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## DIOCESE OF BUEA

### PASTORAL LETTER RESOLVING THE CONTROVERSIAL MATTER CONCERNING SOME ASSOCIATIONS OF CHRIST'S FAITHFUL IN THE DIOCESE OF BUEA

Dear People of God,

The peace of the Lord be with you.

1. *"The Consecrated Life, deeply rooted in the example and teaching of Christ the Lord, is a gift of God the Father to his Church through the Holy Spirit. By the profession of the evangelical counsels the characteristic features of Jesus — the chaste, poor and obedient one — are made constantly "visible" in the midst of the world and the eyes of the faithful are directed towards the mystery of the Kingdom of God already at work in history, even as it awaits its full realization in heaven... We are all aware of the treasure which the gift of the consecrated life in the variety of what its charisms and institutions represents for the ecclesial community. Together let us thank God for the Religious Orders and Institutes devoted to contemplation or the works of the apostolate, for Societies of Apostolic Life, for Secular Institutes and for other groups of consecrated persons, as well as for all those individuals who, in their inmost hearts, dedicate themselves to God by a special consecration."*<sup>1</sup>

It is with these words that Pope St. John Paul II begins his presentation of the proceedings of the Synod "On the Consecrated Life and Its Mission in the Church and in the World" that brought together Bishops and Consecrated persons in Rome, from the 02nd to 29th of October 1994. This Synod gracefully affirmed the unique importance of the presence of consecrated persons in local Churches all over the world precisely because *"the consecrated life inspires and accompanies the spread of evangelization in the different parts of the world, where Institutes from abroad are gratefully welcomed and new ones are being founded, in a great variety of forms and expressions."*<sup>2</sup>

2. While extolling the inestimable contribution that these institutes make to the growth of the faith, the Synod, nevertheless, also recognized that this is an area in the life of the Church which must be handled with utmost vigilance, pastoral prudence, and unwavering diligence. This is in order that the presence of these Institutes may perpetually be an unambiguous sign and testimony of the Kingdom of God, present among us. Consequently, the Synod insists that *"Their vitality must be judged by the authority of the Church, which has the responsibility of examining them in order to discern the authenticity of the purpose for their foundation and to prevent the proliferation of*

<sup>1</sup> Pope St. JOHN PAUL II, Post-Synodal Apostolic Exhortation *Vita Consecrata*, on the Consecrated Life and its Mission in the Church and in the World, Rome, 25.03.1996, nos. 1 and 2.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 2.



*institutions similar to one another, with the consequent risk of a harmful fragmentation into excessively small groups. In other cases, it is a question of new experiments which are seeking an identity of their own in the Church and awaiting official recognition from the Apostolic See, which alone has final judgment in these matters.*"<sup>3</sup>

3. For close to a decade now, the Diocese of Buea has witnessed a very unpleasant situation concerning the presence and activities of some "congregations." It is a situation that has generated a lot of tension within our diocesan community because of the divided opinions among the people of God regarding these "congregations." When I arrived in Buea as the Apostolic Administrator, the Laity, Religious and Clerics presented the presence of the Lay Associations as one of their challenges and wondered what I could do to arrest the situation. During meetings of the Presbyteral Councils and College of Consultors, this point came up every now and then. Consequently I decided to put in a lot of effort, along with my immediate collaborators, to prayerfully discern the authenticity of the charisms of these "congregations," and therefore their relevance in the pastoral life of our Diocese. It is in this context that on the 08th of June 2020, I issued a decree suspending the activities and further recruitment of candidates by all those new "congregations" which had come into the diocese (all from Nigeria). The purpose of that suspension, as stated clearly in the decree, was meant to provide the necessary space for a proper investigation into the irregularities surrounding their presence, status, and the exercise of their apostolate in the Diocese of Buea.

4. This suspension was done when I was the Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Buea. Some people were of the opinion that as an Apostolic Administrator I had no authority to carry out such an administrative act. I would like to refer these persons to the letter written by the Apostolic Nuncio to Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea on the 15th of June 2020, N.1613/20, which states: *"Following the high instructions of the Congregation of the Holy See for the Evangelization of the Peoples, the Apostolic Nunciature in Cameroon declares that:*

- 1. Bishop Michael Miabesue BIBI is the Apostolic Administrator of the Diocese of Buea appointed by the Holy Father Pope Francis on the 28th of December 2019.*
- 2. The Apostolic Administrator is having jurisdiction within the Diocese of Buea to act for and on behalf of the Diocese of Buea in all matters concerning the Diocese of Buea and all other institutions belonging to the Diocese.*
- 3. The Apostolic Administrator is the legitimate authority over all Priests, Religious and any other mission personnel within the diocese of Buea and reserves the right to appoint, transfer, remove or dismiss persons according to the prescriptions of the Code of Canon Law and the specific instructions given to him by the Holy See.*
- 4. The same Apostolic Administrator is responsible for all the temporal goods and patrimony of the Diocese of Buea and of all Diocesan Institutions and is answerable directly to the Holy Father through the Apostolic Nunciature in Yaounde.*
- 5. This document is valid until the Holy Father appoints the Local Ordinary of Buea, to whom the Apostolic Administrator will legitimately hand over the diocese.*
- 6. This document is meant to serve any purpose for which it is demanded by the Law of the State of Cameroon.*

5. Due to some irregularities in these *Lay Associations* especially in the area of formation, the Holy See asked my predecessor not to carry out the ordination of candidates in these Associations. This decision from the Vatican was brought about in response to the report that the Nigerian Episcopal Conference, some Priests, Religious, and Laity made to the Vatican. Since Rome gave these Instructions, those who were programmed for ordination since 2018 have not been ordained to date. When they approached me for ordination, I told them it was not possible till I get specific instructions from Rome.

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.*, 12.



These Lay Associations were never erected as Institutes of Diocesan Right in the Diocese of Buea. In fact, all the letters welcoming them into the Diocese of Buea almost always stated as follows: “permission to operate in the diocese of Buea as an association of Christ’s lay faithful in view of becoming a Religious Institute. By granting them permission to come to the Diocese of Buea and my predecessor becoming their Principal Bishop, the associations did not automatically become Institutes of Diocesan Right in the Diocese of Buea. Worth noting is the fact that these “congregations” had been operating in Nigeria long before coming to the Diocese of Buea with no Bishop willing to take them as Principal Bishop. Concerning their formation, it was not the Bishop of Buea that followed up the candidates, but rather it was their superiors who did so. The superiors even announced their banns, got the results and presented them to the Bishop for ordination. They, therefore, operated almost like autonomous entities.

6. The investigation I carried out with instructions given to me by the Holy See involved three dimensions: a visit to the houses where the members of these associations were lodged; meetings with some of their members; and a critical study of the file of each of these associations. The report was then forwarded to the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples as requested.

On the 22nd of October 2021, I received a response from the Congregation for the Evangelization of the Peoples and a request for more information pertaining to the life of the members of these associations. I delegated my Vicar General who after meeting with the members of the various Lay Associations wrote to the respective Superiors, on the 05<sup>th</sup> of January, 2022, asking information about their associations and a detailed profile of the clerics belonging therein with their curriculum vitae. In making this request, the diocese of Buea was offering them the opportunity to exercise the right that is theirs, as demanded by law, in view of guaranteeing an accurate and fair evaluation of their cases (cf. canon 50). We acknowledge and appreciate the fact that some members individually responded to the request made. On the contrary, it is unfortunate that such cooperation was completely lacking on the part of the Superiors and most of their members. From this, it was obvious that they had nothing to add to what we were able to find in their files, notably, their constitutions and various correspondences by my predecessor concerning these associations. My decision regarding the future of these associations in the Diocese of Buea is therefore based on all the available documents or absence thereof and on our inquiries. We observe as follows:

#### **I. ON THE STATUTES OR CONSTITUTIONS OF THESE ASSOCIATIONS**

7. Canon 94 §1 reads: “*Statutes properly so called are regulations which are established in accordance with the law in aggregates of persons or of things, whereby the purpose, constitution, governance and manner of acting of these bodies are defined.*” I have underlined the words, “in accordance with the law”, understood to mean that the provisions made in the statutes of any juridic entity must conform to the hierarchical norms contained in the universal and particular laws of the Church (cf. c. 94 §3). What this implies is that any such provision in the Statutes that should be contrary to the superior norms mentioned above can never serve as a legally binding document whether in respect to its members or to any authority, having pastoral care over the juridic entity. Furthermore, there are some very fundamental elements that must feature in any statute and based on which the history, charism, purpose, conditions for membership, governance, etc., are clearly defined (cf. cc. 114, 304). This is particularly compelling if we are talking about an association intending to be recognized as an institute of consecrated life or a society of apostolic life. Notwithstanding the attempt made to address some of these points in the statutes of these associations, our study of the respective files reveals that there is so much vagueness and confusion that characterize their statutes that in the final analysis, it is impossible to say what these associations are all about.

#### **II. THE STATUS OF THESE “CONGREGATIONS”**

8. The most confusing aspect about these “congregations” concerns their identity, that is, their nature and character. In their constitutions, for example, these associations refer to themselves as



*institutes of apostolic religious life whose members take the three public vows of obedience, poverty, and chastity.* Ironically, there is not a single document by my predecessor in which he addresses any of these entities by this title. He invariably and explicitly calls them “Associations of Christ’s Lay Faithful with the intention of becoming a religious institute.”

It is abundantly clear that Bishop Immanuel Bushu, under whose guardianship and mentoring these associations exercised their apostolate had not yet accorded these entities the status of Institutes of Consecrated Life, that is, up to the time he went on retirement in December 2019. Even if he had wished to raise the associations to the canonical status of Institutes of Consecrated Life, there is absolutely no way this would have happened without due observance of the law as contained in canon 579 which reads: “*Diocesan bishops, each in his own territory, can erect institutes of consecrated life by formal decree, provided that the Apostolic See has been consulted.*” Concerning the question on whether this consultation is necessary for validity, the Holy Father Pope Francis at the Audience accorded to the Secretary of State, Cardinal Pietro Parolin on 4<sup>th</sup> April 2016, made it very clear that as established in canon 579, prior consultation with the Holy See is to be understood as necessary *ad validitatem* before establishing a diocesan Institute of consecrated life, otherwise risking nullity of the decree of establishment of this said Institute.<sup>4</sup> There was neither any decree by my predecessor raising these associations to the status of Religious Institutes, nor a process towards that end being engaged. Thus, referring to their members as “religious”, with stages of incorporation beginning with the pre-novitiate, novitiate and religious profession was inconsistent with their states.

### III. ORDINATION OF CLERICS

9. This concerns the male associations only. The very first issue I find problematic concerns the whole recruitment exercise of members, leading up to their ordination as clerics. Although the constitutions explicitly make mention of some sort of intellectual formation in view of the priesthood, none of them say anything more concrete about the way this was to be done, beginning first of all with the admission requirements. Neither do we have any records about the philosophical and theological studies undertaken by the members as a necessary prerequisite for licit ordination. The only tangible reference in relation to the academic background of some of these candidates is to be found in the letter of my predecessor of the 17<sup>th</sup> of September 2015, addressed to the Rector of St. Joseph’s Major Seminary, Ikot Ekpene, informing the Rector about members of the association of Missionary Sons of Saint Mulumba “...*studying in different seminaries in Nigeria: Seat of Wisdom Owerri, St. Augustine Jos, Christ the King Kafanchan, St. Joseph Ikot Ekpene, among others*”; and imploring him to “*kindly encourage them.*” The concern was raised, and legitimately so, by a good number of persons, based in Nigeria, about the suitability of these candidates for Sacred Orders.

10. The norms regulating the formation of clerics are contained in cc. 232 – 264 of the Code of Canon Law. Canon 250 states unambiguously: “*the philosophical and theological studies which are organized in the seminary itself may be conducted either in succession or conjointly, in accordance with the Charter of Priestly Formation. These studies are to take at least six full years, in such a way that the time given to philosophical studies amounts to two full years and that allotted to theological studies to four full years.*” This norm is complemented by Canon 1032 §1 which instructs that “*aspirants to the priesthood may be promoted to the Diaconate only when they have completed the fifth year of the curriculum of philosophical and theological studies.*” We find additional norms outlining the requirements for valid and lawful conferral of the sacrament of orders in cc. 1024 to 1052.

11. There are serious questions raised when candidates are admitted to orders without fulfilling the conditions required for their valid and lawful ordination. There are no records in the files

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<sup>4</sup> Secretary of State, *Rescript ex audientia SS.mi pertinens ad canonem 579 Codicis Iuris Canonici de Dioecesanis Institutis erigendis*, May 11, 2016: AAS (2016) 696



showing proof that most of these candidates had received the appropriate seminary and academic formation in view of the priesthood. This raises legitimate doubts about the suitability of the candidates and the liceity of their ordination.

12. It is clear, therefore, that some persons belonging to the various associations were clandestinely admitted into the associations and conferred the sacrament of Orders without regard for the universal norms, nor reference to all those persons, for example, Rectors of Seminaries, Parish Pastors and the Christian Communities, who by right, have a contribution to make regarding the suitability of candidates for Sacred Orders (cf. cc. 1043 and 1051). Canon 1052 §1 reads: *“for a Bishop to proceed to an ordination which he is to confer by his own right, he must be satisfied that the (relevant documents) ... are at hand and that, as a result of the investigations prescribed by law, the suitability of the candidate has been positively established.”* This buttresses the allegation made by one of the Christians in Nigeria, upon reception of the news about the impending ordination of some of the young men from Nigeria. In his lamentation, he writes: *“one of the religious congregations is said to have been founded by a run-away Monk. In the past years, his candidates paid between N600.000 to N1.000.000 to be ordained. In the last few months, the information at my disposal indicates that the founder collected a huge sum of money ranging from N1.500.000 to N2.300.000 to ordain some people deacons and priests. The most disturbing issue is that some of these young men that are ordained have serious questionable characters. Also, some of them have not received any seminary formation as recommended by the Church (no spiritual year formation; no novitiate experience; no atom of seminary formation). Some candidates’ names were added to the list of those to be ordained deacons few days before the ordination (no calling of banns; no prior investigation or inquiry on the candidate’s integrity).”*<sup>5</sup>

These are not allegations that can be treated lightly. In another instance, we have a report by a female religious who wrote to four different Bishops in Nigeria to notify them of one gentleman who had forged a philosophy transcript to present to one of the Bishops for ordination.<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, expressing their discontentment with the way things happened some members of the Missionary Sons of Saint Peter wrote concerning ‘ordination fraud’ that *‘with the approval of the deacons of the association to onward procession into the presbyteral order, Rev. Fr. Peter Mary Omini Okoi as superior deceived the bishop, by removing five of the approved names and replacing them with people whom he collected huge sums of money from, who are not members of the association.’*<sup>7</sup> This speaks of fraud, deceit, and simony, practiced by some of these associations which my predecessor may not have been aware of, thus, being lured as a holy pastor into ordaining persons he personally did not know. This could be the reason why some members of these groups which had been existing in Nigeria had to seek accommodation in the Diocese of Buea, far from their home Dioceses where they were well known.

13. Even if there had not been any questions about the suitability of these candidates for sacred orders, it will be important to recall what canon 1019 §1 says with regard to religious clerics, namely that “the major superior of a clerical religious institute of pontifical right or of a clerical society of apostolic life of pontifical right is competent to grant dimissorial letters for the diaconate and the presbyterate to their subjects who are enrolled perpetually or definitively in the institute or society according to their constitutions.” Obviously, these associations were not yet institutes of consecrated life or societies of apostolic life, talk less of having pontifical right. Yet, their superiors took upon themselves to announce the banns, get the results and present the candidates to the Bishop for ordination. The law does not give them such authority and therefore the dimissorial letters they granted were not only invalid but illegitimate, and by that fact, according to the prescripts of canon 1383, those whom they presented for ordination and who were ordained are ipso

<sup>5</sup> Letter of a Concerned Christian, Archives, Bishop’s House, Soppo, Buea.

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Letter of Sr. Rev. Umeh, Missionary in Dakar, 4th June 2018, Archives, Bishop’s House, Soppo, Buea.

<sup>7</sup> Letter received on September 17, 2019 titled ‘The Hideous Life and Activities of Rev. Fr. Peter Mary Omini Okoi, MSSP.



facto suspended. Furthermore, a priest incurring the suspension for being ordained without authentic dimissorial letters becomes irregular for the exercise of orders if he carries out an act reserved to an ordained priest while being barred from its exercise (cf. cc. 1041, 6° and 1044, 3°).

14. What is stated above concerns the sacrament of Orders. A lot could be said also regarding the irregularities involved in the process of incorporation of members into the association, that is, in the context of the profession of the Evangelical Counsels, by means of public vows. That would not be necessary.

#### IV. SUSTENANCE OF THE ASSOCIATIONS AND THEIR MEMBERS

15. Canon 114 §3 says: *“the competent ecclesiastical authority is not to confer juridical personality except on those aggregates of persons or of things which aim at a genuinely useful purpose and which, all things considered, have the means which are foreseen to be sufficient to achieve the purpose in view.”* (cf. also can. 610 §2). Our visits to the houses of these associations present to us a state of disillusionment by the members, especially in some associations. It tells me that no serious study was carried out regarding the future sustenance of the associations and their members, prior to the acceptance of these communities into the Diocese. They are far from being financially stable to be able to provide for the needs of their members, and this has been one major source of problems and tensions within most of these communities, characterized by their squalid living conditions in the different houses and the fact that the members of these associations are left to fend for themselves and cannot even pay for their rents. The Missionary Sons of St. Peter are presently in court for not paying their rents since 2020 and the landlord is requesting from them 5.000.000 frs. The daughters of the Sacred Passion have not paid rents to their landlord and the total amount owed as of my last discussions with them is 8.000.000 frs. We have seen cases of young ladies in religious habits operating small-scale businesses in some street corners and public spaces, to the utter dismay of curious passers-by, Catholics and non-Catholics alike. This is uncomely and non-representative of their religious identity. Besides, there is no record in the diocesan finance office concerning the yearly financial report that was supposed to be submitted to this office by these associations, as per the universal norms (cf. cc. 319 and 637). In other words, the burden of running these associations and providing for its members has been far above the means of the Founders or Superiors to handle. Unfortunately, it is a situation that is almost impossible to redeem because almost everything about the creation and functioning of these associations has been irregular, unlawful, and even canonically offensive.

#### V. DECISION

16. Having established the grave irregularities that surround the presence of these associations in our Diocese, and taking into account the many unnecessary conflicts of interests which this situation has generated; considering the provisions of canon 326§1 – which states that “a private association of Christ’s faithful is extinguished in accordance with the norms of the statutes. It can also be suppressed by the competent authority if its activity gives rise to grave harm to ecclesiastical teaching or discipline, or is a scandal to the faithful” –I, therefore, decide as follows:

1. That none of these Associations of Christ’s faithful, namely, **a) Missionary Sons of Saint Peter; b) Little Sons of the Eucharist; c) The Missionary Sons of Saint Mulumba; d) Daughters of the Sacred Passion; e) Mater Domini; f) Daughters of Mary Mother of the Eucharistic Jesus**, shall be raised to the status of a Religious Institute in the Diocese of Buea.
2. The above-mentioned associations are without exception suppressed and can no longer operate in the Diocese of Buea.
3. Members of these Associations have up to **the 22<sup>nd</sup> of February** at the latest to leave the Diocese of Buea.
4. The Diocese of Buea has no obligation towards persons belonging to these associations.
5. All those who were ordained to Sacred Orders in these associations, and desire to be incardinated into the Diocese of Buea, have to submit a letter of intent to that effect, latest



Tuesday 22nd of March 2022, at the Chancery of the Diocese of Buea. Those who wish to join other Dioceses could also be recommended if they are found worthy.


6. Members of the associations, supposedly having been incorporated through the rite of profession of the evangelical counsels, by means of public vows, are recommended to transfer to any other canonical institute or society of their choice within or outside of the Diocese in accordance with the norm of law (cc. 684-685, 730, 744). The decision about incorporating these members into the considered religious Institute is purely the prerogative of the authorities concerned, based on criteria to be determined by them.
7. These decisions bring to a definitive end the controversies surrounding the presence and activities of these associations within the Diocese of Buea. The members of these associations will do well to observe the strict injunction, henceforth, not to indulge in any activity, whether public or otherwise, aimed at instigating disobedience or animosity against the lawful authorities of the Diocese of Buea (cf. cc. 1371 and 1373).
8. Likewise, it is strictly forbidden for any individual to present himself or herself in any community of the Catholic faithful within the Diocese as belonging to a Religious Institute that is not recognized. They are not allowed as well to dress in any formal garment that identifies them as members of a Religious Institute in the Roman Catholic Church
9. Finally, any other Association of Christ's Faithful existing within the Diocese of Buea clandestinely is hereby ordered to dissolve immediately. Should they have the intention to carry out any activity within the Diocese, of whatever form, they are required to follow the official legal procedure. They can only begin acting as such after receiving due recognition to be given in writing.
10. These decisions take effect from the date of the signature of this Pastoral Letter.
11. This Letter and the above decisions are to be communicated to all the concerned, registered in the official journals of the Diocese, and given the widest publicity.

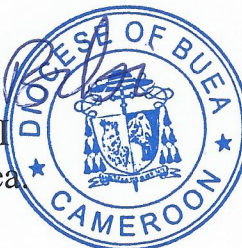
## VI. CONCLUSION

17. The Diocese of Buea deeply cherishes the mission of consecrated persons, who commit themselves in chastity, poverty, and obedience, and desires to see it flourish among us. However, this will be done, under the promptings of the Holy Spirit and with appropriate discernment, in order that the presence and action of consecrated persons in the Diocese will truly be opportunities for the sanctification of God's people.

**Given at Buea, Today, February 16, 2022.**

Yours in His Service,

  
+Michael MIABESUE BIBI  
Bishop of the Diocese of Buea



### CC:

- Prefect, Congregation for the Evangelization of Peoples
- Apostolic Nuncio to Cameroon and Equatorial Guinea
- Metropolitan Archbishop of Bamenda
- Archbishops and Bishops of Cameroon
- Congregations Concerned