abundantly!

STUDENT'S DECLARATION

I, the undersigned, declare that this long essay is my original work achieved through my personal readings and critical reflections. It is submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the Diploma in Spirituality. It has never been submitted to any other college or university for academic credit. All sources have been cited in full and acknowledged.

Signed.....

Name of Student: VESTINE INEZA

Date.....

This long essay has been submitted for examination with my approval as the college supervisor.

Signed.....

Name of Supervisor: Sr. Maria Felix MWIKALI, ASN

Date.....

ABBREVIATIONS

Acts: Acte of the Apostles

CCL: Code of the Canon Law

Col: Colossians

Cor: Corinthians

Ex: Exodus

Ez: Ezechiel

Gal: Galatians

Gen: Genesis

Is: Isaiah

Jer: Jeremiah

Jgs: Judges

Jn: John

LG: Dogmatic Constitution on the Church *Lumen Gentium*

Lk: Luke

Mal: Malachi

Mk: Mark

Mt: Matthew

Nm: Numbers

PC: Decree on the Up-to-Date Renewal of Religious Life *Perfectae Caritatis*

Pet: Peter

Phil: Philippians

Prov: Proverbs

RM: The Mission of the Church, Encyclical Letter *Redemptoris Missio*

Rom: Romans

Tim: Timothy

VC: *The Consecrated Life, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation Vitae Consecrata*

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GENERAL INTRODUCTION

As a religious congregation of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, we imitate the fraternal communion of the first Christian community. A Community life, an experience of common faith, living together, making everything together and sharing everything according to the needs of each. The community, a place where each member learns to rise up when she falls, to trust others, a school of humility and understanding, a learning school where each learns to welcome the differences of others in their strengths and their weaknesses, a school where each member learns to live and understand others during moments of joy and difficulties.

From the differences of origin, age, character, each *Mwene-Mariya* will understand that it is through unity in the Holy Spirit that we will be able to build communities. "Living together" is unquestionably a source of joy that responds to the need of the heart.

With experience of community life, the *Bene-Mariya* try to understand that, what makes life is not above all bringing, giving and doing much for others but gradually learning to admire others, asking for forgiveness if there is a mistake committed, doing a service if possible, accepting fraternal corrections....This experience helps those who live it to let themselves be loved and to rise up when they fall and to receive fraternal life together in the same faith as God's gift. The reciting of the Acts of the Apostles on the first Christian community (Acts 2:42-47) greatly encourages those who are concretely and resolutely committed to more openness with those they live together, in the community on fraternal communion and sharing , but also with all those they meet in everyday life.

The current paper starts by presenting the background of the study, the purpose and aim, the objectives and the rationale for the study. It then discusses the scope and the delimitation, the difficulties that the researcher may encounter during her work of research as well as the remedies for those difficulties. Additionally, this paper presents possible research questions and

methodology that will inform the current study. A work plan, a general conclusion and the bibliography are presented through this discussion as well.

1. Background of the Study

The inspiration for researching on the topic:” Community life as a prerequisite for living an Authentic Religious Life among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* in Burundi ” was stimulated by the researcher’s personal experience of community life as well as many experiences shared with some fellow sisters in the congregation . Community life has its origin in the love of the Trinity. “The Father wants all people to form one single family in which all will be loved as brothers and sisters.”¹ Thus, sincere love is the foundation of community life.

Likewise, for Africans, community is an indispensable value in one’s life. A person grows and comes into full existence in relationship with others as he/she becomes a member of a community.² In religious life, with exception of those who not live a community life, the religious become faithful and committed in their journey of following Christ in and through the community. According to Kaitholil, “a genuine religious community can be a heaven on earth” where every member experiences joy and happiness, peace and harmony, love and understanding, acceptance and recognition³. Thus, all members together have to build this “heaven”. This was echoed by. S. M. Gomez, in his book *Community Life among Religious*. According to him, “Religious community should be a family where everyone feels loved and loving, where calling each other “my sister” or “my brother” signifies what it means.⁴

¹ Second Vatican council: “*Gaudium et spes*”: dogmatic constitution on Pastoral Constitution on the Church in the Modern World” in *the document of Vatican II*, ed. Walter M. Abbott, New York: Guild Press, 1966), 35.

² J. S. Mbiti, “*African Religious and Philosophy*”, (Nairobi: Heinemann Kenya Limited, 1969), 108.

³ G. Kaitholil, “*Communion in Community*”, (Mumbai: Saint Paulst, 2001), 9.

⁴ S.M. Gomez, “*Community Life Among Religious*”, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2006), 44.

This is however not always the case. In our present time there are many sisters who are struggling in their vocation due to various crises, including community problems. Some of those who quit religious life associate their reasons of quitting with community living. Some do not hesitate to call their community “a horrible place” or “hell” in which they cannot continue living. There are some who take courage to stay but lead a frustrated and questionable life.

In our society today, there are also many other factors such as; technology, activism and individualism that are hampering some religious in their vocation and leading them to the loss of the significance of community life.⁵

All the above indicated situations and many others unmentioned here left me with a question: Can we really talk of an authentic religious life without having a genuine and solid community life? We, hope that this research will be an excellent opportunity to explore deeply the role of community life in our authentic consecration to God as *Bene-Mariya Sisters*.

2. Purpose and Aim of the Study

The interest and willingness of researching on the topic, Community Life as a prerequisite for Living an Authentic Religious Life among the *Bene-Mariya sisters* is raised by the lived experiences in religious communities today. This study will therefore emphasize the necessity of a genuine community life for one to lead an authentic religious life. In fact, the religious vows cannot be lived fully if not in a good community. Likewise the apostolate can never be fruitful if not influenced by the community where everyone shares his or her joys and burdens; where all get mutual support from one another in order to persevere in times of difficulties and to enjoy life together. A community should however not be built simply on togetherness that is, just living under one roof and putting all in common pool but on

⁵ *Constitution des Sœurs Bene-Mariya* (Ngozi : 1987), 57.

communion and fraternal love.⁶ Therefore, this research will help the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* to renew and deepen their role in building a genuine community life which is the basis of an authentic religious life in order for them to be happy religious women.

3. Problem Statement

The whole of Religious Life is heavily centered on Community life without which Religious life seems impossible. This is most important among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* where the value of community is of paramount importance. However, among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, some sisters do not find time for community life and it becomes even worse when they do not find the meaning in it. For some, the value of community is somehow neglected and replaced by activism. Some sisters are more interested in what they do than who they are. For some, the religious community becomes a burden and a place of conflicts and quarrels instead of being an oasis of joy, peace and blossoming for every member.⁷ As a result some sisters in temporary vows as well as in final vows desert their vocation citing as the root cause, the problems of community living.⁸

On the other hand, there are some sisters who remain but lead a regrettable life contradicting their call and vocation. These are known as nesters and are characterized by inconsistencies in their vocation. This simply means that even though these people have chosen an ideal life there are many difficulties in living according to that ideal⁹. Therefore, what can the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* do to improve community life in order to live authentic religious life?

⁶ G. Baum, “Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life of Vatican Council II”: Commentary, (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1966), 12.

⁷ G. Kaitholil, *Communion in Community*, 46.

⁸ *Constitution des sœurs Bene-Mariya*, 235.

⁹ A. Cencini-A. Manenti, “*Psychology and Formation, Structure and Dynamic*”, (Bandra Bombay: Pauline Publications, 1992), 139.

4. Study objectives

The objectives of this research include:

1. To point out the Church's and the Bible teaching on community life.
2. To discuss religious community life in the context of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* pinpointing its values as well as its challenges.
3. To create awareness and awaken an interest in the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* of today on the importance of a genuine community as place of living an authentic religious life.

5. Rationale/ Justification of the Study

This research will help the researcher to analyze the need for community life, including even its importance in religious life. It will be an opportunity for the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* to understand their role in building their community and community life itself. Each will realize that those who seek the same goal are bound together in the community by the love of God itself. They also support each other as disciples of Jesus Christ.

This research will also look for different ways to enlighten the leaders of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* about their role in improving and developing community life and, above all, encouraging all its members to live like Sisters and living a model life community. The Church and society will benefit from this research through the fruits of a well lived community life.

6. Scope and Delimitations of the Study

This research will focus on the importance of community life for authentic religious life specifically in the context of *Bene-mariya Sisters*. The emphasis will be on sisters in the Congregation of *Bene-Mariya Sisters* in Burundi. The culture of concealing what belongs to an internal life of a given congregation or community might interfere with the researcher's

obtention of certain information. The solution to this limitation will be possibly through sharing with my colleagues from various communities and reading from books.

7. Difficulties and How to overcome them

During this study, the lack of time as well as financial challenges may make it difficult to travel from Kenya to Burundi. The major problem will therefore be how to get information since books written on the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* are not in the Tangaza University College Library available the insufficient information is. This means that the researcher will use the new technology to facilitate the research. As far as the problem related to travelling from Kenya to Burundi to collect information is concerned, the researcher will use new technology, through phone calls to resourceful personnel's in the congregation to acquire more information. In order to get books, we shall use internet and for those that we cannot find through internet, we shall find other related books in the library. By this strategy, the researcher will reduce the amount of money to use to travel to Burundi as well as the time to be used for the research.

8. Possible Research Questions

The following questions will guide the research.

1. What does the Bible and the Church teach on community life?
2. How is community life experienced for actual religious in the context of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*?
3. What makes community life important for the authenticity of religious life in the context of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*?

9. Methodology

This research will use relevant material with emphasis on the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* and religious community life. This certainly includes Sacred Scriptures, books, journals, encyclopedias, Church documents and internet sources. It will be more enriched by some personal reflections based on lived experiences to make it more realistic and authentic.

CHAPTER ONE

CHURCH AND BIBLE TEACHING ON COMMUNITY LIFE

1.0. Introduction

The aim of this chapter is to get an overview of the Church's and the Bible teaching on community life. We shall look at the foundation and the purpose of community from the biblical perspective, focusing on both the Old and the New Testaments. We shall also see the Early Christian Community basing our attention on their essential characteristics such as the teaching of the Apostles, common prayer and breaking of the Bread, and the common goods. Thereafter, we shall see how community life is discussed in the Magisterium of the Church through different documents. We shall finally have a brief look at the typical examples of the emphasis of community life in the Code of Canon Law and some constitutions of different Institutes and Constitutions. These will be related to the authentic religious life in Burundi.

1.1. The Scriptural Teaching on Community Life

1.1.1. Old Testament

From the very beginning, God created human beings as a social beings and this is clear in the second creation story. God intended the community life. "It is not good for the man to be alone" (Gen 2:18). He wanted man to be a relational being. Lawrence Boadt comments that "The message behind the second creation story is, that humans need human community. Being alone is not good for humans."¹⁰ We have been created to relate with others.

In the history of salvation, God did not want to save His people individually but rather to save them as a community. Beginning with Abraham, God promised him a community: "I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you" (Gen 12:2). With this community "Israel",

¹⁰ L. Boadt. "Reading *the Old Testament: An Introduction*", (New York, Paulist press: 1984), 363.

God kept his promise by making a covenant with them on Mount Sinai after he had freed them from slavery of Egypt (Ex 19-20).

Thus they became, as Martin Gomez asserts “an assembly called together by God, the community of the chosen people, the sacred assembly.”¹¹

The book of Exodus shows how the people of Israel agreed enormously to become a special possession by keeping faithfully the covenant (cf. Ex 19:5-6a.8b). According to Martin Gomez, the covenant God made with Israel, sealed with the blood of communion sacrifices, was summed up in the two great commandments: You must love Yahweh your God with all your heart and you shall love your neighbour as yourself (cf. Ex 24:5-8; Lv 19:18).¹²

A religious community is the assembly of the chosen people of God who accepted to become a special possession of God. Thus, for the religious life to be authentic there is need for that continuous awareness that consecrated people are to keep faithfully the covenant signed during religious profession.

The commandment of love binds together the people of Israel with God and among themselves. This love was characterized by unity, solidarity, care and support for one another. They were to take care especially of the poor, widows and orphans. Israel had a clear and severe legislation against any injustice to this group of people (cf. Ex 22: 20-26). Those who would disobey God’s commandments were punished and taken away from the community. These were condemned to die in the desert and never reached the Promised Land (cf. Nm 11:31-35; 4-6). Even when they reached the Promised Land they were to live in accordance with the covenant. They were given the judges to guide them in order to remain faithful to God’s covenant. Whenever they rebelled against the God of the Covenant they were oppressed by other nations

¹¹ M. Gomez, “*Community Life among Religious*”, (Nairobi: Paulines Publications, 2006), 8.

¹² M. Gomez, “*Community Life among Religious*”, 8

(cf. Jgs 2:10-4:3; 10:9). However, God was always ready to save them when they repented and turned back to Him (cf. Jgs 6:7-7:25; 10:10-11:28).

The above standards of the community of Israel were stressed by various prophets who ever detested their infidelities and weaknesses against the Covenant. Among others, Malachi condemns the failures of priests and of the people in their religious duties (cf, Mal 1:6-2:16). Isaiah insisted that justice, righteousness and compassion especially towards the poor and the weak, were essential aspects of communal life (cf. Is 1: 21-24). Jeremiah also confronted the social sins of the King and of the people, (cf. Jer 22: 13-19) and reminded them that God the LORD is interested in people's lives and their love and concern for others. Nevertheless, despite People's infidelity to the covenant which made them suffer several consequences, God did not abandon them. He kept his word to make them his ownership and through the words of prophets Ezekiel and Jeremiah, God promised to renew the covenant, (cf. Ez 36:24-28, Jr 31: 31-34). Thus, the authenticity of religious life is not an individual's responsibility alone, but a community role. Each one is called to be their brother's keeper.

1.1.2. New Testament

In the New Testament, the community living is understood as the gathering of the people of the New Covenant fulfilled in Jesus Christ. John states that Jesus was to die to gather into one the dispersed children of God (cf. Jn 11-52). It is among those children of God that Jesus chose a special community of the disciples who will become the foundation of the New Israel, new people of God. They were to be with Jesus, which means "forming a community of Jesus and sharing in his mission."¹³ After being with Jesus and learning from him they were sent out into the mission (Mk 3; 13-14). They were to go two by two (cf. Mk 6:7). The number two is the symbol of community. This aspect is also emphasized in the Acts of the Apostles where

¹³ A. Sekkamatte, "*Synoptic Gospel*", Class notes (Nairobi, 2013), 22.

they go out in pairs (cf. Acts 3:1; 4:13; 13:2; 15:22). Mission is not a private affair. The gospel is to be preached by those who practice community life.¹⁴

Jesus never ceased to instruct and form his disciples about the behaviors and attitudes appropriate to fit in this community. They were called not to dominate others but rather to serve them just in the footsteps of their master. “Whoever wishes to be great among you will be your servant, whoever wishes to be first among you will be the slave of all” (Mk 10:43-44). Thus, the primacy in the community is that of service and humility.

Religious people are to serve, not to dominate. Jesus did not train them by words alone but also by example. For instance, the Gospel of John clearly demonstrates Jesus washing his disciples’ feet (cf. Jn 13: 1-20). The washing of the feet is symbolic of the self-abasement and humility of the Son of God. Therefore the disciples were called to follow their Master’s examples as He himself clarifies it: “I have given you a model to follow, so that as I have done for you, you should also do” (Jn 13:15). The washing of the feet is a need in today’s religious life in general, and among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* in particular. The vocation of each member should be supported by fraternal care and tactical correction. This is only possible when they love one another.

Jesus insisted often on the great commandment as a sign of discipleship: “I give you a new commandment: love one another. As I have loved you, so you also should love one another. This is how all will know that you are my disciples, if you have love for one another” (Jn 13:34-35).

In his priestly prayer, Jesus called his disciples to follow the Trinitarian model of community life by praying for them to his Father to make them one as he and his Father are one (cf. Jn 17:11). In the same prayer, he also stated clearly that his community was not limited only

¹⁴ A. Sekkamatte, “*Synoptic Gospel*”, Class notes (Nairobi, 2013), 25.

to the disciples of that time, but it was inclusively open to those who would believe in him through the words of the disciples (Jn 17:20-21).

In the Christian context, and particularly in religious life, the true sense of community goes beyond the concept of sharing the same traditions and laws; instead a community founded on Christ is where the Jews and Gentiles are all welcome.

Another characteristic of community life is mutual forgiveness. Given that Jesus knew very well the fragility of his disciples, he replied to Peter who asked him how many times he had to forgive his brother who offended him (Mt 18:21-22): "Then Peter approaching asked him, Lord, if my brother sins against me, how often must I forgive him? As many as seven times? Jesus answered, "I say to you, not seven times, but seventy-seven times. For Peter, his offer of seven times seems generous, but Jesus in his answer shows us how our will to forgive should be as illumined as he even loved us with infinite love until giving for us his life on the cross (Ph 2: 8) . Jesus took advantage of Peter's question and understanding and instructed his disciples through the parable of the unforgiving debtor (Mt 18:23-25). By the forgiveness from God that we receive every day, it is shameful for us to refuse to forgive those who have offended us. Jesus' unconditional love must teach us to forgive, without mention the number of times we have forgiven.

One the other hand, Saint Paul, in his letters brings out the concept of community as a body and "the body imagery requires that the community has internal concern for its members."¹⁵ This is very clear in the first Christian community whereby all resources were shared. They were united soul and heart, devoted to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayer (Acts 2: 4-47). This ideal community should serve as an example for religious community life, particularly to the *Bene-*

¹⁵ K.D, Sakenfeld, " *The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible*" (Abingdon Press, 2006), 711

Mariya Sisters whereby unity, harmony and solidarity expressed through concern for one another and generosity founded on prayer and the Word of God should be the motto.

Saint Paul, known as “the Doctor of charity”¹⁶ insisted on sincere love, compassion and unity among the communities he had formed (cf. 1Cor 13:1-13). He wrote to those in Thessalonica praying to God to make them increase and abound in love for one another and for all (1Thes 3:12). To the Romans, he urges: “Let love be sincere..., love one another with mutual affection; anticipate with one another in showing honor..., contribute to the needs of the holy ones, exercise hospitality...” (Rom 12: 9-18). To the Colossians, he recommended: “Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, heartfelt compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience, bearing with one another and forgiving one another, if one has a grievance against another, as the Lord has forgiven you, so must you also do. And over all these put on love, that is, the bond of perfection” (Col 3:12-14).

Therefore, in a religious community, the members should help to carry one another’s burdens (Gal 6:2). According to Kaitholil, to carry one another’s burden means to accept one another as they are, with all their defects and limitations. Thus, it is the duty of every member of the community to be generous towards the faults and defects of their brethren.¹⁷ All these biblical quotations clearly show that community life is essential to Christians and in a special way to the religious.

1.2. The Early Christian Community

The Christian Community of Jerusalem was probably the earliest community of believers who felt strongly to have and share much in common. This community was therefore

¹⁶ G. Kaitholil, “*Communion in Community*”, 59.

¹⁷ G. Kaitholil, “*Communion in Community*”, 60.

characterized by perseverance in the teaching of the apostles, common prayers, the breaking of the bread and common ownership of goods.

1.2.1. The Teaching of the Apostles

The teaching of the apostles has the same authority as that of Jesus their master. The Jews were firmly convinced that the Scriptures, namely the law and the prophets were very authoritative. The teaching of Jesus and the apostles commanded more authority. This was well articulated in the words of the high priest: "We strictly charge you not to teach in the name, yet here you have filled Jerusalem with your teaching and intend to bring this man's blood upon us "(Acts 5:28).

In this way, the preaching and witness of the apostles was effective in Jerusalem. Consequently, the community of the newly baptized was formed and catechized in the light of the Risen Lord.¹⁸ The Scriptures were interpreted, the words and actions of Jesus were recalled and finally the rule of life was discovered in them.¹⁹ This community was shaped by the Gospel. The early Christians enhanced the unity which Jesus prayed for. They learned unity from the apostles who learned it from Jesus himself. Thus, adherence to Christ's teaching meant unity with him and all the brethren. The prayer of Jesus inspired them: "I do not pray for these only, but also for those who believe in me through their word, so that they may all be one , as you, Father, are in me and I in you, that they may be in us, that the world may believe that you sent me" (Jn 17:20-21) .

Thus, unity was a priority in the early Christian Community. It was an expression of the Trinitarian love of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit. Emphasizing the ultimate ground of

¹⁸ R.F. Temu, "*Religious Community Life with Reference to the Pallottine Fathers in East Africa*"(Nairobi, 2007), 89.

¹⁹ R. Schnackenburg, "*The Church in the New Testament*", (New York: Herder & Herder, 1965), 19.

this unity, Schnackenburg puts it well: “It is the one God who has called all, the one Lord to whom all belong, the one Spirit who fills all and unites them in the one Body of Christ, the one baptism in which all become ‘one in Christ Jesus’ (Gal 3:27f.; cf. 1 Cor 12:13), the one bread of the Eucharist in which all share (1Cor 10: 17).”²⁰ It was the fruit of Christ’s redemptive power on the believers.

Love and unity are features that identified the early Christian Communities and were strengthened by the Holy Spirit. As stressed by Bullough, “the living preservation of unity is once more to be attributed to the work of the Holy Spirit, the life giver, the spirit of unity.”²¹ The spirit was to protect, inspire and lead the Church. He was the life giver of the Christian Community and an active inspirer during hard times as this was Christ’s promise (cf. Jn 14:12-25; 16:7-15).

The early Christian Community was united solely by the teaching of Christ. However, the religious community, being primarily a Christian Community, has more in vows and traditions laid down through generations. Thus, their bond of unity should be more sincere and generous, that is, there is a collective unity of purpose through the charism and spirituality they share, and commitment enshrined in the vows.

1.2.2. Common Prayer and the Breaking of the Bread

In the Christian Community of Jerusalem, prayer was a symbol of unity. It united believers among themselves and with the Risen Lord. In fact, they prayed in their homes and in the temple (Acts 2:46; 3:1). Furthermore, as they prayed together, they experienced the presence of the Lord among them. This experience strengthened unity among the believers. Another

²⁰ R. Schnackenburg, *“The Church in the New Testament”*, 19.

²¹ S. Bullough, *“The Church in the New Testament”*, (Maryland: Newman Press, 1957), 58.

aspect that strengthened unity in the Jerusalem community was the breaking of the bread that is the Eucharist. They shared both the faith and the communion. The sharing of the bread in families was a symbol of love and solidarity with the Risen Lord. St. Paul puts it in this way: “For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord’s death until he comes” (Cor 11:23-26). Thus, it is certain that the “Eucharistic unity is expressed already in the breaking of bread and the communion here is more of a juridical unity.”²² Finally, common prayers and the breaking of the bread were an expression of unity of the early Christian Community under the leadership of the apostles as representatives of Christ.

The teaching of St. Paul calls the Religious people to live their witness of life, first to their brethren in the community. Prayer is the essential pillar for any authentic community life. This was true of early Christian community. It can be true as well for the *Bene-Mariya* religious communities.

1.2.3. Common Goods

In the early Christian Community of Jerusalem, there was a voluntary sharing of goods (Acts 2:44-45; 5:1-6). For St. Paul, sharing of goods is directly connected with reference to the poor in Jerusalem for whom he was collecting money (Rom 15:26; Gal 2:10; 1 Cor 16: 1-3). The fact of sharing property in common enhanced solidarity in community since everyone was obliged to support the other. Consequently, Christians gave up their riches for the poor and condemned excessive wealthy as an obstacle to the Kingdom of God (Lk 1:53; 6:24; Mk 10:23; 2 Cor 8:9; Jas 5:1).

The administration of common goods became a requirement imposed on the community leaders (1 Pet 5:2; 1 Tim 3:4-5). It is therefore, argued that “the object of renouncing possessions

²² S. Bullough, “*The Church in the New Testament*”, 55.

in this way, be it among the early Christian or among religious at the present day, is to enable men to occupy themselves more freely with the things of God, and at the same time to detach themselves from earthly possessions which can so easily claim more of our care than they should.”²³

In practice, the early Christian of Jerusalem lived in a community of common ownership of goods (Acts 2: 44, 4:32). They sold their properties and brought the money to the apostles who arranged its contribution (Acts 2: 45; 4:34-35).²⁴ For those who entered this way of life but failed to keep it, there was a severe punishment. The condemnation of Ananias and Sapphira for instance, is an indication that truth and trust were the basis of membership to the community as it is reported in the Acts of the Apostles. Therefore, the punishment was inflicted upon this tragic couple by God, in order to preserve the purity of His Church. The condemnation of the action was made by the visible head of the Church who was Peter.²⁵ Thus, Peter exercises the authority which was received from Jesus. And the community must adhere to instructions of the apostles in order to behave in a manner proper to the followers of Christ. This indicates that, genuine detachment from excess material and concern for the poor are important elements in building a community necessary for an authentic religious life and this is clear in our vow of poverty.

From the Apostolic Church up to now, the Church has never ceased to teach her children to maintain the essentials such as communion, love, unity, reconciliation among others.

1.3. Magisterium on Community Life

The Church in her teachings has never ceased to remind her children about their duties to keep the exigencies of community living. Some Apostolic Exhortations like for instance *Vita*

²³ S. Bullough, “*The Church in the New Testament*”, 63.

²⁴ S. Bullough, “*The Church in the New Testament*”, 63.

²⁵ S. Bullough, “*The Church in the New Testament*”, 65.

consecrate (VC), Redemptoris Missio (RM), Ecclesia in Africa, Decrees and Constitutions such as *Lumen Gentium (LG), Perfectae Caritatis (PC)*, have been written emphasizing community life and its effects on the whole Church.

In the decree of *Perfectae Caritatis* on the appropriate renewal of religious life, the Vatican Council II tells us that: the purpose of the profession and practice of the evangelical counsels is to help religious in their “pursuit of perfect love”, to follow Christ more freely and imitate him more closely.²⁶ This love is directed first of all to God. He is to be loved above all else because he loved us first. Then it is directed towards one’s brothers and sisters. The council devotes the whole fifteenth section to community life among religious. It says among other things:

“Common life, in prayer and sharing of the same spirit (Acts 2:42) should be constant, after the example of the early Church, in which the Company of believers were of one heart and soul. It should be nourished by the teaching of the Gospel and by the sacred liturgy, especially by the Eucharist. Religious, as members of Christ, should live together as brothers and should give pride of place to one another in esteem (Cf. Rom 12:10), carrying one another’s burdens (Cf. Gal 6:12). A community gathered together as a true family in the Lord’s name enjoys his presence (Cf. Mt 18:20), through the love of God which is poured into their hearts by the Holy Spirit (Cf. Rom 5:5). For love sums up the law (Cf. Rom 13:10) and is the bond which makes us perfect (Cf. Col 3:14); by it we know that we have crossed over from death to life (Cf. 1 Jn 3:14). Indeed, the unity of the brethren is a symbol of the coming of Christ (Cf. Jn 13:35; 17:21) and is a source of great apostolic power.”²⁷

According to the description of this section about common life, “Christian life is the life of the brethren whereby their unity in a common life is a sign of Christ’s victory.” According to the biblical ideal, the unity of these brethren is above all the fruit of charity. Loving one another, living for the same ideal, sharing in the same gifts, bearing the burden of life together,

²⁶ Second Vatican council: “*Perfectae Caritatis*”, dogmatic constitution on the adaptation and renewal of religious life”in the document of *Vatican II*”, ed. Walter M. Abbott, (New York: Guild Press, 1996), 551.

²⁷ “*Perfectae Caritatis*”, 552.

this is the unity of the religious family. Commenting on the Decree about *The Renewal of Religious Life of Vatican Council II*, Gregory Baum says that the unity of common action, common regulations, common habit and so on. This unity is characterized rather, by sharing, openness, friendship and love between the members of community.²⁸

Saint John Paul II in his Post-Synodal Exhortation on Consecrated Life known as *Vita Consecrata* exhorts the religious about their call to fraternal life and love:

“The fraternal life, understood as a life shared in love, is an eloquent sign of ecclesial communion. It is practiced by special care in Religious Institutes and in Societies of Apostolic Life, where community living acquires special significance...Love led Christ to the gift of self, even to the supreme sacrifice of the Cross. So too, among his disciples, there can be no true unity without that unconditional mutual love which demands a readiness to serve others generously, a willingness to welcome them as they are, without ‘judging’ them (Cf. Mt 7: 1-2), and an ability to forgive up to ‘seventy times seven’ (Mt 18:22).”²⁹

The Pope goes on to say, that the witness of communion within the religious community must bear fruits outside that is, in the world. In other words, consecrated persons are called to be a leaven of communion in the world at the service of the mission of the universal church. This was stressed by *Lumen Gentium (LG)* in these words:” The Church serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society.³⁰ He states it in the following inspiring words:

“The Church entrusts to communities of consecrated life the particular task of spreading the spirituality of communion, first of all in their internal life and then in the ecclesial community, and even beyond its boundaries, by opening or continuing a dialogue of charity, especially where today’s world is torn apart by ethnic hatred or senseless violence. Placed as they are

²⁸ G. Baum, “Decree on the Renewal of Religious Life of Vatican Council II: Commentary” (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1966), 101.

²⁹ John Paul II, “*vita consecrate*”, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, march 1995, <http://www.vatican.va/ENG141/INDEX.HTM>, 43.

³⁰ Second Vatican council: “*Lumen Gentium*”, dogmatic constitution on the church “in the document of Vatican II”, ed. Walter M. Abbott, (New York: Guild Press, 1996), 43.

within the world's different societies- societies frequently marked by ways to attain it – communities of consecrated life, where persons of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, are signs that dialogue is always possible and that communion can bring differences into harmony”.³¹

The call to witness was again reminded in the Encyclical *Redemptoris Missio* in these words “People today put more trust in witness than in teachers, in experience than in teaching, and in life and action than theories.”³²All this is specifically true for Africa where sometimes ethnic and cultural conflicts are the issues destroying communion in some religious communities. In this regard it is worth noting what John Paul II says in *Ecclesia in Africa*, the post-synodal Apostolic Exhortation that gathered the fruits of the African Synod. On the basis of the new evangelization, he emphasizes that the new evangelization will aim at building the Church as a Family, avoiding all ethnocentrism and excessive particularism, trying instead to encourage reconciliation and true communion between different ethnic groups, favoring solidarity and the sharing of personal and resources among the particular Churches, without undue ethnic considerations.³³

The value of communion and fraternal life emphasized in the Church Teaching of all the time is stressed in the Code of Canon Law and again by each and every Institute of Religious Life.

1.4. Religious Life in Canon Law and Some Congregational documents

As far as religious life is concerned, community life is always considered as a prerequisite for living in an authentic way one's commitment. According to *CCL*. 602, ”The fraternal life proper to each institute unites all the members into, as it were, a special family in Christ. It is

³¹ John Paul II, “*vita consecrate*”, 51

³²John Paul II, “*Redemptoris Missio*”, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, march 1995, <http://www.vatican.va/ENG141/INDEX.HTM>, 42.

³³ JOHN PAUL II, “*Ecclesia in Africa*”, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, March 1995, <http://www.vatican.va/ENG141/INDEX.HTM>, 17.

to be so defined that it proves of mutual assistance for all to fulfill their vocation. By their fraternal union, rooted and based in charity, the members are to be an example of universal reconciliation in Christ” (CCL, 138). Faithful to the office entrusted to them, the superiors are the first ones to strive to build in Christ a fraternal community, in which God is sought and loved above all. However, they cannot achieve this alone without their members’ commitments (CCL, 169).

The General Constitutions of the Order of Minor insist on fraternal life in the community. The whole of chapter three emphasizes this in a very beautiful and inspiring word. They are to be inspired by the Trinitarian love and unity as the following article points out: “The brothers, as sons of our Father in heaven and brothers of Jesus Christ in the Holy Spirit live a fraternal life in common and love and nourish each other”.³⁴ Their differences in temperament, cultural background, customs, abilities, gifts and specific traits helps the whole fraternity in becoming the privileged place for encountering God and so they become a gift to one another (cf. 40).

The life in a real fraternity requires them to have a similar lifestyle, to participate in the communal activities such as common prayer, evangelization and household tasks (cf. 42) Their brotherhood should not be lived for itself alone but for the benefit of others so much that, having the same brotherly relationships with all people, they become a splendid witness to the Gospel and a prophetic sign of a new human family.³⁵

The *Bene-Mariya Sisters* lay emphasis on community life, which they consider as a grace constantly offered to them. They express it in wonderful words: “Community is a grace of the Holy Spirit” (Eph 4: 2-6). Brought together without having chosen companions, they welcome one another as gifts of the Lord.³⁶ Their founder, *Bishop Germain Joseph Martin*

³⁴ “*The Rule and General Constitutions of the Order of Friars Minor*” (Pulaski: Franciscan Publishers, 1988), 65.

³⁵ “*The Rule and General Constitutions of the Order of Friars Mino*”, 87.

³⁶ « *Constitutions des Sœurs Bene-Mariya* », 57.

formed the community of the sisters into a real family in line with the example of the Nazareth family.³⁷ Thus, the sisters of all times are to keep this family spirit alive. They are urged to live their sisterly relationship with joy, mutual respect, and warmth.

The *Bene-Mariya Sisters* also recognize the importance of the community for their successful consecration to God. The founder in his will insists on the unity and fraternal love among his daughters. He says this: “May comprehension, discretion, mercy and fraternal love are a solid tie among you wherever you are.”³⁸ The union among the sisters derives from their attachment to Christ and manifestation of God’s love poured into their hearts through the Holy Spirit (Rm 5:5). This love is stronger than our human limitations. The unity of the community is built daily by the contribution of every member. The superior is at the service of the unity. They help each other to give the best of herself and to live her vocation always fully. Their sincere charity is to be lived in humility, simplicity, respect for one another and mutual confidence.³⁹ This requires to have true freedom of heart, openness and gentleness.

The unity and love as the solid foundation of religious community are also emphasized by the Sisters of the Child Jesus: “Within the community, unity and love will increase as we share ideas and experiences, work and leisure, joys and sorrows and especially our prayer.”⁴⁰ The reason of their consecration to God brings them together and in Christ they become a true family. This family is a place of evangelical conversion. “In our human frailty and brokenness, we so easily fail to relate to one another as we would like. We hurt and offend. We cause misunderstanding or experience ourselves such suffering from our fellow Sisters. Thus, personal and constant conversation is important to keep alive the family spirit.

³⁷ « *Constitutions des Sœurs Bene-Mariya* », 43.

³⁸ « *Constitutions des Sœurs Bene-Mariya* », 50.

³⁹ « *Directoire de la Congrégation des Sœurs Bene-Mariya* », 49.

⁴⁰ “*Constitutions of the Sisters of the Child Jesus*” (Mission Press, 1994), 45.

Conclusion

In this chapter we have seen so far that the community is rooted in God's intention to save humankind. God did not want to save human beings in isolation but as a community. And Jesus, as the fulfillment of the New Covenant, to fulfill his mission created a community of disciples. He often taught them about the exigencies of their community such as love, unity, service and humility (Jn 17). This is what is emphasized in the teaching of the Church as well as in the Canon Law and the Constitutions of Institutes of Religious Life and of different congregations. Generally speaking, community life is a very important aspect of religious life. Thus, the religious are called upon to make their community a family where everybody is accepted and recognized as a gift for his or her brethren. This will lead us to our next chapter where we will be specific and apply religious community life in the context of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*.

CHAPTER TWO

COMMUNITY LIFE AMONG THE BENE-MARIYA SISTERS

2.0. Introduction

This chapter presents religious life among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*. After giving a brief historical overview of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, we shall talk about the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* in communities and what brings them together. We shall also discuss about some effective values of religious life among the *Bene-mariya Sisters* that influence positively the living in a religious community. The other part in this chapter will pinpoint some of the challenges faced by living in a religious Community among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, and it will eventually end by coming up with remedies to some of the problems.

2.1. A Brief Historical Overview of *Bene-Mariya Sisters*

The Congregation of the Sisters of the Immaculate Heart of Mary locally called *Bene-Mariya Sisters* was established in *Burundi* in 1958 by *Bishop Germain Joseph Martin* who was born in *Saint Remy-lez-Chimay (Carthage_ Tunisia)*. He was the first bishop of *Ngozi Diocese-Burundi*. Their mission consists of helping families to live according to the Christian spirit and shape their lives after the pattern of the Holy Spirit.⁴¹

In their charism, “*make the Christian spirit flourish in families all over the world*” the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* take as an example, both for the Ignatian spirituality and the rule of the congregation, and has various activities as witnessing the action of the Holy Spirit which works in the hearts of every member of the congregation, as well as in the life of the whole congregation. Some activities of the Congregation include: direct participation in evangelization (training in catechetical schools and collaboration in pastoral care), apostolate in families (family action, animation and accompaniment of the families), teaching in schools

⁴¹ « *Constitutions des Sœurs Bene-Mariya* », 8.

(primary, secondary, vocational and professional schools, universities) and in health and social works (clinics-health centers and maternity, hospitals, parish caritas, interdiocesan services, listening centers, orphanages).

2.2. Gathered in Religious Community as *Bene-Mariya Sisters*

Only the personal love of Jesus Christ brings us together as a religious community. Thus, he attracts those who know the same thirst for God and brings them together in a common community.⁴² As our mission indicates, "to make the Christian spirit flourish in the families all over the world," our communities will first be themselves families, following the example of the Holy Family of Nazareth in the church and throughout the world. For the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, following Christ according to their vocation is therefore for them the requirement of community life in the spirit of the Family of Nazareth. Their community will be a sign of the truth of their consecration to God and the first form of their apostolate in the Church. They will proclaim by themselves the presence of the Lord among them.⁴³

2.3. Positive Effects of Religious Community Life among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*

2.3.1. Sharing life

The aspect of belonging to one's family or community creates the value of sharing.⁴⁴ The *Bene-Mariya Sisters* share life together, its joys (housing, food, clothing, leisure) as well as its difficulties. According to Mbiti "whatever happens to the individual happens to the whole group, and whatever happens to the group, happens to the individual"⁴⁵. For instance, when one has a particular function or celebration, every member of the community is involved to make it more successful since this is not a private affair.⁴⁶ After the celebration has taken place, they sit together to evaluate each and every part of the celebration to appreciate or see what needs to be

⁴² « *Constitutions des Bene-Mariya* », 41.

⁴³ « *Constitutions des Bene-Mariya*, 43.

⁴⁴ « *Constitutions des Bene-Mariya* », 80.

⁴⁵ J.S. Mbiti, « *African Religious and Philosoph* », 108.

⁴⁶ « *Constitutions des Bene-Mariya* », 51.

corrected. In case of the illness also of a member of the community, all members are affected by the event. They have to take her to the hospital and take care of her until she regains health.

Besides these events, the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* who are in the same locality create time for sharing and recreation. They sit together to share the meal, moral values and religious values. They do this to rejoice in life. Applied to their members, this cultural value influences their communities. Consequently, they are called to share life together: spiritually, morally, materially as well as apostolically.

2.3.2. Mutual Concern and Assistance

Due to the value of communion, the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* are bound by a solid tie of love and unity. Everyone is concerned by the life of the others. For instance, when sisters meet on the way, even when they do not know each other, there is no way that they can pass without greeting and introducing themselves to one another. There is a kind of friendship and lack of it would be looked at as a scandal even to those who see them. In times of joy they celebrate together. This is not a private affair. In times of difficulties as well they carry one another's burden by spiritual, moral and material assistance as well.

Regarding, the celebration of anniversaries, patron feast, and profession of religious vows, graduation or any other celebration of the individual for instance, is carried out by his or her community and the other communities around. This is the same even in one's family, when there is any celebration, the whole community is involved. In times of difficulties as well, they share the issue and console and support those who are affected. In addition, shaking hands and being available for one another in community leads to personal growth because a person can be realized not only through his or her commitment but also in union with others. Union, in truth, allows the community to accept one another's strength and weaknesses, values and

limitations.⁴⁷ This mutual understanding helps the members to enter into communion through a real sharing with one another that enhances and sustains one's growth and faithfulness. This value of mutual concern and assistance should be strongly kept.

2.3.3. Confidentiality

One of the important elements of community life is confidentiality among the members. Confidentiality is also an upheld value in Burundian culture. Even though, the *Bene-Mariya* Sisters share life, there are some personal intimate affairs that need to be respected and kept.⁴⁸ Thus, in community life, there is that side of life that must be kept and not be revealed to everybody. Even when it is a mistake or a problematic behavior of the individual, this must be corrected fraternally within the community without taking it outside. Confidentiality results from a mutual respect which is again a core value in Burundian culture and so it is among *Bene-Mariya Sisters*.

2.4. Some Challenges of Community Life

2.4.1. Activism and Individualism

Some of the problems in the Religious life especially among *Bene-Mariya Sisters* today that need most to be studied are activism and individualism. Today, activism is a great stumbling-block to the interior life of a religious.⁴⁹ We are living in a modern society characterized by many changes including busy life. Indeed, nowadays active life has become the priority for some religious who understand their religious life as first of all service. They are preoccupied with doing their service rather than giving a good testimony or devoting a time to the community. This is so remarkable among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*. Some sisters among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* for instance, spend the whole day preoccupied by their apostolate.

⁴⁷ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 57.

⁴⁸ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 27.

⁴⁹ Union of Superiors General: “*Consecrated Life Today: Charism in the Church for the World*” (Rome: Paulines Publication, 1993), 81.

Besides, the whole weekend is spent either in some celebrations or in doing some work. While there are notable exceptions, there is a remarkable connection between the involvement of religious in socio-political activism and their negligence of prayer. Work is prayer, they say, and they best find God in working for others, not in ritual invocations or devotional acts of piety. However, having time to be together helps religious to feel at home and offer opportunities to share with others joys and burdens and to overcome the attitudes such as individualism, isolation and others pushing one away from the community. D. Fleming states that “when the needs of the individuals are placed over those of the community, the community will suffer and may even dissolve.”⁵⁰ Thus, where individualism is rampant, a religious community is called to be a prophetic sign of the possibility of achieving in Christ fraternity and solidarity.

2.4.2. Sympathies and Antipathies within the Community

According to Jean Vanier, “the two great dangers of community are friends and enemies”⁵¹. Sympathy comes in the community when some begin to select their favorites among others, maybe because they please each other, they share the same ideas, ways of looking at life, sense of humor, they share the same ethnic group, they come from the same place, and so on and so forth. The religious with sympathies as long as they get more and more close to each other, end up by excluding others. Consequently, human friendship becomes a club of mediocrities, enclosed in mutual flattery and approval. It becomes a cause of divisions and disharmony in the community.⁵² Those out of the circle become antipathies maybe because they do not agree with them, they block them, and they contradict them. This living out of the circle

⁵⁰ D.L. Fleming. *“Individualism in Community Life”*, 5.

⁵¹ J. Vanier. *“Community and Growth”*, (New York: Paulist Press, 1979), 25.

⁵² G. Katholil, *“Communion in Community”*, 117.

makes some members to feel lost within the community and further rejected. The experience of rejection leads to the loss of taste of one's vocation.

Humanly speaking, these attractions as well as blocks between natural personalities are natural. They come from an emotional affective immaturity. They show a necessity of working on one's needs and they are dangerous facts that impede community growth. Jean Vanier strongly stresses that a community is only a community when the majority of its members have consciously decided to break these barriers and come out of their cocoons of "friendship" to stretch out their hand to their enemies.⁵³

2.4.3. Professional and Educational Identity

Professional and Educational identity is another challenge that is found in some of the religious communities, even among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*. Education is perceived as opening doors to a better life. Some candidates come without higher education and expect to be educated and trained. When they have obtained their degree or training, for example in nursing, social work, teaching, they leave the congregation. This leaves the congregation emotionally and financially drained. This phenomenon also occurs when some members want to be identified by their professions or by their levels of education and want to dominate the rest. In this case, those who do not have these levels are considered as non-valuable in community or even they themselves develop the inferiority complex.

On the other hand, the latter may develop a kind of jealousy and hatred towards the former. Sometimes this creates the unnecessary tensions and conflicts among the members of the same communities. This problem is worst when some religious even refuse or feel

⁵³ J. Vanier, "*Community and Growth*", 26.

humiliated when they are removed from their offices which they consider as their own not because of the service of the people of God but because of their personal prestige.

It is important to recall again the good speech of Bishop Smaragde that, “what we are, is the more important than what we do.”⁵⁴ A Religious community is the place where the daily and patient passage from “me” to “us” takes place, from my commitment to a commitment entrusted to the community, from seeking “my things” to seeking “the thing of Christ”.

2.4.4. Aggression

Anger is an emotion that expresses those things that man feels inside. Sarro states that, “it is easy to become angry”. Unless one is able to express this emotion of anger in a positive manner, one cannot advance in love.⁵⁵ Upon becoming angry, a person should admit the anger and not justify it. In this way, one can manage and channel anger in a constructive manner. When one admits failure, in this regard, one draws closer to improvement.

While comparing anger with imprisonment, Agudo states that, “anger is a common emotion among prisoners. An individual who is imprisoned by negative views and attitudes is filled with rage even if he or she decides to cover it up.”⁵⁶ Hostility is apparent to the people no matter their age. As beloved children of God, we should strive to be free of anger and aggression.

2.4.5. Failure in Sincere Love

In community life, one of the main challenges is failing to love sincerely, God, others, and certainly oneself. When asked by the Pharisee which commandment was the greatest, Jesus

⁵⁴ Mboniyintege, *Address of Pope Francis to the Bishops of the Episcopal Conference of Rwanda on their ‘Ad Limina Visit’*: Available at: <http://www.vatican.va/content/francesco/en/speeches.index.html#speeches> , Accessed on: 2/12/2019.

⁵⁵ Agudo, “*changing attitude by changing behavior*”; available at: <https://www.linguee.fr/espanol-francais/traduction/agudo.html>; Accessed on 2/9/2019.

⁵⁶ Agudo, “*changing attitude by changing behavior*.”

Christ replied: “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and first Commandment. And the second is like it, you shall love your neighbour as yourself. On these two Commandments depend all the law and the prophets” (Mt 22: 37-40). In this text of the gospel, Jesus makes it clear that sincere and healthy love of self must be applied to one’s neighbour and must be preceded by the sincere love for God. In most cases, we fail in love even though we claim that we practice it as one of the fruits of the Holy Spirit (Cf. Gal 5:22).

Love is essentially an act of the will. The love of God is a gift from the Spirit of God. It is the Spirit that moves a person to choose God and stirs in the heart good thoughts, prayers, and warm feelings of joy and peace. When someone is not willing to follow the path of love, it is a failure to respond to a gift received from the Holy Spirit.⁵⁷ Since love is a gift from God, we give ours to God who asks: Son, (daughter), give me your heart” (Prov 23: 26), God will give us “ a clear heart, a pure heart, a faithful heart, a loving heart, a gentle heart, a joyful heart, a heart like a heart of Jesus.” Jesus’ power of love draws people to him; those who followed him were drawn after being convinced by his teaching; others came to him out of curiosity and remained with him. Thanks to this unconditional love of God, the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* are called to love him above all with incomparable love and to follow him.

2.5. Some Suggested Solutions to the Challenges in Community Life

2.5.1. Forgiveness

Forgiveness is a supernatural gift from God. St. Paul affirms this idea saying:” Put on them, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassion, kindness, lowliness, meekness, and patience, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. No matter whom you are, old or young, rich or poor, in one way or another, we need to forgive or be

⁵⁷ K. Medhin, “*Models of Community Life as tools for witnessing to solidarity with the poor*” (Nairobi, 2018), 28.

forgiven.⁵⁸ The Church teaches that true peace is made possible only through forgiveness. Forgiveness may seem like weakness, but it demands great spiritual strength and moral courage, both in granting it and in accepting it. It may seem in some way to diminish us, but in fact it leads us to a fuller and richer humanity, more radiant with the splendor of the Creator.

Forgiveness, which begins from the heart, is understood and accepted with tolerance, humility, discretion, reconciliation and love for peace.⁵⁹ Such an acceptance requires that the person who has hurt the other recognizes that he/she has done wrong. Then he/she asks openly or in some hidden way for forgiveness. Finally he/she should show readiness to release the human personality in him/her and enter into a new creative relationship that ignores the past weakness.

Forgiveness in community life is modeled on God's forgiveness bestowed on the human person. If God has forgiven them, then community members too must forgive one another. If a community lives in love, forgiveness is the greatest expression of that love. No human community could survive without a strong willingness to forgive the sin and human weakness which are part of being human.⁶⁰ Thus, pardon is the gift of gifts. It is certainly the most difficult gift to give, the root of all common conflicts lies in the problem of forgiveness. So, anyone in conflict with others should remember Jesus' words of forgiveness on the cross to offer forgiveness: "Father, forgive them; for they not know what they do (Lk 23:24)". In this verse, we see that Jesus excuses that guilt of his death. The great challenge for us is to excuse the fault of those who accuse us falsely.

⁵⁸ H.W.Tumbo, "*Recipes for Forgiveness*" (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2011), 7.

⁵⁹ « *Constitution des Sœurs Bene-Mariya* », 50.

⁶⁰ K. Medhin, "*Models of Community Life as tools for witnessing to solidarity with the poor*", 32.

2.5.2. Respect and Acceptance

Respect in community life is one of the most significant means of growth, communion and love for one another. It follows that “communion in community implies a profound respect for the personal mission and tastes of each member”.⁶¹ Therefore, respect is the first and essential attitude for interpersonal relationship in a community for it makes room for mutual acceptance. In community living, respecting our differences is the basis for unity among us since our differences demonstrate the richness, which we enjoy in our communities. In community, differing personalities, gifts and abilities are beneficial, but at times differences cause difficulties. Those who live religious life are committed to building up communities of love although they have probably not chosen individuals with whom they live.⁶²

2.5.3. Appreciation and Trust

Appreciation is one of the most powerful means of unity that helps people remain optimistic and help others to grow in the love of themselves and others. Building trust is needed to create harmony in community life. Trust is a basic ingredient of both personal and communal life. We cannot grow unless we receive trust and we are not really mature unless we can give it to others.⁶³ Trust opens people to communication and “communication in communities is intended to foster communion among members through the sharing of feelings about common experiences and values.”⁶⁴ Communication and communion involve the risk to trust. Communication evolves into true communion, in the process of developing a caring community.⁶⁵ In developing true communion through appreciation and trust, basic good manners are needed such as saying ‘I am sorry’, ‘thank you’ and, ‘please’. According to Valles,

⁶¹ G. Kaitholil, “*Communion in Community*” (Saint Paul, 2001) , 148

⁶² T. Widdicombe, “*Building Culturally Competent Organizations*”; Available:

<https://www.ebay.com/p/Simply-Shakespeare-by-Toby-Widdicombe-2001>; Accessed on 4/9/2019.

⁶³ T. Widdicombe, “*Building Culturally Competent Organizations.*”

⁶⁴ K. Medhin, “*Models Of Community Life As Tools For Witnessing To Solidarity With The Poor*”,33

⁶⁵ K. Medhin, “*Models of Community Life as tools for witnessing to solidarity with the poor*”, 33

these basic human gestures serve as “the spice” for our lives in common; “they make eyes meet, hands touch, and human beings pay attention to each other in the whirl of hurried existence.”⁶⁶

To create a loving community, we must grow in our appreciation of one another and build a trusting atmosphere. In the Congregation of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, mutual trust is this basis for all relationships. True community is founded upon respect for persons, discretion, and confidentiality. To appreciate the goodness of others, one must first be humble. In admiration of the virtue of humility, Pope Francis in his letter “*Times choice*” called The People’s Pope says: “Truly, nothing is more precious or more important than humility”.⁶⁷

2.5.4. Witnessing

One of the chief purposes of religious life is to give witness to the love, holiness and absolute primacy of God. The Religious must witness from their experience of God, and they must do so not only by their words, but also by their lives. Indeed, what they are counts far more than what they do. The witness of the Religious involves the whole of their lives, values, attitudes, behavior, dress, recreation and their use of the things of this world.

People of today need to hear more religious witnesses than teachers. Witness of life is one key way in which the religious exercise their prophetic role. In his *Encyclical letter Redemptoris Missio*, John Paul II states: “People today put more trust in witness and experience than in teaching, in life and action than in theories.”⁶⁸ *The Bene-Mariya Sisters* too still know that their life must bear witness to the society. This is done especially through their apostolate. Most of *Bene-Mariya Sisters* are involved in education, catechism, health services, community

⁶⁶ T. Widdicombe, “*Building Culturally Competent Organizations.*”

⁶⁷ E. chua, “*Times Choice*”; available at: poy.time.com/2013/12/11/person-of-the-year-pope-francis-the-peoples-pope. Accessed on: 6/10/2019.

⁶⁸ John Paul II, “*Redemptoris Missio*”, Encyclical Letter, Vatican Website, march 1995, <http://www.vatican.va/ENG141/INDEX.HTM> 42.

development, social welfare of the needy, and the conscientization of the all the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* to the duty of promoting integral development.

2.5.5. Use of Moments of Recreation

In community life, fun and relaxation have great importance. Humor fosters harmony and prevents members from being overly serious. Just as it is important for the community to work together, so it is important for the community to relax together and laugh from time to time.⁶⁹ Maloney states that the enjoyment of one another's company, allows us to see and understand the differing aspects of another's personality.⁷⁰ We must make some time for relaxation. Being conscious of the need for relaxation, the Rules of the Congregation refer to "times of relaxation in common, in an atmosphere of joy and simple, friendly relationship, which are part of community living and are necessary for balance in the life of each Sister and the local community".⁷¹

Hand-in-hand with learning to rest is learning to relax. It is difficult if not downright impossible, to sleep soundly in an anxious, troubled and preoccupied state of mind.⁷² A sense of humor is helpful to relax and to be renewed. "A sense of humor is a gift of God..." all religious need this gift. With it, we keep our balance. Without it we lose our sense of direction; we become dangerous to ourselves and to those we claim to serve."⁷³ When speaking about the sense of humor as a gift from God, Medhin says that, "a sense of humor needs to be controlled and cultivated; clear and healthy humor relaxes tensions and relieves difficult situations."⁷⁴

⁶⁹ K. Medhin, "*Models of Community Life as tools for witnessing to solidarity with the poor*", 36.

⁷⁰ K. Medhin, "*Models of Community Life as tools for witnessing to solidarity with the poor*", 30.

⁷¹ "*Constitution des Bene-Mariya*", 75.

⁷² K. Medhin, "*Models of Community Life as tools for witnessing to solidarity with the poor*", 36.

⁷³ K. Medhin, "*Models of Community Life as tools for witnessing to solidarity with the poor*", 36.

⁷⁴ K. Medhin, "*Models of Community Life as tools for witnessing to solidarity with the poor*", 36.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have seen a brief history of community life among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, their charism and their mission. We have seen also some positives values in community life such as sharing life, mutual concern and assistance, confidentiality. But due to the human nature, these values are not lived perfectly by all religious. Thus, some communities are characterized by some challenges that need to be handled in order to live authentically one's consecration to God. We have mentioned some of the common ones like: activism and individualism, sympathies and antipathies within the community, professional and educational identity, aggression and finally failure in sincere love.

On the other hand, however, we have seen some suggested solutions to the challenges in community life which are: forgiveness, respect and acceptance, appreciation and trust, witnessing and use of moments of recreation. The communication ideal must not blind us to the fact that every Christian reality is built on human frailty. The perfect "ideal community" does not exist yet. The perfect communion of the saints is our goal in the heavenly Jerusalem. Unity in community life is a clear witness to the presence of Christ and the power of his grace.

CHAPTER THREE

OTHER ESSENTIAL ELEMENTS OF RELIGIOUS LIFE AMONG THE BENE-MARIYA SISTERS AND THE COMMUNITY DIMENSION

3.0. Introduction

A religious vocation is essentially a call to be in community.⁷⁵ The community dimension of the Gospel message strikes an African in a particular way, because it touches his or her deepest aspirations. He or she considers the community as a place *par excellence* where a person realizes his or her destiny.⁷⁶ The community is a privileged place for fraternal communion. A religious community is a place where those who have received the same call from the Lord live together in unity for the sake of the kingdom.⁷⁷

This chapter will explore the role played by the community in fulfilling other essentials of religious life. These essentials will include evangelical counsels, community and prayer, community and apostolate, community and personal growth and the role of leadership in the community. We shall also discuss community and communion.

3.1. Community and Religious Vows

Religious vows are sacred promises. They reflect a life orientation and profound loving commitment. After a period of formation members of religious communities, Sisters, Brothers, and those becoming religious Priests, publicly profess the vows of poverty, chastity and obedience. Religious vows joyfully free a person to live for God and through that first love to serve others with love and to witness to God's faithfulness, compassion and care for all.

⁷⁵ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 43.

⁷⁶ V.C. Kiaziku. « *Consecrated Life in Bantu Africa* » (Nairobi: Paulines Publications Africa, 2007), 173.

⁷⁷ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 41.

Religious poverty, chastity, and obedience can speak forcefully and clearly to today's world which is suffering from so much consumerism and discrimination, eroticism and hatred, violence and oppression.⁷⁸

3.1.1. Chastity

The vow of chastity is a vow of love; love of God and love for all people without discrimination and distinction.⁷⁹ According to David Fleming, chastity needs to be thought of and presented as a way of loving. It does not represent a nonliving approach to the world and to our fellow men and women. To be a celibate religious demands that we grow in being affective people. Jesus is our model, and we are always learning how to love better the way He loves. The older understanding of chastity was a chastity of distance based mostly on ritual purity. In this way it was understood as a way of renouncing conjugal life as well as human relationships. The true meaning of chastity is basically defined as a way of loving in the way Jesus loves. The vocation inquiry about how we live in community is tied up with our understanding and living of the chastity vow.⁸⁰

The vow of chastity is a choice made freely; it involves a growth in acceptance, warmth, closeness, and empathy with both God and the people. According to *Perfectae Caritatis*, "chastity frees from the human heart in a remarkable manner, so that it burns with a love for God and for all people."⁸¹ In this regard, the vow of chastity is fully lived and becomes fruitful in community living through one's brethren. This is what is emphasized by O'Morchu, "the Christian revelation is of a God whose deepest essence is love (relatedness) and that Christians can only know and serve that God by relating with others with a love like his."⁸²

⁷⁸ Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes. "Essential Elements in the Church's Teaching on Religious Life" (31 May 1983), 17.

⁷⁹ "Constitution des Bene-Mariya", 25.

⁸⁰ D.L. Fleming, "Individualism in Community Life" (Human Development, 2000)", 5.

⁸¹ Perfectae Caritatis, 12.

⁸² D. O'murchu, "Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision" (Ave Maria Press, 1991), 122.

Chastity freely chosen leads religious men and women to the greater love of God and neighbour, and it facilitates apostolic action and pastoral care. It consecrates a person to God, to Christ, to the Church and enables one to dedicate himself/ herself to the ministry of Christ in a special and distinctive way. It bears witness to the transcendence of the Kingdom of God and new life in the Spirit which begins on earth and will be fully realized in eternity.⁸³ Religious people choose to live chaste lives because they want to serve God without any impediment. They are led by the love they have for God and other human beings (Cf. 1 Cor 7: 32-34). A religious community is a new family for a celibate. Although it does not repeal their natural family relationship and obligations, it transcends them and takes precedence over them. The community is their first allegiance and responsibility.⁸⁴

Community life is the basis and foundation of religious life, it has a great role to play in living celibacy and searching for holiness. Relationships in the community create an atmosphere whereby everybody feels at home.⁸⁵ When everything goes well in the community, the celibate will not meet many challenges. Life will rather be supportable. Community life is the root of the three vows and it is especially the pillar of chastity. Lack of community life destroys celibacy as it destroys obedience and poverty too.

Although one can face some obstacles either from within or from without, the one in a difficult moment needs support from the community and so a healthy community upholds the vocation of its members.⁸⁶ We have been created in love, to love and to be loved. Thus, love is something needed by everybody in life. If someone feels not loved in community and thus does not find joy and support in his or her community, she or he may look for happiness elsewhere. This is the great obstacle that can lead to some members breaking the vow of chastity both in

⁸³ C. Kiesling, *“Celibacy, Prayer and Friendship”* (New York, 1977), 7.

⁸⁴ A. Shorter, *“Celibacy and African culture”* (Pauline Publications Africa, 1998), 46.

⁸⁵ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 49.

⁸⁶ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 49.

word and in action. In fact, lack of community support in different ways has been pointed out as one of the factors that slows down our search for holiness and furthermore forces some people to abandon their call to religious life.

Loving one another is very important for celibate people; it leads them to living their celibacy well. *Perfectae Caritatis* recalls to our mind that “Chastity is practiced with greater security, where a real sense of community flourishes upon the genuine brotherly love reciprocated by all of the members.”⁸⁷ Joyce Ridick, too, in his inspiring book *Treasures in Earthen Vessels. The Vows*, advises religious that whenever there are weaknesses in the vow of chastity, it is good to look first into our community living and question ourselves about our relationships with our brethren.⁸⁸ Briefly, religious chastity is only successful in community, thus, community becomes the prior condition of authentic living of the one’s vow of chastity to God.

3.1.2. Poverty

By vow of poverty, the religious especially the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, promise to live a simple life. They commit themselves to sharing of resources, time and talents within their communities and with those in need.⁸⁹ A vowed member of a religious community does not have personal possessions but like the early Christian communities, they “place all things in common” (Acts 2: 44). Ladislav Orsy describes the vow of poverty as “an intangible gift: an attitude which grows out of a relationship between two persons who love each other. It is initiated by God through the gift of Himself to us. To accept this gift means that we allow ourselves to be led by Him.”⁹⁰ He goes on to explain that when there is great love between God and us, our relation to the material world is transformed: some objects, some levels of our being,

⁸⁷ “*Perfectae Caritatis*”, 12.

⁸⁸ J. Ridick. “*Treasures in Earthen Vessels: the vows*” (Alba House, 1984), 72.

⁸⁹ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 68.

⁹⁰ J. Ridick. “*Treasures in Earthen Vessels: the vows*”, 5.

even though they somehow remain vital and necessary, decrease in importance while others become rich in meaning.⁹¹ This is what Jesus asked the rich man: “Go, sell all what you have and come and follow me (Mt 19:21). He also emphasizes about it when he gives the conditions of discipleship (Mt 14:25-33). Renouncement or self-detachment from material goods, persons and even one’s being for the sake of God’s kingdom is what the vow of poverty is all about. Hence, the consecrated poverty finds its source in Jesus’ life and in his message of salvation.

To accomplish his work of liberation and to announce the Good News to the poor, Jesus, rich as he was, made himself poor in order to enrich us of his poverty’ (Phil 2: 5-11). Jesus receives all from his Father. He is our unique treasure. We receive all from him and it is also of Him that depends the growth of the Kingdom.

On the other hand, however, poverty is not a deprivation of material goods, or possessions, persons or social interactions. It is integration, liberation and a revelation. In this sense, according to Ridick, “poverty is an expression of the integration of our being: an ordering of things and people according to the essential significance within them and within ourselves. Poverty becomes then an expression of the transcendent, self- forgetful love proposed by God.”⁹²

The vow of poverty chosen freely has a communal aspect. It requires the religious to put everything in common for the building up of the community. Since poverty does not mean misery, those bound together by this vow survive and accomplish their mission by building it together. This implies the willingness to surrender one’s talents, efforts, energies, abilities and time to the use of the community.⁹³ The Religious, especially the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, share not only material goods but also spiritual experiences and inspirations, apostolic ideals and

⁹¹ J. Ridick. “*Treasures in Earthen Vessels: the vows*”, 5.

⁹² J. Ridick. “*Treasures in Earthen Vessels*” 5.

⁹³ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 78.

charitable services. In this way, not only does each enjoy his own gift, but makes it abound by sharing it with others, and each one enjoys the fruits of other's gift as if they were his own.⁹⁴ This is how a community is built and this is only possible when every member of the community has a genuine sense of belonging to the community as his or her own family. O'Morchu gives the new meaning to this vow and calls it a vow for *mutual sustainability*⁹⁵. And in the words of Kaitholil, "common life is a putting together of heads and hands and hearts."⁹⁶ Hence, there is need of a common search for what is best for the community, much readiness to listen to the views of others and generous cooperation in executing plans.

Members or makers of the community always need to come together, observe, discuss, plan and decide the well-being of their community.⁹⁷ This requires each one to listen to others' views, to discern them and embrace them if they are constructive and if need be, to let go one's views with the purpose of having a common goal of building the community together. But if everyone wants to follow his or her interests and make his or her own business, the energies of the community will be abused and this will lead to the destruction of their own community.

The vow of poverty requires the good use of the common good. In a religious community, no one has his or her own possessions. All that they have belong to the community and thus requires the good maintenance for the sake of everyone's well-being.⁹⁸ Sometimes, there is the tendency of some religious to accumulate the materials of the community or using them as their own without taking into consideration the needs of the others. This tendency is a sign of the lack of self-dispossession from material goods for the possession of God. Thus, according to Ridick, "the quality of our poverty is also the quality of our obedience and chastity.

⁹⁴ « *Vita Consecrata* », 42.

⁹⁵ D. O' Murchu, "*Poverty, Celibacy and Obedience*", 14

⁹⁶ G. Kaitholil II, "*Communion in Community*", 47.

⁹⁷ G. Kaitholil II, "*Communion in Community*", 47.

⁹⁸ "*Constitution des Bene-Mariya*", 79.

It illuminates them both since it also bespeaks our abandonment and self-immolation in the area of the use of will and of sensual desire.”⁹⁹

3.1.3. Obedience

Etymologically, “the word obedience is derived from the Latin *ob-audiere*, meaning to ‘listen attentively’, which is the biblical connotation.”¹⁰⁰ From the Old Testament point of view, the people of God agreed to live a covenantal relationship with God which required an ongoing dialogue between God and them. The same attitude was evident in Christ’s own life, in his continued awareness of and listening to God the Father (cf. Jn 4:34, 5:30, and 6:38, 17:4). Indeed, the vow of obedience is primarily characterized by respectful and attentive listening to: God, to others, to life’s circumstances, to nature, to many ‘calls’ of daily living, and to respond in a manner that enhances growth.¹⁰¹ In this sense the vow of obedience engages a communal aspect. It is first of all a vow of total commitment to God’s will to whom we consecrate our total life and our existence. Nevertheless, this will of God is communicated to us especially through human intermediaries; these may include both authorities and others brethren.

The vow of obedience is commonly held as the hardest among the three vows. This is because it involves the consideration of other human beings as mediators with God. As stated by Kaitholil, “Obedience is the supernatural virtue that prompts us to see superiors as God’s representatives and to submit our will to their will.”¹⁰² In other words, in following Christ radically who obeys his Father to the point of laying down his life, Joyce Ridick suggests that even religious, under the motion of the Holy Spirit, subject themselves in faith to their superiors who hold the place of God. Thus, under their guidance, they are led to serve all their brethren

⁹⁹ J. Ridick, “*Treasures in Earthen Vessels: The Vows*”, 7.

¹⁰⁰ D. O’ Murchu, “*Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*”, 144.

¹⁰¹ D. O’ Murchu, “*Religious Life: A Prophetic Vision*”, 145.

¹⁰² G. Kaitholil, “*Communion in Community*”, 109.

in Christ, just as Christ himself in obedience to the Father served his brethren and laid down his life as a ransom for many.¹⁰³

In religious communities, obedience also includes submission to one's brethren. In this regard, the one who obeys has to accept others' intervention in one's life. This simply means that the person has to share his or her ideas, thoughts, and suggestions with his or her brethren. This implies an open and humble heart and disposition to receive and accept the ideas, thoughts and suggestions of others. In many circumstances, a person needs to renounce to his or her own ideas and suggestions and embrace the ones of others. Genuine obedience must be free. This simply means that a person does not obey out of fear, intimidation and pressure of authority. The person obeys out of love of God and his mediators. Even in difficult circumstances, a *Mwene-Mariya* has to remember that he or she committed herself freely to God.

In their vow of obedience, the religious follow the model of Christ who obeys even until death of cross (Cf. Phil 2:5-11).¹⁰⁴ They follow his example because they love him. Joyce Ridick puts it in this way: "We agree to let our Lover make demands on us even when we do not desire to be constrained. Out of love we act even when we do not wish to and accept suffering even when we would rather avoid it."¹⁰⁵

The vow of obedience cannot therefore be lived fully and fruitfully unless there is a genuine love, openness, acceptance, unity, mutual trust and respect towards the superiors and vice versa as well as among the community members. Obedience directs the community to discern and to do the will of God. "In good religious community the members will show submission to one another and respect one another. No one will put on airs of superiority or try

¹⁰³ J. Ridick, "*Treasures in Earthen Vessels: the Vows*", 100.

¹⁰⁴ "*Constitution des Bene-Mariya*", 87.

¹⁰⁵ J. Ridick, "*Treasures in Earthen Vessels: the Vows*", 109.

to dominate others in discussing, deciding and doing things. No one will keep another under the thumb.”¹⁰⁶

3.2. Community and Prayer

The first Christian Community was united soul and heart, devoted to the teaching of the apostles and to the communal life, to the breaking of the bread and to the prayers. The teaching of the apostles, the breaking of the bread and prayers bind together the first community. Unity was the fruit of their prayers. They were living as brothers and sisters. They had the fraternal love with one another and this was the fruit of their daily life of prayer. The Religious too, must remain strongly convinced that the community is built up starting from the liturgy, especially from the celebration of the Eucharist and the other sacraments especially the sacrament of reconciliation, through which the Lord restores union with himself and with one's brothers and sisters.¹⁰⁷

The local community, as the place where religious life is primarily lived, has to be organized in a way which makes religious values clear. Its center is the Eucharist in which the members of the community participate daily as far as possible and which is honored by having an oratory where the celebration can take place and where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved.¹⁰⁸ The daily times of prayer, based on the word of God and in union with the prayer of the Church as offered especially in the liturgy of the hours, support community life. So also does an established rhythm of more intense times of prayer on a weekly and monthly basis, and the annual retreat. Frequent reception of the sacrament of reconciliation is also part of religious life. In addition to the personal aspect of God's pardon and his renewing love in the individual, the sacrament builds community by its power of reconciliation and also manifests a special bond

¹⁰⁶ G. Kaitholil, “*Communion in Community*”, 22.

¹⁰⁷ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 47.

¹⁰⁸ « *Directoire de la congrégation des Bene-Mariya* », 47.

with the Church.¹⁰⁹ Canon 608 affirms that each religious house is to have at least an oratory, in which the Eucharist is celebrated and reserved, so that it may truly be the center of the community. In this way the community can be visibly united around an oratory.

Religious consecration cannot be lived without prayer. In prayer, the religious concentrates his/her heart to God, coming to know and love Him more and more deeply. Religious life cannot be sustained without a deep life of prayer, individual, communal, and liturgical.¹¹⁰

Genuine prayer strengthens the fraternity in religious community, and it leads to true communion in their relationship. Genuine prayer produces genuine love in the community, whereby all members feel at home, feel loved and loving. Can we understand how people from different cultures and traditions, with different background, race and language, understanding, history and so on, can live together as brothers and sisters? They find themselves together without having chosen one another.¹¹¹ It is the power of prayer which binds them together. Despite this diversity, their fraternal life is strengthened by prayer life.

It is often said that “community that prays together stays together.” Kaitholil suggests that “the word of God and the Eucharist are the principal sources of unity. They nourish common life and give it motive and meaning.¹¹² He goes on to explain that reading the word of God in community and meditating on it builds up in the members’ the evangelical attitudes of intimacy, trust, peace and joy. Their daily liturgical gathering is a source of unity and sanctification for the community.¹¹³

¹⁰⁹ Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, “*Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life*”, 20.

¹¹⁰ Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, “*Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life*”, 20.

¹¹¹ “*Constitution des Bene-Mariya*”, 241.

¹¹² G. Kaitholil, “*Communion in Community*”, 47.

¹¹³ G. Kaitholil, “*Communion in Community*”, 17.

This means that prayer life is the powerful way that leads to communion first of all with God and then with one another. Kaitholil inspiringly describes what communion is all about, “Communion is loving, listening and accepting. Communion is openness, sensibility and availability. Communion is supporting, promoting and responding. Communion is communicating, understanding and respecting. Communion is cooperating, participating and sharing. Communion is kindness, sympathy and concern.”¹¹⁴ All these virtues and values are the fruits of profound and genuine prayer. But one should ask why sometimes there is misunderstanding, quarrels and conflicts within the religious members while they attend community prayer and Eucharistic celebration every day?

Praying and attending prayer or being in prayer is slightly different. From experience, sometimes the *Bene-Mariya* goes for prayers as a routine, because it is written on their timetable and in their Constitutions. This kind of prayer is meaningless and useless. It can never reach to conversion and transformation.

Both community and individual prayer in one’s religious vocation should be the best transformative power that leads to communion with all brethren. Prayer life helps the religious to work on their characters and weaknesses and to overcome them since there is that aspect of healing in prayer. Prayer helps a religious in community to accept others’ hard characters and behaviors. Prayer plays a distinctive role in forgiveness of one’s brethren’s torts or weaknesses. Indeed, prayer gives strength to overcome tensions, trials and any other challenge that occur often in community living. “The consecrated person who lives in community nourishes his or her consecration both through constant personal dialogue with God and through community praise and intercession.”¹¹⁵ Thus, for a religious, nothing else should be more important than

¹¹⁴ G. Kaitholil, “*Communion in Community*”, 17.

¹¹⁵ Congregation for Institute of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life: “*Fraternal life in Community* “
Congregavit nos in Unum Christi amor, 15.

prayer life in the community. For the religious prayer should be their daily spiritual activity, a special moment where they are called to share the life of communion with God and to reflect it to each other first of all in community, and then outside in their apostolic field.

3.3. Community and Apostolate

Most religious institutes seek to serve and praise God by apostolic and charitable activity. For them, “apostolic and charitable activity is of the very nature of religious life.”¹¹⁶ The style of community life itself will relate to the form of apostolate for which the members have the responsibility and to the culture and society in which this responsibility is accepted.¹¹⁷

The religious are known as persons consecrated to the service of God. They are called to bring people to God through their various activities and apostolate. In other words, they are called to service, to be an apostolic, generative community.¹¹⁸ Their vows are apostolic in the sense that what they ‘state’ as earthly life is of value in so far as it is imbued by heavenly goods already present, and that, essentially this life is a pilgrimage towards the glory of the heavenly kingdom.¹¹⁹ Their mission is to reflect the image of Christ to others, through their behavior, their teaching and above all their true witness of life. In this way “they will become true signs of Christ in the world.”¹²⁰

We are living in a world torn by divisive forces of hatred, materialism, individualism, corruptions, violence and wars. Many people find their joy and security in material things and in degrading others. Others, on the other hand do not find the meaning of their existence.

¹¹⁶ “*Perfectae Caritatis*”, 8.

¹¹⁷ Sacred Congregation for Religious and Secular Institutes, “*Essential Elements in the Church’s Teaching on Religious Life*”, 21.

¹¹⁸ L. Sfield-L, Hammett, C, Juliano, “*Building Community*” (Ave Maria Press, 1998), 101.

¹¹⁹ “*Lumen Gentium*”, 44.

¹²⁰ “*Vita Consecrata*”, 25.

In this context, as it has been reminded in the *Congregavit nos in unum Christ amor*, “the presence of communities where people of different ages, languages and cultures meet as brothers and sisters, and which remain united despite the inevitable conflicts and difficulties inherent in common life, is in itself a sign that bears witness to a higher reality and points to high aspirations.”¹²¹ Hence, through their lifestyle, the religious are called to be the signs of hope, genuine love, joy, forgiveness, tenderness and concern for others. Their fraternal communion is already an apostolate; in other words, it contributes directly to the work of evangelization. According to *Vita Consecrata*, “religious lifestyle must clearly show the ideal which they profess, and thus present itself as a living sign of God and as an eloquent, though often silent, proclamation of the Gospel.”¹²²

The various activities done by religious are done as well by ordinary lay people. Moreover, the latter can even do them better. It is their community that makes them different. Their common life supplies them with the emotional, spiritual and even financial support for ministry. But more profoundly, it witnesses that it is possible to balance rampart individualism with a concern for the common good.¹²³

Michael Himes suggests that “Living out your life in a radical way makes you a source of astonishment, but what validates you as a sign to the Church is that you can do this in community.”¹²⁴ Thus, genuine community of fraternal love, unity, mutual support, care, joy and peace is a witness which our society and our Church sorely need. In the words of William Clark, “Love gives ultimate value to what we do.”¹²⁵ That is why religious consecration is wholly

¹²¹ Congregation for Institute of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life, “*Fraternal life in Community*”, *Congregavit nos in Unum Christi amor*, 56.

¹²² “*Vita Consecrata*”, 25.

¹²³ P. Wittbrg, “*Community and Obedience*” 59(2000). 526-536.

¹²⁴ P. Wittbrg, “*Community and Obedience*” 59(2000). 526-536.

¹²⁵ W.P.Clark, “*Revisiting Religious Identity in Review for Religious*” 68 (2009), 379-388.

directed towards the love of God and neighbour. It is precisely that love which gives the value of consecration to the activity of the religious.

3.4. Role of Leadership in Community

Before going back to His Father, Jesus entrusted to Peter the role of leadership over His Church to represent him (Jn 21: 15-19). Indeed, within a religious community, the superior represents Jesus Christ since his or her mission of leading the brethren is received from Jesus.

According to the 1983 Code of Canon Law, for religious, community life is lived in a house lawfully erected under the authority of a superior designated by law (can. 608). The authority which superiors receive from God through the ministry of the Church is to be exercised by them in a spirit of service (can. 618). “The vow of obedience is effectively emptied of substance where there is no superior to whom one is accountable. Every community shall have a superior, a human and frail spiritual who, however unworthily, holds God’s place.”¹²⁶

Jean Vanier suggests that the role of authority can only be understood if it is seen as one of the many gifts or ministries which are needed to build community.¹²⁷ The role and responsibility of leaders therefore is to guide and direct those who are entrusted to them in a harmonious and warm atmosphere of relationships with them. The superior of the community is first of all a member of the community among the members.¹²⁸ This should be understood by superiors as well as their fellow sisters in order to build the community together.¹²⁹ Leaders of a community have a twofold mission. One is to keep the community in touch with what is essential, that is, the charism, spirituality and apostolate. Another is to create an atmosphere of

¹²⁶ “*Perfectae Caritatis*”, 14.

¹²⁷ J. Vanier, “*Community and Growth*”, 154.

¹²⁸ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 75.

¹²⁹ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 75.

mutual trust, peace and joy among its members. Human beings, according to the experiences, grow best in a relaxed environment built on mutual love, trust and respect.¹³⁰

Religious leaders need to understand their role as not showing off authority and power of position but to love and serve in humility. As such, to fulfill this role, they are called to follow the example of their master, Jesus Christ. It is only in love, humility and self-giving that they can be faithful and successful in this demanding task if they agree to call it as such (cf. Jn 13:4-17, Mt 11:25-26).

Jesus wants his followers to have the same spirit as he had, for he came not to be served but to serve and give his life as ransom for many. Kaitholil proposes the golden way to the use of authority that is “to respect and encourage the brothers or sisters in the community and, when need comes, to correct them with gentle love and delicate persuasion.”¹³¹ Superiors need also to know their position in the decision-making process, “it should be remembered that the final word belongs to the authority and, consequently, that authority has the right to see that decisions taken are respected.”¹³²

Pedro Arrupe suggests that “the authentic service of a superior is to seek and discern the will of God, interpreting and manifesting it to his subjects, individually and as a community.”¹³³ Basically, the leaders always need to get in touch with God through sincere prayer. Indeed, the service entrusted to them cannot be fully fulfilled without God’s intervention which they get from the power of prayer. Furthermore, the superior must become the creator of union within the community entrusted to him or her. He or she must be the symbol and the pledge of that unity, that is, of the members among themselves and of the community with the superior.¹³⁴

¹³⁰ S. S. Gomez, “*Community Life among Religious*”, 49.

¹³¹ G. Kaitholil, “*Communion in Community*” 99.

¹³² “*Vita Consecrata*”, 43.

¹³³ P. Arrupe, “*Challenge to Religious Life Today*” (The Institute of Jesuit Sources, 1979) , 83.

¹³⁴ P. Arrupe, “*Challenge to Religious Life Today*”, 84.

This requires the superior to relate with all members in a mature way and avoid any childish relationship built on sympathy. He or she must be an example of communion with all so that what he or fosters others to live can be reflected in his or her daily life.

Empathy is another quality of leadership that builds understanding, love, care and support towards his or her members. Empathy is a feeling of concern for other people that creates the desire to help them, experiencing emotions that match another person's emotions, knowing what the other person is thinking or feeling. This is a good description of Jesus' approach to people. In miraculous incidents, his dealings show his desire to get inside the mind and heart of those he addressed, to experience and know from their perspective before trying to help them. Hence, if superiors exercise authority in a spirit of open dialogue, listening and sincere empathy, then those under them will respond more as if to Christ himself.¹³⁵ However, on the other hand, some bad behavior or attitudes of the subjects towards authority are critical. In fact, leaders like any other person, have their strengths as well as weaknesses and limitations. Subjects should not be blinded by their leaders' weak points or mistakes, since all are human beings. Therefore, instead of criticizing them, they should help them and pray for them.

3.5. Community and Personal Growth

Because a religious community is a *Schola Amoris* which helps one grow in love for God and for one's brothers and sisters, it is also a place for human growth.¹³⁶ But note that the path towards human maturity which is a prerequisite of a radiant evangelical life is a process

¹³⁵ P. Schnapp, "Christ-like Empathy in Those who Govern" Review for Religious 70 (2012), 70-74.

¹³⁶ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life, "Fraternal Life in Community" *Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor* (1994), 35.

which involves continuous enrichment not only of spiritual values but also psychological, cultural and social values.¹³⁷

A Community is made by mature people striving for maturity in all aspect of life. Even though the religious are called to live their religious life in community, everyone should bear in mind that vocation is unique. Everyone is unique and hence must strive for the growth of his or her vocation without relying always on others for one's growth in holiness. It is true that community fosters this growth in one way or another but they should always remember their role and take their responsibility. The quality of fraternal life has a significant impact on the growth and perseverance of individual religious in their vocation.

On the other hand, it has been mentioned by many that the poor quality of fraternal life is one of the many reasons for leaving religious life. In this regard, every member is requested to maintain this fraternal life for his or her benefit and for the benefit of others. Within a truly fraternal community, each member has a sense of co-responsibility for the faithfulness of the others. Each one contributes to a serene climate of sharing life, of understanding, and of mutual help. Each is attentive to the moments of fatigue, suffering, isolation or lack of motivation in other. Each offers support to those who are saddened by difficulties and trials.¹³⁸ It is by cultivating and developing these qualities that the individual obtains his or her growth in relationship with others as well as in his or her own vocation.

In community living an individual gets growth in using all his or her gifts, talents, capacities and abilities for the common good. It is in giving that the religious receive more as they develop what they already have by their use. Indeed, it is by living with others that the

¹³⁷ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life, *Fraternal Life in Community*, "Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor", 35.

¹³⁸ Congregation for Institutes of Consecrated life and Societies of Apostolic life, *Fraternal Life in Community*, "Congregavit nos in unum Christi amor", 57.

religious discover who they are: their strengths and weaknesses, their potentialities and limitations. As each member journey with each other, all people must learn something from them. Life is a school and learning is an unfinished process. Hence, personal growth is also unfinished process.

Community living provides this growth since it entails getting into profound and genuine relationship with other people from different backgrounds, ages, cultures, personalities and so on. This requires an individual to renounce to some personal wishes, preferences and habits in order to fit in the community. It involves dying to one's self and once succeeded, this is one of the most important elements of growth. As stated in *Vita Consecrata*, "Love of God and of the brethren is a powerful force which can ceaselessly inspire the process of growth and fidelity."¹³⁹ It is this love that empowers the openness and readiness for self-transformation. Moreover, the human and fraternal dimensions of the consecrated life call for self-knowledge and awareness of personal limitations which, once discovered the person is offered the support needed on the path of perfect freedom, and this is what ongoing formation is all about.

3.6. Community and Sharing

Animated by the same spirit as the first Christians (Acts 2:44-45; 5:1-6), the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* share everything. This sharing makes them to be sensitive to the needs of others. This exchange is prophetic. It will strengthen a possible communion based on love, and refuse the hoarding of goods that the world is always trying to worship. Like the Family of Nazareth, the communities of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* seek to be places of sharing, places where anyone is welcome and places of joy where all can feel at home. The *Bene-Mariya Sisters* try to put everything together and the sharing is done in the joy and simplicity of the heart like housing,

¹³⁹ « *Vita Consecrata* », 72.

food, cloths means that all their kind of life will characterized by sharing while allowing the community to fulfill its apostolic commitments.¹⁴⁰

In their desire to be united with God in action and to seek him in everything, the life of sharing of the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* is based on the recognition of God's free love for them. The community is a place where they seek together to share the same family realities as any other family, the same roof and table, the material goods and tasks of the community and all in God's will.¹⁴¹ This practice of sharing everything will help them to celebrate together the feasts and significant moments of their lives such as birthdays, patron saints holidays, profession day memories, end-of-study celebrations etc and they will help each other discreetly and realistically to live their family and friendship relationships.¹⁴² Their communities will also be close to the people because sometimes they will need to share their property with the poorest especially those around them with simplicity, welcome and understanding and solidarity with them. With this sign of sharing, the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* desire to become a sign of communion.

3.7. Community and Communion

The union among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* that God gives to the different communities and to the congregation in general day after day, they accept themselves despite their differences, whether of origin, language, age, race and culture because God who brings them together is stronger than Satan who separates them.¹⁴³ Only God can give them the strength and courage to build well and work for their communities despite their differences, strengths and weaknesses and all those things that can separate them. They strive to confront the difficulties

¹⁴⁰ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 79.

¹⁴¹ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 51.

¹⁴² « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 51.

¹⁴³ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 57.

of community life with sincerity and realism, and they are prepared to be challenged by the community, to reconcile and to forgive.¹⁴⁴

For the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, the behaviors that systematically break the unity, they try to approach them with seriousness and firmness. They know that the cross is planted at the center of their community because there will be no shortage of problems in the communities, but they also believe that God's grace can overcome their powerlessness if they really keep themselves in prayer.¹⁴⁵

In the diversity of origin, gifts and stains as in the variety of communities within the Congregation, fraternal relations reinforce the sense of the body. Openness and communication allow us to know what they are going through and what they are experiencing. Self-forgetfulness and the acceptance of the other make friendship deeper. Joy and discretion stimulate the family spirit. In diversity, it is charity that keeps the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* united in the peace and, by the cross, reconciles them all into one body.¹⁴⁶

Conclusion

In this chapter, we have tried to bring out the role of community in relation to other essentials of religious life. We have mentioned that religious community life is the root of the vows of chastity, poverty and obedience and lack of community life destroys them and as such leads to the destruction of one's religious vocation. Primarily, the religious are apostles by what they are. Their apostolate "consists primarily in the witness of their consecrated life" (can 673). What counts most is not what the religious do but what they are as persons consecrated to the Lord. Through their vows, the religious affirm that God is to be supremely loved. It is by their

¹⁴⁴ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 57.

¹⁴⁵ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* » 57.

¹⁴⁶ « *Constitution des Bene-Mariya* », 58.

unity and love that the world recognizes that the religious belong truly to Christ. Prayer in common has been considered as the foundation of all community life. All community members: superiors as well as their subjects have their role to play in community building. In a genuine community, we see that the religious get a certain degree of growth, whether spiritual or bodily, and thus achieve a certain degree of perfection and holiness.

GENERAL CONCLUSION

The focus of this research was on the Community Life as a prerequisite of living an authentic religious life among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters in Burundi*. The purpose of carrying out this particular research was to emphasize the necessity of a genuine community life for one to lead an authentic religious life.

Thus, after a general introduction of how the research will be carried out, the first chapter focused on what the Church and the Bible teach us on community life. Hence, it looked at both the Old and New Testaments and found out that the community is rooted in God's intention of salvation of humankind. God did not want to save human beings as individuals but rather as a community. He then chose his people and formed them and made a covenant with them through which they were to love Him above all and love one another as brethren. Jesus, the fulfillment of the New Covenant came to continue His Father's work of salvation and in the same line formed a community of His followers who were to continue His mission. He trained them in love and unity, humility and service, forgiveness and reconciliation, care and concern for other's needs and above all He served them as an example in these areas. These exigencies are emphasized in religious life as we have seen in the Church Teaching as well as in the Canon Law and the Constitutions of different Institutes of Religious Life and Congregations.

The second chapter presented the religious community life among the *Bene-Mariya Sisters*. After presenting the brief history of religious life in the community of *Bene-Mariya Sisters*, the chapter discussed some positive effects of Religious Community Life among them. We talked about sharing life, mutual concern and assistance and confidentiality among them. These values are to be reinforced in religious communities so that each one of them becomes a family and a home. However, sisters are human beings, there are still some challenges faced

by community life such as: activism and individualism, sympathies and antipathies, professional and education identity, aggression and failure in sincere love. These challenges are obstacles that affect the growth of a harmonious community life and thus impede the *Bene-Mariya Sisters* to respond fully to their precious call. Therefore, they need to be handled by each and every religious in order to live authentically one's consecrated to God.

The third chapter explored the role played by community in fulfilling other essential elements of religious life. The strongest emphasis was on evangelical counsels (chastity, poverty and obedience), community and prayer, community and apostolate, community and personal growth, community and sharing and community and communion.

By consulting some books and Church documents and especially paying attention on life experience, it was found out that full and genuine dedication to God and to his service is possibly achieved in community, where those following the same goal and bound together by God's love, get support from one another in order to carry out their commitments as disciples of Jesus Christ. In fact, lack of community support in different ways has been pointed out as one of the factors that slows down the search for holiness and furthermore forces some religious to abandon their call to religious life. Therefore, all community members, superiors as well as their subjects should know their role to build a genuine community founded on love, unity, prayer, acceptance, and on good and mature relationships. It is first and foremost in a genuine community where the religious get growth and thus attain perfection and holiness.

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