
CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSION

The focus of this research was on consecrated life and inculturation in the Catholic Church. Taking into consideration the number of congregations of consecrated life and the variety of charisms, the focus was limited to one case study, the congregation of the Companions of St Angela. The entry point to the task was the definition of consecrated life as it is understood in the Catholic Church. This undertaking benefited from the richness of the past and present church documents on consecrated life as well as from the writings of many religious who shared from their theological reflection on this form of life and from their personal experience. Barr (1995) is a classic example of contemporary hermeneutic on consecrated life. He holds that religious life is essentially a charism to live as a professional witness to Christ. This is a powerfully motivating and challenging statement. He explains what he means:

While all Christians are meant to be witnesses, light and salt and leaven in the world, religious are called to be professional witnesses, professional light, professional salt and professional leaven. While all Christians are called to be disciples, religious are called to be professional disciples (Barr 1995:3).

This implies that having freely chosen to follow Christ through the vowed life religious persons live their entire life in union with Christ. They become totally committed to Christ's way of living and ministering to the people of God. *Ecclesia in Asia* (EAs 23) speaks of authentic discipleship, which seems to apply to religious where it says "we need to be men and women of God-experience, living icons of Christ's love for people."

From all the background reading on the religious life it became clear that consecrated life is a universal phenomenon as it exists both within and outside organised religious institutions. Within the Catholic church it emerged quite early, right from the beginning of Christianity, and has continued through the centuries:

Men and women felt called apart to find greater freedom to pray to the Father in Christ through the power of the Spirit. When Christianity began to be more closely allied with secular society, some Christians responded to the call to follow Christ more closely by fleeing the cities and going to live in the desert more or less permanently (Pennington in Downey 1993:666).

The history of the beginning and the development of consecrated life is a remarkable epic in the annals of the church:

By the beginning of the fourth century, religious life was well launched. Monks, most of whom were hermits, and many of whom were female (living in their own homes rather than in hermitages), began to flourish in the Middle East, especially in Northern Egypt. Gradually, the new movement spread westward, especially under the pioneering work of John Cassian (360-435) and the inspirational life of St Anthony compiled by St Athanasius. Not until the time of St Benedict (480-540), did the Christian monastic movement leave a marked imprint on mainland Europe (O'Murchu 1991:63).

It would perhaps be fitting to elaborate on the 'marked imprint' mentioned in the quotation from O'Murchu. The Benedictine order formed a framework of living points on which was stretched the moral life of Europe. People settled in the vicinity of the monasteries where they experienced community, support, co-operation, the dignity and benefits of manual labour together with some peace and stability. St Benedict's *Rule* (58:7) reads "To truly seek God." This is the very essence of monastic life. Indeed, it is the central precept of all human and religious life (Pennington in Downey, 1993:667).

Many founders and foundresses who have contributed to the development and growth of this form of life according to the changing conditions of life and the needs of the times in which they lived and served. Men and women from all continents and from all cultures have felt themselves drawn to follow Christ in this particular way of life. Neither scientific progress nor modern technology has succeeded in eliminating this desire in some people to be part of an alternative life style witnessing to Gospel values. Like faith, consecrated life has stood the test of time. Religious life as one fruit of faith has gradually and steadfastly carved its

place in the life of the church. Throughout the history of the church there were times of turbulence which called for renewal and conversion. Each period in history produced prophetic and charismatic individuals who challenged the system injecting a new spirit and new life into the structures of the church.

Dominic Guzman (1170-1221) founded the Dominican Order “to be and to be called Order of Preachers.” They defended the Christian doctrine against heretics, outstanding educators, intellectuals and theologians. Francis of Assisi (1182-1226) and Clare (1194-1253) both of whom in a time of general decadence, excessive wealth and absolute power in church and in society chose the path of humility, joy, poverty, contemplation and reverence for the natural environment (Raitt, et al. 1988:15-37). Closer to our times, there is the Trappist³⁵ monk Thomas Merton (1915-1968), whom Palmer (in Wakefield, 1989:264) identified as: “a leading contemplative and prophetic voice of the twentieth-century church.” Then there is Mother Theresa, who challenged conventional structures by moving into the grime and dirt of the slums to rescue the little and broken people from despair and indignity.

Today the challenge for the church is inculturation, a concept and process which came into prominence in the aftermath of Vatican II and in the wake of decolonisation in Africa. The church in Africa awoke to the realisation that although the Good News had found a home in Africa, the traditions, practices and interpretation of it were not African. This concern is highlighted in the following words:

Every human being must be able to talk to God in his or her own language - and language means more than a mere system of sounds: it implies symbols, values, silences.... The authentic religion called for by the prophets, and by Jesus himself demands that the experience of people be taken seriously.... We (Africans) must take ourselves seriously - and this means taking the African experience and African values seriously, and seeking ways to integrate them into the celebration of Christian faith (Hearne 1980:60).

³⁵ The word derives from the abbey of la Trappe (One) reformed by Armand-Jean de Rance (1626-1700), after a notable conversion in 1657. External features include perpetual abstinence from meat, fish and eggs (except for the sick), rigorous silence and enclosure, seven hours a day in choir, rising for the night office, manual labour and dormitories not cells (Wakefield, 1989:380-381).

There is a compelling need to change from a Western mould of church to an African church as a sign of maturity in the faith as it sinks its roots on African soil. Pope Paul VI's 1969 visit to Africa, during which he challenged the African church to become truly African, is taken as a catalyst. African theologians were inspired to start taking inculturation seriously through research and experimentation and writing down their findings for the benefit of the church. Conferences and seminars have concentrated on how to make the church in Africa really and truly African. GS 58 whilst acknowledging the link between the message of salvation and culture, and the fact that the church is not just tied to one specific culture, also teaches that:

The good news of Christ continually renews the life and culture of fallen man [sic]; it combats and removes the error and evil which flow from the ever-present attraction of sin. It never ceases to purify and elevate the morality of peoples.

In other words culture is not perfect, it must be evangelised and purified through the Holy Spirit.

This view is also held by Shutte (2001:10) when he remarks that "every culture has its dark and dangerous side as well." Azevedo (1988) makes a valid observation:

There has been a stress on an evangelising presence to the poor in the Church and in the religious life of Latin America. The same cannot be said with regard to the challenge put to us by evangelisation of that other aspect of our reality. Indeed, the Church as a whole and religious life in it do not have significant impact as regards the evangelisation of modern-contemporary culture. We are not succeeding in using our experience with the poor to inspire and animate the evangelisation of modern culture in its many manifestations (Azevedo, 1988:38).

The prediction by the 1989 Conference of Major Superiors in the United States of what the religious life of 2010 could look like seems to be the answer to the lacunae detected by Azevedo in the above quotation. They wrote:

Being converted by the example of Jesus and the values of the gospel, religious in the year 2010 will serve a prophetic role in church and society. Living this prophetic witness will include critiquing societal and ecclesial values and structures, calling for systemic change and being converted by the marginalised with whom we serve... Religious in 2010 will be investing their resources in direct service with and advocacy for structural change on behalf of the poor and marginalised. They will minister where others will not go. Their own listening to and learning from the poor and marginalised will shape all aspects of their lives (Barr 1995:13-14).

At the Synod on evangelisation (1974) the bishops of Africa addressed the issue of inculturation more decisively than ever before. EN (1975) came up with the basic assumption that there can be no evangelisation without inculturation, a proposition which theologians took seriously. Arrupe (1978) went so far as to liken inculturation to the incarnation of the Christian life and the Christian message in a particular culture, the end result of which would be a “new creation”. This definition generated much theological and pastoral debate which led to a production of a number of commentaries on the subject. Okure (1990) giving the biblical and theological bases for inculturation explains:

as a hermeneutical issue, inculturation is not just a twentieth century, and specifically an African problem that grows out of the re-appraisal of our cultural heritage, or consequent from our colonisation. Theologically speaking inculturation belongs to the very core of the history of the fulfilment of the churches universal mission of evangelisation (Okure 1990:62)

Okure (1990) thus affirms the theory that there can be no evangelisation without inculturation. Zwane in the book by Brown (1983:17) outlines four tasks of the church, in the fourth task he proposes that:

The task of the church is to make the genuine gospel message find a home in the real lives of the people. The only authentic context for evangelisation is the local cultures and the contemporary historical circumstances and consciousness of those to whom the gospel is addressed. It is, indeed imperative that the church should concentrate less on building institutions. Rather it should set its mind on building

believing communities who are aware of themselves as the people of God and who are conscious of their mission as signs of the 'new creation'; the people set apart to be truly African and truly Christian; the people who will so work within their society that justice, peace and love will be the ordinary values of life.

Zwane, in putting the spotlight on justice, peace and love as ordinary values of society is actually listing some of the values of the reign of God as they are found in the scriptures, for example justice in Lk 19:8, peace in Jn 14:27 and love in Jn 15:9.

To understand the congregation of the Companions of St Angela it was necessary to look at the historical factors which helped to bring the congregation to birth and to shape it. Its legacy in terms of the spirituality of their founding mothers, the Ursuline Sisters and Angela Merici had to be acknowledged. Peel (1983:209) makes an insightful observation with regard to the impact of past history on a present situation:

But the present is open to the future in a way that the past is not. We are not fated to repeat interminably the mistakes of our ancestors nor to reincarnate their glories. There is a spiritual element in human beings which gives us the capacity to determine to some degree the course of human history.

These are liberating thoughts. Whilst the role of the ancestors is recognised, the present society is free to carve its own future. Bujo (1992:131) on the other hand holds that it is important to observe what was laid down by the ancestors. His argument is as follows:

In repeating the words and deeds of the ancestors, however, people are shaping a new tradition, transcending and completing the old by uncovering its previously unsuspected depths. Hence the future that is fashioned is much more than a copy of the past.

Bujo's (1992) thoughts are also refreshing for the type of continuity he describes. He does not deny change. He points out that the new generation in interacting with its legacy is influencing it and giving it a new form and a new impetus. It can never be exactly the same as it was before because both the situation and the people are different, with different needs

and a new outlook on life. This is important in interpreting the efforts at inculturation made by the Companions because, they follow the spirit of Angela Merici as African women within the African cultural context. They give the legacy inherited from Angela an African expression. They are not Angela. Angela herself would not have expected them to be carbon copies of herself, but they are not to develop their congregation in such a way that it is no longer recognisable as originating from Angela. PC 2 urges religious to return to the sources of all Christian life and to the original inspiration behind their charism, and to make adjustments to the changing conditions of the times. The Companions whilst inculturating the spirituality of Angela Merici must do so with PC 2 in mind.

Chapter two gave the background history of Angela Merici and the way in which she founded the congregation of the Ursulines who were the founding mothers of the Companions of St Angela. The spiritual heritage of the Companions of St Angela is traced back to Angela Merici through the Ursulines. That they are able to recount their ancestry from Brescia in Italy to Krugersdorp in South Africa, gives the Companions a sense of belonging, of communion with a spiritual family which has its roots in a different culture and in a different period in history. As the quotations from Peel (1983) and Bujo (1992) indicate, the Companions of St Angela have developed according to their needs and according to the needs of the local church and of the society in which they work and live. The founder of the congregation of the Companions of St Angela, Bishop W P Whelan, was inspired when he placed the new foundation under the patronage and guiding spirit of Angela Merici. His remark at the time: “Angela is good for the church at this time” (observation in a typed note by mother Antoinette in the archives) indicates that the choice was made after much reflection and discernment. He chose the Ursulines to pass on the spirit of their founder to the Companions because he wanted the Companions to emulate Angela Merici. The historical context and climate of separate development in South Africa in the early 1950s was in a way partly responsible for the way the spirituality of Angela Merici developed within the congregation of the Companions of St Angela. Their experiences were different from those of the Ursuline Sisters.

What is striking in the analysis of the spirituality of Angela Merici is its relevance to the

contemporary spirituality of African women. It is in fact appropriate to the spirituality needed for the current African situation. Angela was a sixteenth century Italian woman but her foresight which is reflected in her writings and in her manner of life have spoken to, and are still an inspiration to, women in the twenty first century. Firstly Angela's historical context bears a striking resemblance to the current context of South Africa. The social troubles which were prevalent in her time are similar to the ones plaguing Africa today. Women and young girls in her time were in need of protection and education, and today the situation is not much different. The trafficking of women and children and the epidemic of emotional and sexual abuse attest to the dire need for education and formation.

Secondly in her seventh *Counsel* Angela wrote "pray and get others to pray that God not abandon his [sic] church, but reform it." Ledochowska (1967:35) gives us a picture of the conditions which called for reform within the church when she writes of Brescia:

There, as in Rome, the neo-paganism of the Bishop's courtiers provided a sad spectacle for the clergy; the Cathedral Chapter was the preserve of a few families of the Brescian nobility ... The higher clergy multiplied their offices and benefices. Priests had themselves nominated to the richer parishes and did not reside there but left flocks untended.

Immorality and heresy were the ailments of both the clergy and the lay people of her time. The church today needs reform in similar areas. New issues which form part of the contemporary trends of our society have come to the fore, the lopsided power balance within the church as well as in the society with regard to the position of men and women is but one example.

From Angela's fifth *Counsel* comes the message, wherever Angela's daughters are, that they should seek to spread peace and concord. More than ever before peace is a crying need not only in Africa but throughout the world. Modern technology has made it easy to get first hand information of events both local and international. The devastation caused by the absence of peace is quite obvious from the pictures of terrified people seeking shelter from

the ravages of war, the determination of suicide bombers, the ruthlessness of coups and the finality of family murders. Angela's spirituality challenges her daughters to be peace loving people, to spread peace, to live in peace and harmony, to follow in her footsteps and be peacemakers. In the last her *Counsel* Angela implores her daughters with her blood to live united together in harmony and to be bound together by the bond of charity (Stone 1996:167). The Companions can contribute towards community building by modelling community as it is understood in the African sense. Shutte examines the African concept of community and finds:

to the extent that I identify with this common humanity I develop my own humanity, my own identity, and I enter into the hearts and minds of others. It is insofar as I come to know and love others for their own sake, that I grow in self-knowledge and genuine self-esteem. Insofar as I am open to others and give myself in service for the good of the community, I myself am strengthened and built up (Shutte 2001:52-53).

The scourge of syphilis tormented Brescia and other cities in St Angela's time. Today we have the pandemic of HIV/AIDS. St Angela served the sick and dying and instructed especially the women of her day so that the dignity of women may be preserved. There is a need for women of prayer and compassion to help bring hope to the sick and the dying in the present context. There is even a greater need for courageous women to come to the fore, to be visible as role models. The Companions need to be true to their nature and mission to show the world that the kindness and love of God has appeared on earth (*Constitutions 2*). They are challenged to be strong witnesses, bearers and servants of life (SAFC 2002:17).

Looking again at the meaning of ubuntu in African life was a rewarding exercise in that the learnings and the insights gathered during the research provided an effective methodology for a systematic comparison of the spirituality of Angela Merici and the values of ubuntu. This in turn helped to throw light on the foundation of the spirituality of ubuntu, which is manifested by distinctive African values which can be compared to the gospel values of compassion, sharing, justice and reconciliation. These findings will promote and advance an appreciation of the worthy cause of rereading our African memory for the purpose of

pursuing authenticity in the radical following of Christ, being truly Christian and truly African religious women. Challenges constantly remind the pilgrim church of the need for continuous conversion.

This study has therefore demonstrated clear parallelism between the life and times of Angela Merici and the recent and current social situation in South Africa. It has further demonstrated a strong connection between Angela's spirituality and charism as the founder of a religious congregation and the impact of these on her society, and the foundation, spirituality and impact of the Companions of St Angela on South African Society.

All of this has emphasised the role and importance of inculturation in bringing about the successful transplanting of a particular spirituality and religious tradition from a European setting to an African one. The story of the Companions of St Angela exemplifies in a dramatic way the dynamics of such a transition.

The Companions of St Angela as a case study needs to be further researched, especially in relation to the three evangelical counsels. The sisters are challenged to teach the vows by the example of their lives in the strength of Jn 8:9 "He who has sent me is with me, and has not left me alone, for I always do what is pleasing to him."